

Birth of John the Baptist – Trinity 4 – What is in a name? – 10:30 Parish Eucharist - St Peters.

“Four letter word just to get me along
It's a difficulty and I'm biting on my tongue
And I I keep stalling, keeping me together
People around gotta find something to say now
Holding back, everyday the same
Don't wanna be a loner
Listen to me, oh no I never say anything at all
But with nothing to consider they forget my name (ame, ame, ame)’.

The music savvy among you may recognise 2007 song ‘That’s Not My Name’ by The Ting Tings.

The ‘four-letter word’ given to us to get us along is the most personal description we have. Our names are personal. They are not only descriptors of us, they are marks of our identity, a short-hand for the way other people observe us thinking, behaving, speaking, standing, interacting. Our names are who we are.

Because names are so personal, it can hurt when our names are mis-pronounced, or we feel misrepresented. Or, as Katie White, who wrote ‘That’s not my name’ felt, mis-remembered. Her band, at least, after her single will not be forgotten for a long time.

These feelings of identity and being remembered as an individual were picked up by a completely different musical genre, rap artist Dizzee Rascal, when he covered the song on Radio 1 changing the lyrics to suit his ethnicity.

These feelings give us an understanding of the kind of situation our gospel reading speaks of – and some of the insights from the epistle reading this morning.

A four letter word, just to get me along.

That’s not my name.

His name is John. These are key words in this portion.

Because throughout the history of divine revelation (the way god’s voice has been heard throughout the centuries) we see a special significance attached to names by God. We think of the names that God is called (I am what I am) which express his virtues and character. Abram’s name to Abraham, Jacob’s name to Israel, because they have names with a meaning to fit in with their circumstances. Just as your names will reflect the time, location, hopes of when you were born.

But that is not John’s name. Yet.

We have his parents to consider in our text.

We read that Elizabeth’s time was fulfilled; and she had borne a son. What rejoicing for any new parent.

One of the joys of being involved in Little Fishes and baptisms at St Peter’s is that we celebrate new life – and support each other in it’s struggles.

This is exactly what the community around Elizabeth did. “Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her”. Especially for Elizabeth, ‘advanced in years’, they rejoice with Elizabeth for her baby.

It is possible, that they may have rejoiced with Elizabeth because it vindicated her name. Elizabeth’s name means – God is faithful.

God is faithful, but he also has some twists – which he’ll get from his father, Zachariah. It’s always the Dad’s fault, isn’t it?

But Zachariah means that God remembers his covenant. The promise of relationship between people and God. And this means that any new hope, new joy, in any one of our lives opens up new possibilities – and we need to be aware of them.

Because when God begins something new, He does not throw the baby out with the bathwater. It is unique but grows from what has gone before. For example, there is Martin Luther, the reformer of the church that began his life as a Roman Catholic monk, so it is from an obscure family from the rural mountains that a person comes who will prepare the ground for one the most enduring and inspirational person (and movements) in history.

The result of God’s faithfulness and remembrance of his covenant will result (if we understand the meaning of Jesus’ message and person) is that instead of a God hidden behind walls of law and writing – Paul sums it up in our letter to the Galatians– the new covenant (or the promise of relationship between people and God) is to be known by the spirit of God and the truth of the word to those who hear it speak.

The baby of Elizabeth and Zechariah insist is not Zechariah.

That’s not his name.

All of us are given our names at birth. All of us may have these names confirmed at baptism. It is no coincidence that the name of the person has to be spoken, while water is poured three times on us at baptism. Our name is a central descriptor of who we are. Our name is a statement of who we are before God – bringing God into intimate contact with our lives. In baptism, God comes as close as the trickle of water against our skin.

Our reading from Galatians sums up the sense of baptism by saying: As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

John managed to find something to say that was unique to him. He initiated something, baptism, that we still do today – and for much the same reasons.

Because his name is John. John means the gift of mercy from God. And, by his parents, John links up the old ways with what is to come – and points directly to Jesus¹.

John prepares the way of Jesus even in his very name.

Jesus’ name, incidentally, is God Saves.

I wonder whether you have ever considered your own name and what it means. I wonder whether you have thought about how your name might point to Jesus.

¹ Malachi 3.1.

I also rejoice that, in God's eyes, we are unique and loved. And that together we can continue to grow into the full stature of the children of God. If we need help, we have the example of John the Baptist this morning – and his gift, in baptism, of God's mercy. Amen.

