

What's in a name?

Isaiah 43 v 1-7 – I have called you by name

Luke 3 v 15-17 and 21-22 - Jesus is baptised

I speak in the name of the father, son and holy Spirit, Amen

At the end of the 1960s, San Francisco's Ashbury district decided to put up their rent, and hundreds of the hippies who lived there moved down the coast to Santa Cruz. They had children and got married but they didn't name their children Melissa or Brett instead the people who lived in Santa Cruz grew accustomed to their children making friends with a boy called Time Warp or Spring Fever. And eventually Moonbeam, Earth, Love and Precious Promise all ended up in the local public school.

That's when the kindergarten teachers first met Fruit Stand. At the start of term parents applied name tags to their children, kiss them good-bye and send them off to school on the bus. So it was for Fruit Stand. The teachers thought the boy's name was odd, but they tried to make the best of it.

"Would you like to play with the blocks, Fruit Stand?" they offered. And later, "Fruit Stand, how about a snack?" He accepted hesitantly. By the end of the day, his name didn't seem much odder than the Heather's or the Moonbeam's.

At dismissal time, the teachers led the children out to the buses. "Fruit Stand, do you know which one is your bus?"

He didn't answer. That wasn't strange. He hadn't answered them all day. Lots of children are shy on the first day of school. It didn't matter. The teachers had instructed the parents to write the names of their children's bus stops on the reverse side of their name tags. The teacher simply turned over the tag. There, neatly printed, was the word "Anthony."

The gospel reading today was about Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist. Both Jesus and John were named before their birth - names seem to be important to God. The other reading in Isaiah tells us He has called us by name and we belong to him. We are named by God and he calls our name. But what truly is our name? What does God call us? It is good to think about our name on the day we remember the Baptism of Christ since each of our baptisms is not only our decision to commit ourselves to Christ but also Gods calling to each of us by name.

My parents fostered and adopted children and when my sister became adopted she changed her name. Not only her surname but her first names too. Her adoption meant that she could take on a new identity - one that meant a new start and a different way of life. Do we change our name when we become adopted by God? Does He change our identity and what he calls us?

Having married someone with the name England I didn't often have a problem with people getting my name wrong. But Paul tells a story of waiting for a taxi that had been booked at work and the taxi driver coming into the hospital waiting room shouting 'Pauline, Pauline, taxi for Pauline Land'. It was then Paul realised that Pauline Land was Paul England and he had to walk across the waiting room and in his deepest voice say 'Hello, that's my taxi, I'm Pauline Land'!

When I think about the many names that I have I realise that all of them have either a positive or negative emotional response in me. It also depends on who is saying it of course. I am called Mum, Reverend, Liz, best friend, daughter and sister.

When I learnt sign language we were given a sign name. The deaf community give you a sign name and it can be anything connected with your looks or personality or even your likes and dislikes.

I got called freckles. But I think I was lucky compared to my signing teacher who was called big red nose and the friend he told us about who was called 'bad breath'.

A sign name can be good or bad and being bestowed with a sign name says something about how people see you and gives you an identity totally unique among your friends. Since this name is given to you by people you know it signifies a bond between you. While it might seem like a novelty to hearing people, having a sign name is very meaningful for those in the deaf community, and it could even be considered an honour. But before you get too excited about the possibility of throwing your former identity away, let me point something out: you don't get to choose your sign name. It is given to you.

And I think that if we consider how God calls us by name then it is not necessarily the name that is on our birth certificate, or the name that we were called at school, or even the names that others call us...God calls us by the name that He has given us. One that is chosen by Him and given to us.

I'm sure some of you have experienced being in hospital and being labelled and therefore known by hospital staff as a number. And does anyone remember the TV series The Prisoner – I am not a number – I am a free man he would often tell us.

And I'm sure you have experienced, like I have, others calling us rude names or names that hurt us and make us sad. In Gods eyes we are never a rude name or a hurtful one. God never calls us by the wrong name and he never calls us by a bad name. We are who we are in Christ. All of those different roles that we have will eventually fade away but who we are will remain in Christ for eternity. He knows us better than we know ourselves. Therefore when God calls us we are the only ones that can do that particular thing at that particular time in that particular place. He knows us that well. He knows everything we are and more than we know that we are. When we stand before God in glory he will call us by our true name. Can you imagine?

So very often, when we call out names, we are saying something about the person being identified. The Isaiah passage we heard throughout the Christmas services listed some names for Jesus. Isaiah was identifying a great King who is to come, but he doesn't stop at King or Lord, he lists many names: Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. But for the meaning and importance of these names to be truly understood we need to know the one who is saying them.

We are God's beloved children, heirs, sons and daughters of God, friend and the apple of his eye. He has called us by name. He knows us. Our identity belongs to him. He knows us intimately and completely and that is who he calls and wants.

Let's take a moments silence now in prayer seeking God – I encourage you to ask God 'What is my name?' and spend a time waiting for the answer.