

31 DECEMBER 2023

For many people the days after Christmas Day are a time to relax and to clear up, and they can feel a bit of an anti-climax.

But liturgically there is a whole raft of saints' days -Stephen, John the Evangelist, Holy Innocents, Thomas a Becket and, tomorrow, the Circumcision and Naming of Christ.

In one of his sonnets, Shakespeare wrote: "What's in a name?
What we call rose, by any other name would smell as sweet."

Most people today would probably agree with Shakespeare that there is not that much in a name, but in the Bible it is quite the opposite. Names mattered.

First of all, the name of God. When God appeared to Moses in the burning bush in the desert and told him to go back to Egypt, Moses demanded to know the name of who was sending him. God told him "I am who I am", which was a bit cryptic, and then said that JHWH ("Jahweh", a version of "I am") was sending him.

Others were more coy.

The mysterious being who wrestled all night with Jacob refused to give his own name. The angel who announced the wonderful birth of Samson, refused to give his name, because it was too wonderful.

And then some names were changed during the holder's lifetime. In our tradition we hear of Ethelred the Unready or Alfred the Great (after whom one of my sons is named) or Suleyman the Magnificent, renamings reflecting what they achieved or failed to achieve.

So, God changed Sarai and Abram to Sarah and Abraham and Jacob after his all-night wrestling match was renamed Israel, meaning "he strove with God".

In the New Testament, Jesus gave Simon a second name "Peter", the Greek word for rock (hence petroleum, rock oil) because he was to be a rock and foundation for the church.

And after Chapter 13 of Acts, for no stated reason, Saul became Paul.

Those are names given to adults. Newly born children have names given by their families. There are in the congregation some new grand-parents, David Spring and Rod and Jo Willis, whose baby grandson has yet to be given a name. My youngest sister has also just become a grandmother and her grandson has been given the name Felix. This is not a family name but presumably his parents hope he will be happy and fortunate, which is what Felix means in Latin. It is predictive.

In the Old Testament some predictive names given to babies are less encouraging.

Hagar, Abraham's Egyptian slave girl is carrying his child but is driven out of his household. She is rescued by an angel who told her to call her son Ishmael "because God has heard your suffering".

The prophet Hosea was told by God to name two of his children "Lo-rohamah" "not shown mercy" and "Lo-ami" "not my people". I hope they were not teased at school because those are pretty gloomy names to be given.

In the New Testament, the angel Gabriel told Zechariah that when his longed-for son is born "his name shall be John".

In Matthew, Gabriel tells Joseph (and in Luke Gabriel tells Mary) that her child is to be named Jesus "for he will save his people from their sins". The logic of this is not immediately clear to English speakers, but Jesus is the Greek form of Joshua, a Jewish name meaning "God saves"

At the Annunciation to Mary, Gabriel says that Jesus will have the throne of his ancestor David, which sounds like the sort of political Messiah that many were expecting and hoping for.

At the Annunciation to Joseph, Gabriel only says that Jesus will save his people from their sins, which sounds like the spiritual Messiah that Jesus actually was.

And when Gabriel said that he will save "his people", Joseph may well have understood that to mean the Jews. But all people are God's people; Jesus is God: therefore all people are his people.

And Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection gave and gives all people everywhere the chance to be saved from sin.

The tiny 8-day old baby who was named Jesus, was truly human.
"Tears and smiles like us he knew" as the carol reminds us.

But also, as Paul writes in Colossians:

"in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell."

He would indeed save his people from their sins and therefore:

"at the name of Jesus every knee should bow."