

8am Service, 29 December 2024 Rev Bill Church

What's in a name?

Nothing much says Shakespeare giving Juliet the line: "That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet."

But if you asked experts in commercial brands or trademarks, they would say – a great deal. And so would intellectual property lawyers, and so would the Bible.

In the Bible, names were not just a bureaucratic convenience to tell one person from another, they were also a signifier about that person.

Sometimes they were changed to reflect what had happened - Sarai and Abram become Sarah and Abraham when the promised son Isaac was born.

Jacob was renamed by the angel he had wrestled with all night. His new name was to be Israel, meaning he struggled with God. Jacob then also renamed the place Bethel – house of God.

Saul became Paul to mark his new life as a supporter not a persecutor.

Jesus gave Simon the name Peter – in Greek Petros, rock or stone- saying that he would be the rock on which the church would be built.

Some names given to newborns were prophetic. The prophet Hosea was told by God to name his first children Jezreel (meaning God will sow), Lo-ruhamah (meaning unloved) and Lo-ammi (meaning not my people) to predict punishment for the royal dynasty, and to show God's displeasure with Israel. How the children felt about these names is not recorded.

Zechariah was told by the angel Gabriel to give the name John to his longed-for son, to the astonishment of his wider family. The name Jesus was decreed for the son of Mary by the angel Gabriel, speaking in Matthew to Joseph and to Mary in Luke. And Mary and Joseph obeyed that instruction.

Jesus is the Greek version of the name Joshua or Yeshua. It means "God is salvation".

The name was not unique to Jesus. Apart from the original Joshua, early manuscripts of Matthew's Gospel tell us that the notorious Barabbas was Jesus Bar-abbas, which later scribes omitted to avoid confusion or embarrassment; and from the Acts of the Apostles we hear of a sorcerer called Bar-Jesus.

The Jesus we worship, Jesus Christ (that title is unique) was so named by the angel in Matthew's Gospel "because he will save his people from their sins".

But who are "his people"?

Matthew's first readers would surely have concluded that "his people" were the people of Israel or maybe the new Israel which the early church saw itself to be.

If Jesus himself had overheard that debate, I think he would have told a Good Samaritan type parable.

The beginning of John's Gospel says he came to his own and his own did not accept him. Who are "his own"? His own people, the Jews, yes, but just before that, John has said

that he had come into the world that owed its existence to him and the world did not recognize him. Jesus' "own" was and is much more than just one people. The letter to the Colossians points in the same direction. It says that through Jesus God chose to reconcile all things to himself. "His own" "his people" has a much wider sweep.

Whether they acknowledged him then or acknowledge him now, whether they support him or oppose him, Jesus' destiny is to save all these people from their sins – the thief on the cross, the crooked tax collector, the woman taken in adultery the faithful, the faithless, the orthodox, the unorthodox, all are within the scope of God's offering in Jesus, because he can save all God's people from their sins.