Sermon on the Feast of the Naming of Jesus

Anyone here just come from a party straight to this service? That would be quite the juxtaposition wouldn’t it?

Not many folk in the Western world would attempt to give or listen to the equivalent of a speech the morning after New Year’s Eve, but we Christians are a strange lot, aren’t we?

Speaking of strange, the feast we celebrate today is rather odd in its own way. It’s usually only celebrated by Anglicans when it falls on a Sunday, which, since it’s assigned to January 1st, happens to be every six years or so; the last was 2012, the next we’ll have the privilege will be in the Year of our Lord 2023!

But timing is not the whole story when it comes to the oddness of this feast. Christian feasts celebrate either God’s work or evidence of God’s work in a person.

This feast is sometimes called “The naming of Jesus” in order to make it sound more “work-like,” but it actually is a feast celebrating the *name* of Jesus. We celebrate Queen Victoria by which we mean her lengthy reign, the accomplishments that happened during her reign; the way she ruled etc. But imagine if we had a holiday that celebrated not her reign but her name!

Of course the name of Jesus is not a separate reality from his person, but it is a different thing; I’ll try to explore this paradox and it’s importance for us, briefly!

Karl Jaspers, the German philosopher and historian made a claim, disputed by some, but still persuasive to many, that there was a period, approximately 500 years before Christ in which the foundations of what Aldous Huxley would later call the perennial philosophy were laid.

These foundations were laid independently in China, India, Persia, Judea and Greece. The importance, of course, is that these spiritual and philosophical foundations are still the ones that humankind recognizes today.

There’s a lot going on but suffice to say that this was the age of One: the recognition that there is One divine reality rather than many. It was imagined as either separate from the Created Order (theism) or closely intertwined with it (pantheism).

In Israel, this is the time when Israel, under the pressure of new thinking, finally leaves the lesser gods, the baals, the ashteroths and sacred groves and embraces what the prophets have long been saying: the One God who is far more incomprehensible and thus far more powerful, awesome and indeed more faithful than anything that religion has to this point imagined.

Just as importantly, and a bit counter intuitively, at just the same time Israel comes to a greater conception of the human being than anything previously imagined.

The famous Genesis 1 with verses that claim a kind of divinity for male and female comes during this period: “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.”

A verse so sacred and important that it is the first verse where in our modern translations we encounter offset lines signaling that in the original Hebrew this is the first bit of poetry in the Scriptures.

The God that Israel comes to recognize in this time is so awesome and transcendent that, in substitution for the personal name YHWH, revealed to Moses, Israel begins, whenever the name is referenced in the text to say *Adonai*, Hebrew for “the Lord,” lest they mispronounce or misuse the Holy name.

And so, in our 1st reading whenever we read Lord, it is the Hebrew YWHW: “The Lord bless you, the Lord make his face to shine etc.”

When we get to our gospel reading, when we get to the name of the one who most Christians have believed *is* this incomprehensible deity putting on human flesh we might be forgiven for expecting some exotic name in this Hebrew tradition

Instead, what we get is the equivalent of John or Mary: Jesus, a variant of Joshua, a common name in Israel. Indeed when we read the Jewish historian Josephus we realize there were many other Jesus’ running about.

In about 6 B.C. there was even one who led a rebellion claiming to be the Messiah. I mean really God, if you’re going to have your supreme revelation stand out and get noticed you probably shouldn’t name your Son the equivalent of John Smith, especially if just recently John Smith is known as a criminal!

But this, it turns out is precisely the point! God, the One, the Great One who from reverence can’t be named seems determined to be named, after our ordinary conventions!

God appears determined to deepen the connection with humanity, not in its elite form, not with an appending “sir” or “Lady” but with your average run-of-the-mill variety.

Born of a supposedly knocked-up teenager, on the far reaches of the empire, far from power and influence, now further into the thick of it, hidden amongst the crowd by a common name.

To name your child Jesus in ancient Palestine was not to image that your child would “save” anybody any more than naming your child Peter today means you think he’ll be a Pope.

Only Mary and Joseph, it would seem, believed there was some significance to the name; but he’s still just a little baby!

He’s circumcised like all other babies; he’s cut, blood flows, there’s pain.

And now there’s something public, the name previously announced by the angel to Mary is now known by extended family and friends. It is in the context of initiation into the covenant that the name Jesus is made public.

In Israel’s thinking there can be no identity, literally, no name without God’s involvement and God’s work. That’s ironic in this case because Jesus’ name means “he will save his people from their sins” and yet he himself cannot *be* Jesus unless he submits to the saving covenant himself!

What do we have here? Some nice, maybe even romantic, story of God’s descent?

No, what we have is—and the New Testament will bear this out—something even more significant for our conception of God and the human being than that offered by the Axial age; or at least the way that insight was understood in places like Greece and Judea.

The One becomes one with humanity! The One incomprehensible transcendent divinity reveals itself as imminent to Creation and pleased to dwell in and with human beings! This is the Good News that resounds out of the New Testament and out into the wider world.

This becomes even more important to grasp in a time when it would appear that the West wants to hold some vestige of Christian ethics and worldview while denying both the reality of what the Axial age discovered in terms of God and by reducing humankind to “nothing more” than a mammal or the last line of hominids.

Some of the impetus for these moves might be well-founded. The Scriptures reveal that we are created from the earth, we are ordinary humans from the humus.

For the sake of our planet we do need to rediscover this part of our identity, our name, if you will. We do not stride above creation but are thoroughly interwoven with every part of it!

I like to say we are “Ordinary” but I always capitalize the O. But the NT reveals, this feast reveals, that there’s more to our name than this!

In our baptism we are found, called, rescued, saved, commissioned and blessed to be “in Christ!” We are “cut into the covenant” and given the name “he will save us from our sins.” We are the image of God and more. As I like to say it we are “Ordinary, capital O, gods, small g” Ordinary gods.

We have our “Christian” names, so-called because we were until very recently named at our baptism signifying that the mystery of our human identity is completely caught up in the Christian mystery; but our real Christian name is simply Christ-ian; those who are given the name of Christ who is the incomprehensible divinity intermingled with human flesh.

He is the Ordianry God, this time both the O and G capitalized so that we can be named and so live as Ordinary gods!

What does this mean? It means, of course, more than we can say here; more than we can say period. But it does mean that in our “ordinariness” we are not simply “mimickers” of some ideal; Christianity isn’t simply about conforming and keeping a bunch of rules!

Rather, we are the ones called to creatively cooperate with Christ’s Spirit, who lives in us, to work out love, forgiveness and reconciliation in ways that make sense in our time and place!

That’s why sometimes you’ll see on one of our sign messages that reads “creatively living into Christ’s New Commons.” And because we are in Christ, it is our, indeed it is Israel’s and the World’s New Commons as well!

Our parish name, our individual names mean a bunch of things; the world has good reason to think that the name Christian is not very important either. Sometimes we can get caught up in that negativity!

But God’s Spirit is here at this feast, reminding us of the name we were given when we were baptized: “In Christ!”

In our Post-Christian culture, we are called to find creative ways to live into a name, that very few notice, even less understand but which is still instrumental in saving the world from it’s mistakes, it’s sins.

The challenges before us in 2017 may not feel ordinary, but neither is the baby just named, neither are you and I, or at least, that’s not all we are!