

That is My Name

Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 3:13-17

Should you ever find yourself by the River Jordan, make sure to take time to visit the Baptismal Site. It is now opened on both sides of the river - the Israeli-Palestinian side and the Jordanian side. It is said to be the site of where Joshua crossed over with the people of Israel into the Promised Land, after the death of Moses and the forty years of wandering in the wilderness. It is said to be the site where the prophet Elijah ascended into heaven in a chariot of fire. And, not far from where it opens into the Dead Sea, it is said to be the place where, not too far from Jericho, John the Baptist carried out his ministry. Calling people to repent, to turn around and face God, baptising them in the water, a sign of a new beginning and new intention.

From the 2nd AD onwards Christians built churches at the Jordan, sometimes diverting the river through the church, so that those wishing to be baptised would walk down one set of steps into the water, and up the other side. The Jordan is a place associated with baptism, new beginning, naming.

We associate baptism today with our font, where infants and adults are touched by water, welcomed into the church family, and in the case of infants, given their names. Something special happens, maybe it is, as it was with Jesus. The movement of the Holy Spirit, the heavens opened, and people caught a sight, heard a sound, that revealed God not absent but present. In Jesus' time people thought that heaven was closed, and God no longer spoke, but Jesus' baptism showed otherwise. The One given the name Jesus, He will save His people, and Emmanuel, God with us, named for us not only to know Him personally, but to know what He came to do.

Centuries before Jesus the prophet Isaiah had a vision of what God, through Jesus, would be like. The Servant, the one come to bring justice to the world quietly but persistently, gentle and faithful. He might seem weak, but He would not fail, nor be discouraged. He breathed encouragement into our lives when we are depressed, or despairing. As we walk with Him, we are helped, because we are accompanied. He will take us by the hand. He will bring light, and sight and freedom.

There's a heart-stopping phrase in the Isaiah reading. *"I am the Lord, that is My Name."* We might be tempted to think about utter mastery and control and domination, but the context says otherwise. The passage starts off with 'The Servant'. A Lord, Who is a servant. A Lord, Who comes to help and assist and notice and accompany. A Lord, Who gets alongside, and is hands-on. In naming God there is authority, but it is benevolent, and gracious, and inclusive and enabling.

"I am the Lord, that is My Name." That is how you will know me, for this is Who I am and what I have come to do.

What God, the Lord, is trying to make clear is that His power works alongside us. Yes, I believe He could overrule, but the experience of God, in Jesus, is one of gentler, irresistible power that doesn't take away our responsibility to work alongside Him. It does keep asking us: "Why are you doing this? Why are you like that?" It keeps forcing us to examine ourselves - our motives as well as our actions. Our thoughts and our words that have as much impact as the things that we do. It keeps forcing us to deal with the One Who says, *"I am the Lord, that is My Name"*, by spelling out not only Who He is, but what that He has come to do.

In the ancient world, knowing the name of something gave not only knowledge but also responsibility and a kind of power. One of the first things we see Adam doing, invited by God, in the poetry of Creation, is to have Adam naming the animals and the plants and everything in Creation. A kind of dominion but with the idea of responsibility and stewardship. A recognition

that by knowing the name of something, or someone, we have a duty of care. To know a name creates relationship and creates connection. "Naming is not just sticking labels on things, so that we remember what they are. We share in God's creation of an ordered, significant world.ⁱ We learn we belong together.

*"I have called you by name, you are Mine"*ⁱⁱ says God. God knows who you are, by your name. It matters to God that God knows you, and therefore connects with you and cares about you. We belong together, God, and you, and me.

But not only does God know us, God wants us to know Him. Not simply by Name, calling on His Name, though that's a good thing. But knowing Him for what He does. *"Faith is not primarily a matter of choosing what to believe, as if one were a consumer in a spiritual supermarket, filling one's trolley with religious goods to match one's personal needs and preferences. Faith is our response to the astonishing discovery that we have been chosen."*ⁱⁱⁱ Named and known by God, Who loves us and cares for us.

What seems to me to be going on in our world today, and has been for several years, is that society has grown old because it has lost its faith in something bigger than the individual. You might call it God, or community, or the common good, or general well-being. Then society loses faith in an objective moral order and ends by losing faith in itself. We lose a sense of what the names are, and the people, and things, that go with them. No wonder the walls of our cities are covered with scrawled graffiti names. People trying to remind themselves that they have names. In baptism our names are recorded in a register. Not simply an administrative exercise, but a sign we are treasured by God.

Names have flooded the news this week.

Rennee Nicole Good is a name. A 37-year-old mother of three. A poet and musician. A legal observer of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) activities. She was called by the Trump administration a 'domestic terrorist' even before they knew her name. She was shot by a masked ICE officer. We saw what happened. In such a situation, overwhelmingly condemned by many in an increasingly polarised United States, what are we to do with her name? What do we think, *"I am the Lord, that is My Name"*, who stands for justice and righteousness and open eyes and freedom wants us to do in memory of her name?

Greenland is a name. A sparsely populated island rich in mineral resources, with a peaceful existence, with human beings experiencing sleepless nights because of land-grab threats which have little to do with a country's national security, and everything to do with controlling mineral deposits. Like the seizing of Venezuelan oil under the pretext of regime change which turned out to be not much of a regime change. What do we think, *"I am the Lord, that is My Name"*, Who stands for justice and righteousness and open eyes and freedom want us to do and say in defence of our belief in peace with fairness and a world community based on honour and integrity and abiding international law for names like Greenland, or Venezuela? Or Ukraine? Or Gaza? Or Taiwan? Or Iran?

Putin. Trump. Xi. Starmer. Badenoch. Farage. These are names. Doing things and not doing things that we agree with and disagree with. What do we think, *"I am the Lord, that is My Name"*, wants us to do with them and about them? Naming someone, something, reveals a connection between us. What they do and don't do impacts us. What does knowing their name, and their actions, tell us about them; who they are, and what they do? What does that then require in response from us, if anything? To speak out? To act up? To demonstrate what we think and we believe, and what matters to us?

Names matter: shaping our identity, saying something about what we do, what we stand for, what is important about us. When someone says your name, what will come to their minds? A smile, a kindness, an act of love, a generosity of spirit, a good person. Or something less comfortable. If we learn this, how do we go about addressing that, and what we have become; Alongside what we think about and address in others? Knowing a name calls for a response from us.

For the person of faith, we learn from the One Who is the Lord, for that is His Name. And how as women and men of faith we respond to Who He is and what He does, will shape our lives, and what our names will come to represent in the world where we live.

"I am the Lord, that is My Name." What, I wonder, does He think of you?

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Timothy Radcliffe, *Take the Plunge*, p25

ⁱⁱ *Isaiah 43:1*

ⁱⁱⁱ Radcliffe, *ibid*, p9