



More than a name!

When I first arrived here in West Epping and started the important task of learning your names, I was advised that, if I am stuck, then I should just say “John”.... for there are lots of “John’s” in this congregation! And while, I confess, that I do still forget some names, “John” is a name that will not slip my mind.

“John” is the English form of “Johannes” and it derives from the Hebrew meaning “Yahweh (or God) is gracious”. The name owes its popularity to two New Testament characters. The first is John the Baptist and the second is the apostle John who is traditionally regarded as being the author of the fourth Gospel and Revelation.

In England the name “John” became extremely popular and during the later Middle Ages it was given to approximately a fifth of all English boys. Some famous “John’s” over the years include the “Little John” of Robin Hood fame, the poet John Milton, the philosopher John Locke, the American founding father and president John Adams, the anti-slavery advocate John Newton, the assassinated American president John F. Kennedy, twenty three popes by the name John, two Popes by the name of John Paul and the musician John Lennon. Here in Australia, us “Johns” share our name with such people as John Curtin, John Howard, John Flynn, John Newcombe, and I must throw in a cricket name - John Inverarity.

Names are important and it’s common to actually attribute specific names or titles to people that not just identify them – but go on to describe who they are and what they do. As I mentioned the name “John” means “God is gracious”. And, indeed, this is a big thing for us “Johns” in this congregation to live up to. When you all look at the “John’s” around you I trust you do experience some of God’s grace in action - for it is in name of God’s wondrous grace that we are named!

The Great Nelson Mandela was given a special name. He was known as “Madiba”. This is a tribal name related to Mandela’s Xhosa tradition and it refers to a person of great respect and affection.

I am sure all of you would agree that Nelson Mandela bore those qualities out in his life. Likewise Ghandi was known as ‘Mahatma’. This is a Sanskrit name for “Great Soul” or “saint”. And Ghandi did go on in a saintly way to inspire many in their search for peace and non-violent change.

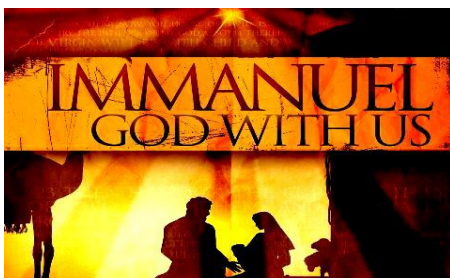
This morning we encounter two names in Matthew’s account of the birth of the long awaited Messiah. Two names are mentioned as we are told this birth-event takes place in unusual circumstances. The betrothed Mary discovers she is pregnant out of wedlock. Joseph, her future husband, gets wind of this. Rather than expressing a bout of righteous anger, as his culture authorised him to do, Joseph plans to quietly call the wedding off.

But this is no ordinary pregnancy, for Mary will give birth to a son who is uniquely special. And, at the prompting of a messenger from God, the scenario becomes clear. God is at work here. This is no ordinary birth. And to explain this we are given two important names to ponder.

One of these names is “Jesus”, for we are told *“When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son, and he named him Jesus”*

The name “Jesus” comes from the Hebrew “Yeshua” and is related to the root word translating *“to rescue or deliver”*. The name also derives from the noun for *“deliverance”* and scholars inform us that these Hebrew words really translate as *“Yahweh saves”* or *“God saves”*. Note that the name itself - is not so much about who this “Jesus” is - as it is about what “Jesus” does. Matthew qualifies this by saying *“for he will save his people from their sins”*.

The second “name” we encounter this morning is “Emmanuel”. Matthew records this name being announced to Joseph with the words: *“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel...”*



“Emmanuel” derives from a Hebrew phrase conveying the meaning of *“to be in common”* together with the idea of being a *“group of people”*. In other words, the name “Emmanuel” points to the God who is one with us in community or as the Gospel states, *“God is with us”*.

Again the name itself here is not so much about who this “Emmanuel” is - as it is about what this “Emmanuel” does. For in the birth of this baby at Christmas - God becomes one with us.

The “*God who saves*” and the “*God who is one with us*” are names that assure us this Jesus, this Emmanuel, is the fulfilment of God’s promise’s that has its foundation in the words of the ancient prophets including Isaiah.

Isaiah was speaking more than 700 years before Jesus and here in the vulnerable, struggling kingdom of Judah, God promises that a child will, one day, be born to bring peace and wellbeing to a people who were constantly living under the threat of violence and war.

For, Isaiah writes: *“the Lord himself will give a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings are in dread will be deserted.”*

As Christians, we believe Isaiah’s prophecy points to Jesus – and at Christmas, in the birth of the Christ-child, this prophecy finds its fulfilment. Jesus saves – God is with us.

Friends, I am all too familiar with slogans that state “*Jesus saves*”. Indeed, I remember, as fit young man mulling over these words that were written on a billboard on the side of the road as I travelled to work each day.

“*Jesus saves*” – okay I believed in Jesus. I was familiar with “Jesus” as a name and I believed Jesus lived as a person. But “to save” - what did that really mean? Was I about to drown and was Jesus patiently waiting by to toss me a lifeline? Was I about to fall off a cliff and was Jesus there ready to throw me a parachute? Was I ready to collapse with a heart attack and was Jesus on duty to employ CPR on me? All of this didn’t make a lot of sense to a young active bloke like me at the time.

But you see, the Biblical concept of “saving” is more than this. Being “saved” is more than simply being “recued”. For the Biblical concept concerns the idea of being delivered. It concerns being delivered from a life of meaninglessness to a life of direction and purpose. Being “saved” concerns the reality of moving beyond a life of frustration and hurt to a life enriched and sustained by God’s mercy, grace and hope.

Yesterday Barney Swartz, a correspondent for the Sydney Morning Herald , hit the nail on the head with his article “The Search for Meaning”. This was published in the News Review section of the weekend paper.

Here Barney claims there is a deep spiritual hunger in Australia today. In his words, “*people are hungrier than ever for the transcendent*”.....*there is “a hunger for something beyond the material world”*. For people are searching for something that will move them, something that will deliver them from the bland and somewhat pointless nature of their current lives.

And you see, this Jesus whose birth we celebrate next Wednesday, is the one - who by his very nature - that involves love, compassion and the total giving of self - offers us the means to move beyond despair to a life that is truly blessed by the goodness of God.

This Jesus who comes to us as baby born in humble circumstances in Bethlehem, is the one – who by his very actions – delivers us from a kind of spiritual amnesia and a preoccupation with the insignificant things of life to a life that begins to make real sense.

Emmanuel – “God is with us”. This is the second name mentioned by Matthew today. These words are very reassuring as they speak of a God who is not remote, who is not out of touch and who is not withdrawn or disinterested.

Indeed, these words speak of a God who does not need to be sought out. Rather, this is a God who searches for us – a God who goes looking for us and who yearns to abide with us - whoever we are and wherever we may be.

Such a notion is bound up in the basic message of the Gospel that says God first loved us – God searches for us – God comes to us - God yearns to be in fellowship with us – right now!

This is precisely what Christmas is all about. God comes to us and God is born among us. And God lives among this community here in West Epping. For we are God’s people in communion with the creator and the sustainer of the universe. We all belong to God. Indeed, it doesn’t matter who we are and it doesn’t matter what we have done. God is there for us. God is there for you, God is there for me, God is there for all of us!

Friends, as we approach Christmas remember the two names we that are given today. For you see, there is much more to a name than just a “name”. In the name “Jesus” we learn that God comes to “save us”. In the name “Emmanuel” we learn that God is here “with us”.

And what more could we ask for on this last Sunday before Christmas? For at Christmas we receive the greatest gift of all!!

Amen.

