

WHAT'S YOUR NAME?

**Sermon preached at 10.00am Sung Eucharist
St. Edmundsbury Cathedral
9 July 2017**

One of the fun things about working in Hong Kong was baptisms. At St John's Cathedral we regularly had the baptism of adults who were new, enthusiastic Christians. Most of these people were Chinese. For cultural reasons they tended to choose a Western name as their baptism name. So we had Catherine, Stephen, Jonathan. The fun part was the names that are surprising to Western ears: Angel, Venice, Tiger, Birdy. I will always remember the look on the Dean's face as he baptised Lemon Chong.

Whether we remember our baptism or not, we usually remember our name. Which is good because it is part of our identity. When we introduce ourselves we tell someone our name. At meetings we go round the group and say our name. It's odd really. Our name doesn't say very much about us. It gives a hint about our culture, our faith, our background, our nationality, but really our name is just a label for who we really are. Our deeper identity is more mysterious.

Rabbi Yehuda lived in Czechoslovakia. He was the greatest Rabbi in Europe of his age. One night he had a dream: he dreamt he had died and was brought before the throne of God. The angel who stands before the throne said to him, "Who are you?" "I am Rabbi Yehuda of Prague. Tell me, my Lord, if my name is written in the book of the names of those who will have share in the Kingdom." "Wait here", said the angel; "I will read the names of all those who have died today that are written in the Book of Life."

The angel read the names, thousands of them – many sounded strange to Rabbi Yehuda; as the angel read, the rabbi saw the spirits of the people whose names had been called fly into the glory around the Throne.

At last he finished reading, and Rabbi Yehuda's name had not been called. He wept bitterly and cried out against the angel. The angel said, "I called your name." "But I did not hear it," Rabbi Yehuda said. "Ah," the angel replied, "in the Book are written the names of all the men and women who have ever lived on the earth, for every soul is an inheritor of the Kingdom of God. But many come here who have never heard their true names on the lips of humans or angels. They have lived believing that they know their names; and so when they are called to their share in the Kingdom, they do not hear their names as their own. They do not recognise that it is for them that the gates of heaven are opened. So they must wait here until they hear their names and know them. Perhaps in their lifetime one person has once called them by their true name: here they will stay until they remember. Perhaps no one has ever called them by their true name: here they stay till they are silent enough to hear the King of the Universe Himself calling them."

At that moment, Rabbi Yehuda woke from his dream. He got out of bed weeping. He fell to his knees and prayed, "Lord God, master of the Universe! Let me just once hear you speaking my true name through the lips of my brothers and sisters."

About a month ago there was an article on the BBC website about the names celebrities choose for their children. The article was provoked by George and Amal Clooney choosing traditional names for their twins: Ella and Alexander. The article mentioned Chris Martin and Gwyneth Paltrow and their daughter Apple. With Mr Soper's love of iPhones, iWatches and iPads, the Lay Clerks were offering good odds on Emily Soper being named after the forbidden fruit.

Apple, BMW, Volvo, Marks & Spencer, Waitrose, Phase Eight, Nike... these are some of our other names. We put these on as part of our identity. Caffè Nero, Costa, Starbucks, Paddy & Scott's...

We use other names too: Conservative, Labour, Lib Dem, Green... British, English, Scottish, Slovakian, Polish, American, Chinese... teacher, accountant, priest, director, musician, journalist, doctor... Head of this, Director of that, Vice President of Something, Assistant Whatever... All these things form the complex web of how we see ourselves, the complex web of how I see myself. Many and subtle are the strands and layers.

"Master, let me hear my true name on the lips of a brother or sister."

This morning we celebrate the gift of faith. We celebrate knowing God's presence with us. We celebrate that we, each one of us here and all people, are made in God's image. We celebrate with the baptism of Emily and William. We hear the song the angels sang at their birth. We hear God saying to each of us "you are beloved, with you I am pleased."

Jesus teaches us that our true identity is deeper than all the names we use, all the brands we put on, all the identities we accrue. Our deepest identity comes from God. It is mysterious, it is hard to grasp, it can be hard to accept. It is that we are of infinite value. We are cherished and accepted and loved more than we can possibly imagine.

"Master, let me hear my true name on the lips of a brother or sister."

One of the great things about living in Hong Kong is being with Chinese Christians. In western culture we put so much emphasis on the individual. In Chinese culture, identity is more about being with other people, being part of a group, part of a collective. This fits with Christian belief that we are one body. "We are the body of Christ – we are all baptised into one body". It makes me think that as well as our own name, we should all have the same middle name – something that shows our unity, a name that expresses how our identity is much more than being one person.

Christian would be good. It tends to be a male name now, but in medieval times it was a common female name. Theophilus, "lover of God", is another possibility. Or simply "Beloved".

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