

Sunday Homily

11TH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

23 AUGUST 2020

YEAR A

“Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah,
the Son of the living God.’”

Matthew 16:16

Illustration

What’s in a name? Each culture has its own tradition when conferring names and there can be a mixture of tribal, family and individual meanings attached. As time goes by some of these meanings can be lost. For example, the surname “Carpenter” tells us something of a family’s trade in the past, but it is by pure chance if a “Carpenter” is a carpenter today. In some Christian traditions, first names are taken from those of saints or scripture. Now a baptismal name is as likely to reflect family links, or book or film characters.

We may have strong feelings for or against our own name, but it carries power for us. An “icebreaker” activity sometimes used in the first session of a group can be to ask each person present to state their name and something about it. As well as being a useful tool to fit faces and names together, the layers of history, meaning and feelings revealed can be fascinating.

Gospel Teaching

Names are always significant in the Bible. They tell us much about the role the person is asked to play in the unfolding plan of salvation. Remember the importance given to the naming of Jesus and of John the Baptist in Luke’s Gospel. One of the pivotal moments in the Old Testament is when Moses asks God for his name and God appears to evade the question. To know someone’s name is to have power over them and no one can have that power over God.

In the Jewish tradition even God’s elusive reply to Moses, often translated as “I am who I am”, is never spoken aloud. Yet in today’s Gospel passage Jesus asks his disciples about his own identity. To begin with he is circumspect. He asks who the crowd thinks him to be, employing the title used in Matthew’s Gospel, the Son of Man. The replies are those from the past, important characters who heralded momentous shifts in the history of salvation.

But Jesus then asks his disciples who they think he is, much more direct and resonant of God’s elusive self-disclosure to Moses. “But who do you say that I am?” And it is Simon Peter who answers accurately. “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Jesus is recognised and named for who he is. It is a turning

point in his mission and provides for a crucial change in our understanding of the nature of God. God is no longer keeping himself apart, jealously guarding his own identity, but revealing himself as one like ourselves, even subject to human power.

The immediate sequel to today's story is the proclamation by Jesus of his journey towards suffering and death. For his faith, Peter is especially blessed by Jesus and is given a new name. He is to become the rock, the source of strength and authority for the new community, the Church, the followers of this newly revealed Christ.

Application

Whatever our role in life, whatever our position in the Church, our starting point is the same as that of Peter and the disciples. We have to answer the same question Jesus put to them: who do we say Jesus is? Can we answer? Not just with the mind, but with the heart? We need to be ever aware of God constantly revealing himself and emptying himself for us in and through his Son. If we have the faith to do that, then we in turn receive our names. We are allowed to turn the question round and ask Jesus what name he gives us. Who does he say we are? We are all his followers but, as St Paul points out, the good of the Church and the growth of the kingdom require that we have a clear idea of what our individual contribution may be.

It is not only the clergy who are called and named in this way. Every single one of us is called by God. It is through daily prayer and reflection and the help of those who know us well that we can discern how we are to live out that calling in our everyday lives. We all have a unique contribution to make and each of our names is known to God, so it is up to us to live out that name to its fullest in the service of the kingdom.