

Sunday 19 January 2014 – Epiphany 2 – Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

ISAIAH 49.1-7 – PSALM 40.1-12 – I CORINTHIANS 1.1-9 – JOHN 1.29-42

God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ.

What's in a name? How important is your name to you? What do you like people to call you?

A name is essentially just a label. It's a way we all know what or who we are on about. You say pavement and an American might say sidewalk. You say trousers they say pants. So long as we know we are talking about the same thing, it shouldn't really matter what we call it. So what's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.

William Shakespeare knew how important somebody's name could be, and it is from his *Romeo and Juliet* that that last line is taken. Juliet is bemoaning the fact that she is called 'Capulet,' and she is unable to marry Romeo simply because he is called 'Montague.' Their names say something about them: that they belong to certain families. In this case, Juliet and Romeo don't particularly like what their names say about them.

Because when we introduce ourselves, we say something about ourselves. I wonder how you introduce yourselves? Do you say, 'Hello, I'm Max?' It's certainly very rare that I say, 'Hello, I'm Maximillian,' though I know (and now you do) that that's what I'm called! But I might say, 'Hello, I'm Mr Drinkwater.' One day, I might even be able to say, 'Hello, I'm the Vicar.' And we feel like different people when we say each of those. If Jutta introduces herself as the Vicar, it is because she wants to say something about her role at Church, and that might affect the way you relate to her. But most of the time, we call her Jutta.

But when you were at school in the classroom, I expect many of you called your teachers 'Sir' or 'Miss,' rather than using a first name. And that is exactly what the disciples say to Jesus in the Gospel today. *When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, 'What are you looking for?' They said to him, 'Sir' (which translated means Teacher).* Ok, so they actually called him *rabbi*, which is just the Hebrew word for 'Sir' in the classroom. In this case, *sir* is another name for Jesus. We all use nicknames like this. Some nicknames are playful – Bashful, Grumpy, Doc – and some are hurtful, but all nicknames are really just a way of saying something different about a person to their usual name. And a lot of these names stick, particularly when you see the same people a lot of the time, such as family and close friends.

Jesus had a lot of other names. Another one appears at the end of the Gospel, when the disciples say that they have *found the Messiah*, which we are told means 'Anointed.' Jesus is anointed because he is the King and the High Priest who is come – Christians believe – to fulfil the prophecies about God and his Kingdom (and Kings and Queens and Priests were always anointed with oil at their coronation or ordination, just like our own today). And the Greek for 'Anointed' is 'Christ,' which is another name for Jesus which has definitely stuck. We use it a lot when we talk about Jesus; in fact, it's become something of an epithet. When we use the name Jesus, we often add the word Christ anyway, and there's a whole story and promise hidden in the one word 'Christ' that we don't tell every time we say it.

At the start of his letter to the Corinthians, which we also heard today, Paul describes the Church as *all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*. Those who use this name are called 'Christians,' people who are willing to use names such as 'Lord' and 'Jesus' and 'Christ' to talk about their God. And just like 'Vicar' and 'Sir,' all the names we use for Christ express something about our relationship with him. We are remembering our humility before God when we use the name 'Lord.' But we are also able to use a name just like 'Jutta' and 'Max,' that is, Jesus. And we are able to do that for the very fact that we have been celebrating over the last few weeks: that Jesus, our Lord Jesus Christ, was born of a woman, Mary, and lived among us. We have the privilege of knowing enough about God to use his name.

But it works the other way around too. We have a name, and God knows it, and it doesn't matter whether we all ourselves 'Max' or 'Mr Drinkwater' or 'Vicar' because God knows them all, whatever hat we try to put on. In fact, *the Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me*, as the prophet Isaiah recalls in today's Old Testament reading. And I find that comforting, because it means that my relationship with God can take many different forms. I know that God is my father or mother, my teacher, my friend, my brother, my listening-post and my watchman.

And God takes all those things seriously enough to know my name – and yours. I always appreciate the fact that Paul bothers to tell us who is bringing us this letter (as he does with most of his letters). Paul thinks it is worth us knowing who Sosthenes is, that we know his name. Sosthenes is important enough to us and to God to greet him personally when he arrives.

But God often has other names for us too, and not playful names like Sleepy, Dopey, Happy or Sneezzy. Jesus gives Simon another name at the end of today's Gospel reading: Cephas or Peter, which are the Aramaic and Greek words for 'rock.' This name does two things for Simon Peter. Firstly, it calls him into Jesus' intimate circle of friends; he is close enough to Jesus to earn a nickname. But it also calls him to a specific job or vocation. Peter's job will be to be the rock on which Christ builds his Church.

We often talk about vocation in the Church today – we all have a vocation to be or do something, either a specific ministry in the Church or simply just to be a Christian. We all must have heard at least a whisper of that vocation to be here today. *God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord*, as Paul reminds us.

And when God calls us, because he knows our name, he uses it. He even calls Jesus by his name, as we heard last week when we celebrated his baptism. Then, he uses two of Jesus' other names: *This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased*.

Baptism and Confirmation are for us affirmations that God is calling us by name. At Confirmation, the Bishop uses the words, *Max, God has called you by name and made you his own. Confirm, O Lord, your servant with your Holy Spirit*, and he signs you with oil, anoints you, just as Jesus Christ was anointed. Confirmation is the time when we say, 'Lord, I'm listening; I might not be able to hear what you are saying but I know you know who I am and I've heard your name too.'

Baptism and Confirmation are something like having a new name. You are still the same person, but you've got another name, another hat to put on. In fact, in some Church traditions people are encouraged to take on a 'Christian name' when they are confirmed: the name of a particular saint they try to emulate and who they hope will pray for them. Romeo thought this when he answered Juliet: *call me but love and I'll be new baptised*. He wants Juliet to call him by a new name, 'Love,' which best expresses his relationship with her. I expect God calls us that sometimes too, and renews the promises to us made at our Baptism.

If you have been confirmed, I hope you keep up the relationship. I hope you and God keep calling each other names! – because names say a lot about who we think we are. If you haven't been confirmed, I hope you might think about it in preparation for when the Bishop comes to St James' in June. But most of all remember that *God is faithful; by him you were all called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ*.

Amen.

MAX DRINKWATER, ORDINAND, WESTCOTT HOUSE
ST JAMES', WULFSTAN WAY, CAMBRIDGE