

A Name to be given

Luke 1.31

I wonder what possessed our parents to give us our names? Often there is a reason - sometimes there is not. But it is true that our name is the most precious personal thing that we possess. There is certainly one person who has recorded in a book the feeling of distress and horror he felt when for the first time at the age of about five he discovered that someone else at a birthday party had the same Christian name as him. Until that moment he had thought of himself as being the only one. It puzzled him and indeed annoyed him that somehow he could no longer retain that sense of uniqueness of name. I can recall a certain amount of confusion in my own mind as a child in this sphere - and I have no doubt that a psycho-analyst could go to town on what it did to me. I gather I was to have been called John, but at the last minute my father thought that I would get 'John Brown's Body' all my life, and changed it to Andrew - thereby landing me with the equally difficult initial - so that I sign myself 'a body', which has always looked strange in newspaper reports of funerals. It was no doubt done in great love and kindness. But throughout his life, my father never called me Andrew anyway - he always referred to me as 'arry. And I was also aware from quite a young age, that if I had been a girl, I would have been called Jane. And as I think about these things again, I seem to feel again the disturbances that they once caused - and I can sympathise with the little boy in the story. Our name, our identity matters very much to us.

It is one of the privileges of parents that they can choose a name for their child. And even if the child grows up to dislike the name they have been given - it is frequently true that they will be unwilling to change it by deed poll. It is something so personal, it cannot be discarded, even if it is not used. A former school teacher of mine was called Albert, but he hated it, quite apparently. He acted a good deal in amateur societies, but on the programme, where the others were listed with their full name, his initial was all that was shown. He was known by everyone by a nickname - except of course by his pupils, who with the perversity and cruelty of children, always called him Albert. But he didn't change his name. A psychologist has suggested that our name has for us a certain sacred character. And if people do change their name it says more than simply that they do not like it - it also implies a break with one's past, to cut yourself off from the person you have made yourself into up to that time. Of course Roman Catholic monks and nuns do this on taking their vows - and that break is deliberate, and the new name is significant for that reason.

In the Bible we have various examples of changing a name as a significant act - so Abram becomes Abraham, Jacob becomes Israel, Simon becomes Peter, and Saul becomes Paul. And of course there are many examples of names being chosen for people because of particular events - my favourite being the name of Isaiah's son Maher-shalal-hash-baz. If you don't know what that means, don't let it worry you - but it meant a lot to Isaiah. People have continued to do this from time to time - one that I suspect must be like this is the name of an American professor of Church History who has the remarkable name of Preserved Smith.

And most of us, within our self-imposed limitations, are free to name our children what we like. We may be expected to call the child after Granny of whatever - but it is our choice. We can even

make up new names without anyone becoming cross with us. That is a dubious privilege - when we see people calling their sons after a complete football teams and that kind of thing. In Switzerland, I know, there is a list of approved names, and you cannot go beyond that. I think there are about 3000 approved names - so even that is hardly a great restriction?

In the gospel reading today we hear the angel telling Mary that she must call her son Jesus. And if we were to have read on, we would have found the story of Mary's relative - Elizabeth. She and her husband cause a mild sensation because of their son's name. After he was born, on the day of his circumcision, it was assumed that he would be named Zechariah after his father, but Elizabeth says it must be John - and Zechariah, who you remember was unable to speak-at the time, wrote that he also agreed it must be John. And that was sensational -whatever is this child going to be, they said - he was by his name being cut off from his family, being different, He was going to mark the intervention of God in the world in a new way - and of course that child grew up to be John the Baptist, whose mission in life was, he said, to prepare the way for the coming of Christ. As far as we can see, it was the same with the name Jesus. It was not the name that expected — probably the first child would have been named after his father. But it is clear that the name of Jesus is significant - that its meaning "God saves" -the same name as Joshua in fact, was of importance. He was not the only Jesus - it was a common enough name - but he was unique.

The name given to us is the greatest personal possession we have, the name given to Jesus was the same for him...except that in his case it was not only the name his parents wanted for him, but also the name that God wanted for him. We sometimes say of a person who has achieved something great - that their name will live for ever. It is an exaggeration, of course, but we all know what is meant. But with the name of Jesus, this seems to be literally true....not only will Jesus' name live for ever as something for men to reckon with - which is why his name will be bandied about this week by people who rarely think of him at other times - but Jesus himself will live for ever. And because of that, not only his name, but our names are immortal. Our names may not live for ever on earth - it is most unlikely that people will remember us for long after we have gone. But what our names stand for - our personalities, our true selves, the real us - those things will live for ever. Jesus was born to show us that we do matter to God - not just for this life, but for eternity. So when we name a child, we name him or her, not just for the time of this life, however long or short it may be - but for eternity.

And lets us come back in closing to Jesus. The name which is above every name, as St Paul called it. Yes, that is right - because Jesus is the name by which we approach God - the personal way in which God has expressed himself, when in those mysterious words, we hear that the Word became flesh, God has no name. The so-called name he gives to Moses Yahweh, is more a title than a name, a description rather than a denotation — it means BEING - the one who is, who was, who will be. And apart from that we hear only titles. Jesus refers to the Father. God who cannot be confined by the limits of a name, has chosen to help us find him by means of the man who was given the name Jesus. We all want to have a name "Who do I ask if don't even know their names" - we could say things like that about God. The mastery of the incarnation is that Jesus was born, in a form in which we can begin to understand God - and not only that - but with a real name which we can use and know, and love.