

Birth of John the Baptist – 24th June 2018 (Year B), Truro Cathedral

What's in a name?

Isaiah 40.1-11; Acts 13.14b-26; Luke 1.57-66, 80

What's in a name?

Knowing that I was going to be moving house this past week and that I was going to be preaching this morning, I managed to get really ahead of myself and first looked at today's Bible readings about a fortnight ago.

Have you ever noticed how when you're reading or listening to familiar passages of scripture, different things seem to jump out at you each time you come to them? The thing that really caught my attention on this occasion was the beginning of our gospel reading: Elizabeth and Zechariah have just produced a longed-for, miracle baby son; all their relatives and friends have gathered to celebrate the occasion and suddenly a major disagreement erupts as to what they're actually going to call him.

You can almost imagine it – transpose the scene to the present day and a baptism service at church; parents, godparents and bemused small children are gathered around the font, assorted family and friends look on with varying degrees of interest and excitement; the vicar is holding the baby and asks what name she will be given ... and before the parents can get a word in edgeways, everybody else is arguing about which grannies and aunties and cousins she's going to be named after.

What's in a name?

Some of us met on Thursday evening to talk about the future of our 'Growing in Discipleship/Pondering' courses. We very much hope to continue to offer several centrally-run courses each year, almost certainly during Advent and Lent. But in addition to those courses and to an existing small home group, we're in process of establishing several more groups that will meet – probably fortnightly – either in people's homes on a weekday evening or in the Old Cathedral School on a Monday afternoon. If that's something that would be of interest to you, then do talk to me or to Canon Alan once he's back from holiday.

When we met last Thursday evening – just as a little 'taster' – we spent a bit of our time together briefly pondering today's gospel reading.

It was fascinating for me that at least one other person in the group was struck by the very same thing that had caught my attention: this whole business of *'What's in a name?'* and we ended up having an interesting discussion about it that not only threw some light on the Bible passage, but was also a really nice way to begin to get to know one another a bit better.

Did we know what our names meant? Did we like our names – did we feel that our names suited us? Did our names actually convey something of the person we are? At least some of us – myself included – had wanted to change our names at some point in our lives. One person's father had apparently taken a unilateral decision to change their name on his way to register their birth! Some of us had family nicknames ...

Family names and their meaning are very important in Hebrew tradition – think of all those long genealogies in the Bible. Think too of the prophetic names given to the children of some of the Old Testament prophets, including Isaiah.

How about the names of John the Baptist's parents?

Zechariah means *The LORD has remembered* and Elizabeth is the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew name, Elisheba, which means *oath of God* or *God is satisfaction*.

There's a real sense in which the meaning of Zechariah and Elizabeth's names is somehow fulfilled through the birth of their precious child. To this day, childlessness can be a cause of great heartbreak, a very real tragedy for any couple who long to have a family. But in Hebrew society at that time, a childless woman felt totally excluded from society – something that we pick up in the poignancy of Elizabeth's words earlier in Luke Chapter 1, when she discovers that she is pregnant and speaks of God having taken away her disgrace.

So ... a miracle baby! Foretold by an angel. A slight hiccup, in that Dad couldn't quite believe the pre-birth announcement and was struck dumb for nine months. But now here we are at Day 8 after the baby's arrival – time for circumcision and the announcement of the name ...

Let's call him Zechariah after his dad,

say the assembled relatives and friends (since Dad still can't speak) ...

Then mum pipes up – now if they were at the synagogue, women were meant to be seen and not heard, but she pipes up anyway, she's a brave woman, that Elizabeth ...

No, he's to be called John, she says.

They try to argue the toss with her,

There's no-one in the family called that!

And then a bit of a pantomime goes on while the interfering, 'we think we know better' brigade try to indicate that they want **Dad** to write down what **he** wants the lad to be called ... funny how they seem to assume that he's deaf as well as dumb ... and it doesn't occur to them that he and Elizabeth might have found a way to communicate about this beforehand!

But anyway, Dad plays along and mimes back, they give him a writing-tablet and he writes,

His name is John.

End of.

Except not quite. Suddenly Zechariah's speech is restored and he begins to praise God in those wonderful prophetic words that we know today as the *Benedictus*. Small wonder that the gathered family and friends are slightly freaked out by all of this. The news spreads all around the county and community gossip is about what this child is going to become after these rather extraordinary beginnings and this unexpected break with tradition in terms of his naming.

So what **is** in the name 'John'? It's another Greek transliteration of a Hebrew name, *Yohanan*, meaning, *YAHWEH – God – is gracious*.

And God was indeed gracious to Zechariah and Elizabeth, blessing them with a longed-for child in their old age – a son, who even in infancy was living up to the promise of his name for them as a couple. God's tender and personal grace in their lives, bringing healing to their personal heartache.

God is gracious. How do you live up to a name like that?

John seems to have lived quite an ascetic, hermit's existence for much of his young adult life – the synoptic gospels all talk about him being in the wilderness – maybe he headed off there after his parents died.

The text doesn't tell us much about it, but I wonder if those wilderness years, being alone, facing physical and perhaps emotional hardship, were the time when John was really growing into his name – living its meaning, learning to listen deeply to God, to lean into the arms of God, that grace of which John's name speaks.

Whether we choose them or not, I think we too can know God's gracious presence in those wilderness times in our own lives.

John's nickname – the 'Baptist' or 'Baptiser' – didn't come until much later, when John – like his cousin, Jesus – was in his early thirties. In fact, it was really more of a job description than a nickname.

In the synoptic gospels, parts of John the Baptist's message about life-change sound pretty blunt and uncompromising and must have made extremely uncomfortable listening for many members of his audience. Yet still they flocked to hear him and to be baptised. I wonder what it was in John's message that stood out for them. John was not simply challenging their religious complacency – we probably **all** need our religious complacency challenged from time to time! – but he was pointing **beyond** himself to the more powerful one who was to come after him. The one who would baptise not with water, but with the Holy Spirit, the *Messiah*. And just as Elizabeth and Zechariah had longed for a child, so too the people of Israel had been longing for *Messiah*, somebody to come and rescue them from the oppressive Roman occupation and the poverty and struggle many of them faced in daily life.

John's conception and birth, his life and ministry, his very name – *God is gracious* – all point to God doing something new, an outpouring of his grace that would be supremely revealed in Jesus. 'Jesus' – the Greek version of the Hebrew name, *Yeshua*, related to Joshua, which means, *God is generous, God saves, rescues, delivers*.

After Jesus' baptism at John's hands, their ministries would run in parallel for a little while until John's arrest and execution. But from this point on, even when some of John's own disciples come to him, complaining that Jesus is drawing bigger crowds, John graciously replies, *He must increase, but I must decrease.*'

So what's in a name? What's in my name? What's in yours? As we ponder them, what questions of identity are raised for us?

As it happens, the root meaning of my name – Jane – is the same as that of John, simply the feminine version. *God is gracious*. The **question** is, I may have a name with a beautiful meaning, but is that me? and do I really live up to and into it?

And the **truth** is, whatever your given name, whether you like it or not, whether you live up to it or not, God knows the deepest, truest, most real you there is to know and in the words of Isaiah, says to you this morning,

I have called you by name, you are mine.