

Sunday 16 September – St Johns & CTK

Exodus 3:1-15

Acts 17:22-31

John 14:6-14

What's in a name?

Right at the beginning of the Bible in Genesis, in chapter 2, we read that God created a man – Adam, then sought a helper for him. He created all the birds and the animals and brought them before Adam to name. But none were found to be a suitable helper.

But why name them? Why does it specifically mention that the animals were brought to Adam to name.

The clue I think is in the alternative cosmic story of creation in the first chapter of Genesis, when God says to the man and the woman “have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and every other thing that moves upon the earth.”

Naming gives a measure of dominion and control.

This is why it is that parents that name their children. And why at certain times they use those given names, when the child might prefer their own shortened or adoptive form of their name. “Thomas” and “Christopher” rather than Tom or Chris for my sons. Maybe you have experienced that too – either yourself or your children.

Any teacher would tell you that the most important task of the new school year is to get to know the names of the children in their classes – because even knowing a name gives a measure of authority and power. The other day I was interviewing someone for a role in a voluntary organisation, and the person kept using my name as she responded to my questions. It was somewhat unnerving, and I felt in some way intimidated.

In the last few years I have taken a (very) amateur interest in bird watching. I suppose it began when we started traveling to the Western Isles of Scotland and saw some of the magnificent birds of prey. And I look at the birds soaring

and swooping and am amazed at the glory and wonder and diversity of creation. But I always yearn to know what bird it is that I am looking at. Is it a golden eagle or a white tailed eagle. Is that a hen harrier or a buzzard? Is that a peregrine or a hobby?

And really it doesn't matter, because the wonder is in seeing the bird fly and soar and glide and hover. So why do I need to know the names? To give me some measure of control. To move the focus from the bird to me – so that I prove how learned and intelligent I am by saying *There is a red breasted merganser* (and sadly I have actually used that phrase ...)

Names are important throughout the Bible. They tend to have meanings. New names are given to signify new tasks given by God, and the authority given to God as a result of the new task and the new responsibilities. Abraham rather than Abram; Sarah instead of Sarai; Israel instead of Jacob; Peter rather than Simon; Paul rather than Saul.

So I want to come to that question that Moses asked when he stood before the vision of God in the Burning bush that we heard about in our Old Testament reading this morning. "If I come to the Israelites and say to them 'the God of your ancestors has sent me to you', and they ask 'What is his name'? what shall I say?"

In other words – Ok God - tell me your name as it will give me some power and authority over the Israelites (and, incidentally, some power over you).

God was not to be fooled. There was no name forthcoming. "I am who I am" or it could be translated as "I will be who I will be" was all that Moses could elicit.

God cannot and will not be named. Naming God was considered on a par with idolatry in the OT. The words we use – God, Lord, Father – are descriptions of his character and authority rather than names. He is beyond naming. He will always be what he will be. God will always be beyond our full understanding, our measuring and our naming. He cannot be limited. To limit God would place him beneath us.

*So the answer to our question this week - Who is God? – must be a little more complex than simply giving a name. So let's press on a bit farther and see where we end up.*

Does this mean then that God will always be unknown and unknowable? Remote from our lives. A God who created, and left us to it. A God who cares nothing about the world or about us?

Certainly not. That would be the other extreme.

And here we pick up our second reading – from the book of Acts in the New testament. We join Paul in Athens – a centre of thought and debate and knowledge. Where philosophers were split between those who believed in this remote kind of God, a creator who had created and then left things, and those who followed other Gods – who were modelled into idols or images and worshipped in shrines created by human hands. And there were also those agnostics, who were even agnostic about their agnosticism who had made an altar to “an unknown god” just in case.

All traditions and religions. From those who created their own gods to those who believed that God was so remote we could know nothing about him.

And Paul presents the Christian truth in a way that shocks, disturbs and demands a response.

The God who created the universe, he says, is neither unknown nor unknowable, nor does this god live in shrines created by humans, nor can he be portrayed in an image – he cannot be pinned down any more than he can be named.

He needs nothing – he is all powerful and created all things. But amazingly he does desire a relationship with us and as such is not far from us. He makes himself known to us in the person of Jesus and has confirmed this by his rising from the dead, and he responds to our searching him out. He truly is not far from us.

And here I want to look at Philip’s question to Jesus from our gospel reading. “Lord, show us the Father and we shall be satisfied”. Philip expressing that longing to see God, to know God, to have a glimpse at what the creator of the world is like. And Jesus’s response – “Whoever has seen me has seen the father”

Not an image, not a name, but an example. Of love, compassion, humility, power, authority, wisdom, purity, hope, forgiveness and more. What God would be like if he were in human form. A glimpse into the character of God.

So back to our question. Who is God?

I think the answer is that we can never know the whole truth of this. We will never be able to understand god, let alone control him or name him. But we can have a relationship with him, and learn more of him and his character. More of the infinite love and graciousness of God. It's a mystery really. God who cannot be fathomed – who is beyond our understanding – desires to have a relationship with his creation. Because of love. And because of love he became a human being in the person of Jesus. To show us how to live; to demonstrate the relationship, to give us a glimpse of his character and to bring us back to God.

And if all this leaves you a little confused – and that's not surprising as we are using human words to speak truths about the creator of all things – then the important thing is not the objective question Who is God?, but the questions which are more personal and more individual. How much of God do we know; how deep is our relationship with him; do we feel his presence; do we hear his call on our lives, and do we reflect his love to the world.

That is for each of us to ponder. How we can learn to spend time in his presence and to enjoy it; how we can desire to know more of his love; how we can seek to show more of his love in the world, how we can become more like him.

And I want to leave this with some words from the film “The agony and the ecstasy”- a film which tells the story of Michelangelo painting the famous picture on the ceiling of the Sistene Chapel – a picture in which he shows what he thinks God might look like.

At the finish the Pope says to Michelangelo ..

Is that truly how you see Him, my son?

And he replies

Yes, Holy Father. Not angry, not vengeful. But like that, strong, benign, loving. He knows anger too. But the act of creation is an act of love.

What you have painted there, my son... is not a portrait of God. It's a proof of faith.

And if you still have a desire for thinking more, Please take one of these – a letter written by former Archbishop Rowan Williams to a six year girl, responding to her question “Who invented God”