

Numbers 6.22-27; Galatians 4.4-7; Luke 2.15-21

If you had to describe yourself to a stranger, I wonder how you would go about it. Would you tell them what you spend most of your time doing? Explain your job? Seize the opportunity to ramble on for hours about your favourite hobby, or tv series? Would you describe your physical appearance, your personality, your family, your taste in music? I wonder at what point you might talk about your name. Many of us have different names at different points in our lives. For some of us, our names might have meanings that we hold dear, or come from a family tradition that you cherish. Or maybe you don't like your name much, or go by something different to what your parents gave you.

But whatever your name is, there is something about the personality, the identification of our individual names that is very important. Our name is so much more than just a label to tell us apart from each other. There is some way in which our name encapsulates and holds the essence of who we are, because they are the means by which we are known. Now I have a lot of names: Catherine Hannah Victoria Connolly. I am called Cat by most people, my mum calls me Katycat, and who knows what other names I may acquire in the future!

My maiden name was Colclough (which nobody can pronounce or spell!), which is from the Midlands in England, the potteries region where my Dad's family have their roots and still live today. Connolly is an Irish name, but I've never even set foot in Ireland. Yet a Connolly is who I now am, and it tells you something about me. All my names are the means by which I am known.

Now, this first Sunday of Christmas is also referred to as the Sunday of Jesus' Holy Name. Naming Sunday. This is because of the last line of our gospel reading where we hear about 8 day old Jesus being officially given the name Gabriel instructed that he have. During the Advent season we already heard the story of Elizabeth and Zechariah insisting on calling their son John - his name is John! - as instructed by an angel, and now his cousin too is named from God. Their names are so important because they identify these two boys as people chosen by God to be and do great things. They are known before they are born, they are named for who they will become.

In fact, Jesus has a whole plethora of names. It is proclaimed that he will be known as Wonderful Counsellor, Prince of Peace, the Saviour, the Christ, the Messiah. And the name 'Jesus' itself means 'Yahweh saves'. You can't really be more explicit with naming than this. Each one of these names and titles serves as a window onto Jesus' identity and mission. We are told in all these different ways who this child is and will be, we are assured over and over again that now, in the incarnation, God is with us in a new way. Jesus' names spell out for us his wondrous personhood, his divine nature and purpose.

Names are also important because they tell us who and what a person is connected with. They tell us about place, or family, how someone fits in and belongs. Even though I've never been to Ireland, in a way I am now connected with it because I've married into a family with Irish roots. And when a child is adopted into a family, they take on the family name. They become part of something that they weren't part of before, it is a new identity being gifted and formed. And even though we may be so familiar with this idea that it seems ordinary to us now, what is remarkable is that we are told in our reading from Galatians that we are adopted into God's family.

I like the tradition here at Holy Comforter of adding the name 'Christian' when we baptise someone. It's proclaiming that that person has been adopted into the family, has become one of us who can make this extraordinary claim of being in the family of God. If you think about all those names that Jesus has, and what they mean, and then consider that we are joined with him in the same family, that we can not only call God 'Abba', 'father', but that we are wrapped up along with Jesus in the divine identity, it is quite incredible. Through Jesus we are gifted a new identity as God-children, members of the family of the creator of the universe itself.

I got a new novel for Christmas, and the storyline involves some people being taken captive. Once they are prisoners, their names are disregarded, and they are simply assigned numbers. Just numerical codes to differentiate them. The individuality and meaning of their real names are taken away. This is a thematic trope which pops up all over the place in books and film - the replacement of names is a powerful move because it is an attempt at removing personality, at removing the very personhood of each individual, a way of making them less valuable, less equal, having less belonging.

God does the opposite of this. God knows us to the depths of our souls, knows our names before we are born, and gives us, as children of the Most High, the family name of Christian.

In Shakespeare's play Romeo and Juliet, Juliet exclaims 'What's in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet', and while this may be true to some extent, when it comes to people I would argue slightly with Juliet. Our names are more than a label, more than a random collection of letters which tell us apart from each other. Our names are the way in which we are known. Our names are given to us in a variety of ways by different collections of people and circumstances. And most importantly of all, our names are given us by God.

Your name is Christian. Your name is heir of God. Your name is joined with Jesus and all that he is and all that he is called. Your name is that secret deep place within you where your very soul is loved, adopted, cherished and known.

The name of the holy child was proclaimed by angels, told to shepherds, announced on his name day, and spread across the world. Now we, too, are called to proclaim the name of Jesus in word and deed, through how we live as members of his family. So joined into God may we, like the shepherds, have the courage and delight to tell everyone we meet about the Christchild, with whom we are all invited to share in the name of the divine.

Amen.