

Sermon for New Years Day 2017: The Naming of Jesus/Octave Day of Christmas and the circumcision of Christ (BCP)

Based on Luke 2: 15-21

What's in a Name?

It is only once every 6 years that New Years Day falls on a Sunday, which in the BCP (Book of Common Prayer) is known as the 'Octave Day of Christmas and the Circumcision of Christ being New Years Day'. In the BAS calendar (Book of Alternative Services) January 1st is known as 'The Naming of Jesus.' Regardless of the name, it is considered a Holy Day--even if it falls on another day of the week.

Now, the eighth day after birth was when Jewish male babies were circumcised and named. In the society of Jesus' time, the naming of the children, particularly the male children was the right of the father, but in this case, this babe's name was as predestined as his birth. As I sat pondering this whole issue about names this week, the famous line from Shakespeare's *Romeo & Juliet* came to mind: "What is in a name?" Well for Shakespeare's doomed lovers, their names were much of the source of their misery -- their last names identified them as members of opposing families.

Names are important, aren't they? We identify with our name and they identify us—both our given names and our surnames, as with our ill-fated Shakespearean lovers. But it's our given names that seem somehow more personal. We like them or hate them, either way, we own them, and they identify us. Names can indicate our cultural past, identify us with a certain family, our family's traditions—or a specific person—a favoured relative for whom you are named. Names can be trendy, even indicating the time period we were born in. If you're one of those people who likes to read the birth announcements and obits, you would have long ago noted this. In the 1970s and 80s there was a backlash in giving children traditional names, and some really creative names and spellings have come out of that time period. The pendulum has swung back again, and the "older" names are coming back in vogue—like Beatrice and George, the newest prince and princess in the house of Windsor and names like Isabella and Violet and Mac and Jack. I recall being in Rockwood visiting one day a few years ago, and there were 2 young girls also visiting and they had come from seeing a lady named "Emily". I over-heard one saying to the other how cool it was that such an old lady had such a modern name!

Many parents spend hours trying to come up with just the right name for their children. When I was pregnant with my first born, both my husband and I had a sense we would have a son, there wasn't much question as to what his first name would be. There has been a Thomas in the Todd family for 4 generations prior to our son being born, and we chose to us to carry this tradition. So it was his second name that became important, because that's the name we would choose and use. And in those days there were no computers to do name searches, and we didn't have a baby name book. So we did the next best book we could think of that had names in it --the phone book, and about half way through Owen Sound we came across the name Keith. We both liked it, so Thomas Keith he is!

If you ask someone about their given name and how they got it, chances are there's a story to go with it. Names in their various derivatives have history, many going back to ancient times where the meaning of the name was as important as the name itself. In biblical time names were very significant. Recall that people's names even were changed after an important or significant happening in their lives. The ones that are most well known from the Old Testament are Abraham and Sarah, whose names prior to their covenanting with God were Abram and Sarai. And of course Saul becomes Paul after his conversion experience—after he sees Christ in a vision and truly comes to believe in Jesus as the Christ and Messiah of the people. Some 2000 years later, in our western culture, we have mostly lost the ancient meanings of names and much of the history behind them. We often choose names for our children just because we like them—or for any number of other reasons, and then sometimes the names we actually call folks by become derivatives

of their proper name. Rather like how a girl named Elizabeth comes to be called 'Betty' or 'Bess' for example, or John becomes Jack.

Now, Mary and Joseph didn't have much choice in the name for their first born. According to Luke, when the angel Gabriel came to Mary to inform her of her pending special pregnancy, she was also told the child she would carry would be a boy, she was told what to name him: *Yeshu'a*. Why this name in particular? *Yeshu'a* is a shortened version of another ancient Aramaic name: *Yehoshu'a* which means "YAHWEH is salvation"¹, YAHWEH of course the ancient name given to the Lord God Almighty—so the shortened form-*Yeshu'a*- means "God saves": a very appropriate name given who this very special child would grow up to be. In his neighbourhood, Jesus would have been known as *Yeshua ben Yosef*; which if directly translated to English would actually be *Joshua, son of Joseph*. So how did we come to call him Jesus and not Joshua? Well, the Gospels and most of the New Testament was written primarily in Greek, and the Greek form of the Aramaic name *Yeshu'a* is *Iesous* ('Ιησους').² And the English form of *Iesous* is Jesus.

So a wee history and grammar lesson for this Octave Day of Christmas. Regardless of the derivative that comes from translation from language to language, regardless of the name that humanity may call him, or may know him by, what we do know that the baby whose naming day we celebrate today is the child of God, born of Mary, born to be the Messiah—the Christ-- God come to earth to save us, to show us the way to new life, a life through Christ, with Christ and in Christ.

So, what's in a name? A lot it seems!

¹<http://www.behindthename.com/name/jesus> accessed Dec. 22.16

²<http://www.behindthename.com/name/Joshua> accessed Dec. 27, 16