

The Naming of Jesus – New Year’s Day
Numbers 6:22-27; Philippians 2:5–11; Luke 2:15-21
What’s in a name?

Names are curious things. Their popularity, for whatever reason, move in and out of fashion. In 2022 Charlotte and Oliver topped the list for babies in New Zealand. I recall asking my mother why she chose my name. ‘We liked the sound of Alister.’ And that’s probably why many names are chosen, though like my second name, Graeme, they may have a special family connection and a surname, of course, identifies our whakapapa – the line of descent from our ancestors. Hendery, with its particular spelling of ‘ery,’ makes a link going back many centuries with our sept which originated in Banff, Scotland.

Shakespeare’s Juliet may have asked, ‘What’s in a name?’ and the answer is, there can be much. Names can tell stories and have deep meaning. They speak of who we are. My parents may not have known it when they chose my name, but I appreciate it, as it means protector or friend of people.

In the culture into which Jesus was born, a name was more than a label to identify that person. They believed that something of the person’s identity could be tied up in the name – that the name might express something of the person’s essential character. What’s more, names can be powerful things.

These may seem rather foreign notions to us, yet they aren’t. Following the 2019 Christchurch Mosque attacks the Prime Minister said of the gunman, ‘He sought many things from his act of terror, but one was notoriety – that’s why you will never hear me mention his name.’ And it’s a name that’s seldom mentioned. By not naming him, a power is removed from him.

On the other hand, by giving a name, we grant power. Children are aware of the power of a name. I wonder if you remember being frightened by some strange sound or shadow in your room and then, when mum or dad came in and showed you what was casting the shadow or causing the noise, the fear went – in other words, by naming it we obtain control over it, or at least control of our fear of it.

Then we speak of slandering or defaming a person’s name. It suggests the name is far more than a label. It represents a person’s character. It says something about who they are, which takes us to the story of Jesus’ name.

This story begins when angels visit Mary and Joseph. In Luke’s Gospel, the angel Gabriel visits Mary to tell her that she will bear a son and name him Jesus. Matthew’s Gospel tells a similar story about Joseph; an angel appears to him in a dream and tells him that Mary will bear a son, whom Joseph is to name Jesus. Each of the angels reminds Mary and Joseph not to be afraid. The story continues, of course, with the birth of Jesus and when, as we heard in the Gospel reading, Mary and Joseph do indeed name the baby Jesus. And that’s what we celebrate today, the eighth day of Christmas – what’s known in the church as the Feast of the Naming of Jesus. It’s a custom shared in many cultures. Isaac, the youngest member of this faith community, was baptised this Advent just past. But before then, his family, with their Nigerian roots, followed this custom and named him on the eighth day, as did Mary and Joseph, who were following Jewish tradition. And with it, they were giving him a name that identified God’s purposes for him.

‘Jesus’ means ‘the Lord saves’ – saves us from whatever separates us from God, in particular, sin. We can expand that, and see how he saves, or delivers us, from whatever bedevils us. Though to use his name, and it appears in the New Testament in various forms – ‘Lord Jesus,’ ‘Christ Jesus,’ ‘Jesus Christ’ – is to also invoke his presence – as he promised his disciples, ‘where two or three gathered *in my name*, I am there among them.’ When we use his name, we call to mind and heart, his saving and delivering presence in our lives – we’re reminded of his living presence among us.

Brother Curtis Almquist, who is an Anglican monk, says,

Knowing someone's name gives a certain access, intimacy, and power. You have Jesus' name. Use it. Breathe the name of Jesus as you make your way through the day. Breathe the name of Jesus for yourself and for others, those far off and those who are near. Jesus will live up to his name for you. Breathe the name, use the name 'Jesus,' because there is power and identification in claiming and using and sharing a name.¹

This feast day has been celebrated by the church since the 6th century – the same century when a very simple prayer, known as the Jesus Prayer, originated. The Jesus Prayer is this:

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

Or simply,

Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner.

It's a prayer that's been common for centuries in the Orthodox churches of south-eastern Europe, Greece, and Russia. In the 19th century an anonymous peasant told the moving story of his search to pray without ceasing in a book called *The Way of a Pilgrim*. Once he learned the Jesus Prayer, he prayed it continuously until the prayer moved from his mind into his heart, and finally, throughout his whole body – becoming so internalised that it was present with him at all times, whether he was awake or asleep. With countless other Christians, it's a prayer that's become integral to my life. It's what we call a breath prayer. That is, a very simple prayer that we can be spoken in one breath. We inwardly repeat it day and night, speaking it as we breath out. Other prayers can, of course, be used. I use this one, because it invokes the holy Name of Jesus and through it, I acknowledge my need for the deliverance, the salvation, the mercy, the love, and forgiveness that Jesus brings.

The name of Jesus is powerful. It is, as Paul said, 'the name that is above every name.' The Book of Numbers says that the Lord's name is placed upon us, and by so doing, God blesses us.

As we enter this new year call upon the gift of Jesus' holy name. Let the name itself be your prayer. Say it often. Say it wherever you are – silently or aloud. And you'll discover that you are both more aware of God's presence in your life, and in those around you.

How sweet the name of Jesus sounds
in a believer's ear!
it soothes our sorrows, heals our wounds,
and drives away our fear.

It makes the wounded spirit whole
and calms the troubled breast;
it satisfies the hungry soul,
and gives the weary rest.

Dear name, the rock on which I build,
my shield and hiding place,
my never-failing treasury, filled
with boundless stores of grace.²

Alister Hendery – Hastings, 1.1.2023

¹ Curtis G. Almquist. *The Twelve Days of Christmas: Unwrapping the Gifts* (Lanham, MD: Cowley Publications, 2008), 57.

² J. Newton (1725-1807)