

WHAT'S IN A NAME? (12th January 2020 Lindfield)

MATTHEW 3: 13-17

Perhaps one of the best known lines of William Shakespeare is from Act 2, Scene 2 of *Romeo and Juliet* when Juliet says, *What's in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet.* She couldn't understand that her lover's name meant he was from a rival family and therefore off limits to her affections, If names are merely labels then she has a point.

Names are often more than just labels. In centuries past and in other cultures today names mean a lot. They can reveal much about a person. The particular spelling of my surname indicates a Swedish heritage. A name beginning with 'Mac' indicates a Scottish background where 'O' is Irish. But 'son', 'Mac' and 'O' all mean the same thing: Son of.

Timothy, the recipient of 2 letters from the Apostle Paul was given the name because it meant, "honouring God". Jesus changed Simon's name to Peter, meaning 'Rock'. Names can indicate heritage, occupation, religion and character traits.

In years past parents brought their children for Baptism when they were very young – sometimes only a couple of weeks old because it was there the child's name was revealed, often for the first time.

Today is the day we think about the Baptism of Jesus. It reminds us that, like Jesus, we are given a name that matters: "beloved".

There has been debate about the significance of these few verses (and those like it in the other Gospels). Some have felt that because John was preaching a Baptism of Repentance there was no need for Jesus to be baptised at all. Others have been troubled by Jesus "submitting" to John to be baptised. And it appears that John felt a bit the same way. Nevertheless this passage is both important and timely because it helps us recover and reclaim baptism as a dynamic, present-tense activity rather than being seen as a quaint religious ceremony.

Baptism brings us into God's family, the Church. It is the sign of God's promised forgiveness and a seal of God's acceptance and presence with us always. Whereas in the Old Covenant the sign of being a part of God's people was circumcision but under the New Covenant the sign is applicable to ALL, both male and female, hence Baptism. Baptism was perhaps the first sign that females mattered just as much to God as males, turning patriarchy on its head! Part of this inclusion is also the name we receive – Beloved – and with the name an identity – child of God, one to whom God is unfailingly committed. That name and that identity has never been more important.

We are at a time and place where so many would like to identify and define us by many names: Australian born or Immigrant, rich or poor, gay or straight, conservative or progressive (both in politics and theology), male or female and on it goes. People who want to use such labels think that such a label defines us. We are even defined by the products we use: Apple, Telstra, BMW, Sony, these are not just company names but lend a particular sense of self, and increasingly the brand labels on our shirts, shoes, computer etc convey something of who we are and what is important to us.

Which is why it's so important to remind ourselves of the significance of remembering our primary identity as "Child of God" and how, in Baptism, God named – and continues to name us as "beloved". It is not that all these other names are worthless, some of them may be quite important to us. Rather, it's that while all the other names, affiliations identifications may *describe* us, they dare not *define* us as only the name we receive by God's Holy Spirit in Baptism grants us the life we have in Christ.

Names are powerful. Notice that in the very next verse Matthew records that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested. This happens only after he has been baptised and named. Similarly, when we remember we are God's beloved children, we are far more able to flourish among the swirl of names, identities and values that compete for our attention and allegiance. In short, Baptism matters because it tells us *who* we are by reminding us *whose* we are: God's beloved child.

On this Sunday preachers often just preach about Jesus' Baptism and ignore the wider implications for Baptism generally, but of course the two are inextricably joined. We have been given a treasure in Baptism that we don't consider often enough. When Jesus came out of the water the Spirit descended upon him as a dove and a voice from Heaven declared, *This is my son, the beloved, with him I am well pleased*. It is Matthew's first declaration that Jesus is God's son, other than the birth narratives themselves and this forms the basis for the rest of his Gospel. It is knowing that Jesus is the beloved of God that undergirds Jesus' ministry and Matthew's record of that ministry.

Yet we are tied up in this "Good News" because we are Baptised in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, we too share the family name. We, too are the beloved with whom God the Father is well pleased. Not because we do lots of good deeds in the hope of earning that love but because a parent loves their child no matter what.

Names can be powerful: they convey identity, purpose, authority and more. And we have been given an awesome family name. We are God's beloved children and each time we wash, each time we are near water, each time we make the sign of the cross, we remember that name and we are renewed in faith, hope and courage.

What's in a name? Maybe a rose by any other name would smell as sweet but our name is more than the label given to a particular flower, it a declaration that we are members of God's family and no-one can ever take that away from us. AMEN
