

## The Holy Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ

Sunday 1 January 2017

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Isaiah 9:2-7

(Psalm 8)

Luke 2:15-21

Acts 4:8-12

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Happy New Year!

Today is also both the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Christmas and the 8<sup>th</sup> day after Christmas, which means that, liturgically, there is quite a lot that might be considered. On the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Christmas, we would usually be thinking about the flight into Egypt of the Holy Family and the slaughter by King Herod of the innocent children left behind in Bethlehem. On the 8<sup>th</sup> day after Christmas, the Church observes either the Feast of Mary the Mother of God or the Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus. The various contrasts are quite striking.

And yet, each of these aspects is somehow true and worthy of consideration today. This Christmas season I have been very much aware of the ordinary humanness of much of the story. Mary and Joseph seem to have been quite simple people who would probably not have drawn much attention if their lives had run their expected course. A young couple without many resources planning a future together that would probably have been quite unexceptional under normal circumstances.

It is not obvious to me, except perhaps in retrospect, why they would have been chosen by God to be the guardians of his great gift of salvation to the world. It seems that the first either Mary or Joseph knew about God's choice was when angels visited and made announcements. Which was just as well, because otherwise that pregnancy would have been even more trouble than it was. The Gospels record the astonishment of Mary and Joseph at every new development or pronouncement about what was happening.

After the visits from the angels, there followed the nine months during which Mary and Joseph learned to live together and to love each other, while the changes in Mary's body would have been a daily reminder of the need to adjust to a different reality. Then there was also that business of the census and the need to get to Bethlehem just as the birth was due. No proper accommodation, family and friends not around, then a bunch of shepherds making a ruckus. The angels had been singing somewhere else.

Eight days after the birth, the baby boy is circumcised on schedule by his devout parents and given the name provided by the angels: *Jesus*. Not an unusual name at the time, but one with a significant meaning: *God saves*.

And yet not very long after that, the child Jesus must himself be saved by his parents when the Magi arrive and Herod discovers that he has a rival. From the start, God's plan of salvation has not run smoothly, at least not from our perspective. *Even with the dawn of*

*peace the blood of innocents is shed, and Rachel, inconsolable, must wonder where God's path has led.*

It took a while for Jesus to grow into his name. When he did, he made the name holy, so that it became his in a very particular way ... but the people whose hopes had been raised by all the fuss around his birth had to wait 30 years for him to start establishing the kingdom of heaven on earth. Thirty years of a largely hidden life, being raised by two faithful parents, living one day at a time.

The reading from the Acts of the Apostles this morning was a short extract from a longer story which starts with the Lord Jesus healing through the apostles Peter and John a 40 year old man who had been crippled since birth. Peter insists that it is the Name of Jesus that effected the healing, rather than any power inherent in either him or John.

It took a while for the apostles to develop such confidence in that Name, confidence that they knew what needed to be done in each situation and that it could be done through them. There were years of stumbling around behind Jesus, wondering who that man was and what he was going to say or do next to astound them, which often meant disappointing them. Simon needed time to grow into the new name Jesus gave him: Peter, the rock.

I want to suggest that our lives are not that different from those of Mary and Joseph or those of the apostles, apart from some details. These stories that we read are not just about people who lived a long way away a long time ago. I think they are deeply connected with our stories.

We too must find a way of getting through each day as best we can, trying to figure out and do the right thing as life comes at us after its often unplanned fashion. We too are subject to cultural, societal and political forces beyond our control. Life is more difficult and uncertain and sometimes more dangerous than we would like it to be. It is not always easy to know how best to respond to the challenges that life brings.

And then there is, above or beneath or within all that, the suspicion that God is up to something, however inscrutable that something might appear to be. The angels are singing somewhere, even if that often seems to be somewhere else. There is more to life than we are usually aware of, more meaning in our own lives than we might understand.

We have our names, given to us by people who had hopes for our lives, labels upon which we hang our identities. Our truest identities often wait to be discovered by us, and then to be lived into. The tradition in religious life of taking a new name reflects the idea that a truer identity has been discovered and the old label no longer fits.

In her novel *Gilead*, Marilynne Robinson has the narrator say the following: 'Calvin says somewhere that each of us is an actor on a stage and God is the audience. That metaphor has always interested me, because it makes us artists of our behaviour, and the reaction of God to us might be thought of as aesthetic rather than morally judgemental in the ordinary sense. How well do we understand our role? With how much assurance do we perform it? ... Well, we all bring such light to bear on these great matters as we can. I do like Calvin's image, though, because it suggests how God might actually enjoy us. I believe we think about that far too little. It would be a way into understanding essential things ... '

I think Mary shows us the way, in her response to all that was happening in her and around her. *She treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart.*

Writing in the *Christian Century*, Peter Marty invites his readers to pay more attention to what is happening in the present moment. 'Live the life you have been given—now. To enjoy the miracle of now is to appreciate the confidence God has in us for crafting a future.'

God had confidence in Mary and Joseph, starting with the confidence that they would indeed provide their newborn with the name that God wanted for him. That name would be the start of his identifying with us, of his bringing God's love to us and teaching us how to love in a new way. God has confidence in us, that we will indeed learn.

And so, as we enter this new year together:

*May the LORD bless us and guard us;  
may the LORD make his face shine on us and be gracious to us;  
may the LORD look kindly on us and give us peace.*

Amen.