

A very Happy New Year to you all and well done for making it to church today if you were up celebrating last night! This is that very rare happening which delights vicars! When Christmas Day and so New Year's Day fall on Sunday's...only one day's work that week! It has only happened 7 times during my 40 Christmases as a priest.

But it does present the preacher with a problem. The official church title today is not New Year's Day but the Naming and Circumcision of Jesus. Who wants to think about circumcision at this time in the morning? And yet this ceremony, making all baby boys members of the Jewish community on the 8th day, was practised on Jesus, as Luke records in our Gospel. It was very important to Jesus that he was a member of God's special people, that he fully shared in the life and worship and learnt about God within the Jewish community. We need to remember this for as a cartoon I saw this Christmas said "Without Jews, Arabs, Africans and refugees, there would only be animals left in the nativity scene".

But I want to concentrate on the other part of the title of today - the naming of Jesus which is one of two important things which occurs during the ceremony. As soon as the child had been circumcised, it is the duty of one of those present to give him his name for the first time. The parents have discussed and chosen the name but in Jewish practice they do not use it for the first week. It is only in the context of the child's dedication to God and as prayers are said for the blessing of his life that his name is used. It shows how important that God who knows his name first. As Isaiah says 'I have called you by name, you are mine.' Our name is the starting point of our relationship with our heavenly Father and of course this is true of girls every bit as much as boys.

But Jewish tradition adds another thought: that the name is prophetic of the child's life. The name will point to the kind of person they will be. And how true that is in Jesus' case. They name him Jesus, the name give by the angel at his conception but what a name. Jesus or Joshua or Yeshua means God saves. A common enough name at the time but how prophetic of the whole meaning and purpose of his life. His words and actions will show forth God's saving love for humanity and in his life and sacrificial death he will bring to fruition the Father's plan to save his people. No wonder then we sing "Jesus name above all names, beautiful Saviour, glorious Lord." No wonder his name is in our hearts and minds and voices in prayer and praise and will be on our lips as we take the final steps into death and new life. For in his name we have discovered our salvation, hope for ourselves and our world.

The Naming of Jesus has vast implications for our daily lives. For as our reading today from Galatians reminded us it is through this Jesus we have been adopted as God's children and so are sisters and brothers of Jesus. We in our baptism and through the constant renewal of our faith day by day are proud to share his name – we are the Jesus people. Each day when we say the Lord's prayer, we say hallowed, holy be your name. And how do we make and keep his name holy? Well not just by avoiding using it as a swear word, but by letting it be prophetic of the sort of people we are as individuals and as a church. Everything we say or do should be in the name of Jesus, living by

his standards, working in his way, loving like he loves, caring to the nth degree as he does. We shall be the Jesus people when we are known as those who live out his call to love, caring for each other and the stranger and the foreigner, demonstrating his care for the planet on which our fragile life is lived.

So how do you face 2017? Many of us, I guess, after the turbulence of 2016 regard a new year with apprehension. How will all these shifts of the tectonic plates of life pan out? It may not just be in the national or international spheres that we face the future with anxiety. We may be facing upheavals in our personal lives, our family circumstances or our own health. We none of us know where we shall be by December 31st or even if we here. Not a cheery thought perhaps for New Year's morning but surely there can be no better way than to enter this New Year than with the name of Jesus on our lips and in our hearts. In a world where the certainties have been broken up what better name do we have to cling to than the person of Jesus, our rock and redeemer? In a world where we are making ourselves more isolated and building walls once again around nations, what better name do we have than the name of Jesus who as letter to Ephesians says breaks down the dividing wall of hostility and made all one in his life and death and resurrection. In a life that seems so fleeting, what better name do we have than the name of Jesus to give us hope and peace?

And so on this day of the Circumcision and Naming of Jesus perhaps we can let our new year's resolution be to honour the name of Jesus in our hearts, in our families, in our church and community by being his children not just in name but by loving action and concern, by sacrificial but powerful love and by looking and working for the day when 'at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue confess him king of Glory now.' Amen

Canon Michael Webb