

TRINITY NEWS

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FEAST OF THE HOLY NAME

Today, in churches of the Episcopal tradition of Anglicanism celebrate the Feast of the Holy Name. Originally, however, this day, which falls 8 days after Christmas is the Feast of the Circumcision. We moderns appear to be rather squeamish about celebrating a surgical procedure, so we've moved away from that. The Roman Catholics have long dedicated the day to the Blessed Virgin Mary: the Church of England however, calls it the Circumcision and Naming of Jesus, which seems to me to be about right.

The circumcision and naming of Jesus mark not only an important event in the personal life of Jesus, but an event worthy of some theological reflection as well. If God entered the physical world at the Nativity, He enters the social world - becomes part of a community, and is recognized as an individual in receiving a name: He thus becomes fully human.

The ceremony of circumcision marks the entry of a boy into the community of Israel - it serves in Judaism more or less the same function as Baptism does in Christianity. Jesus then, like all humans, becomes a member of a community and submits himself to the customs and traditions of that community. He gains a cultural identity. His name provides him with an individual identity. It is in naming a child that we bestow personhood on him, so to speak. From this

point on, He and His name will be inextricably linked, and so through His Name, Jesus becomes part of our language. He enters human consciousness, which is constituted by language to a large extent, and becomes a part of our conceptual world. We can affirm that Jesus exists for us today only by virtue of His Name: we would not know Him, were it not for His Name.

Given this link between person and name, it's hardly surprising that throughout history, names have been taken very seriously as it was widely believed that uttering the name rendered that person present in a very real way. This could be good or bad depending on who is being made present, and the intention of those doing the naming. In the case of an evil and powerful person, the reason for not wanting him around is obvious (think Voldemort in Harry Potter!), but naming, understood as making present, also renders the person present only in name very vulnerable: she is not physically there to defend herself and may be insulted or abused, defamed and reviled.

Nowhere is this respect for a name more evident than in the culture in which Jesus was brought up. The commandment not to take God's name in vain was taken so seriously that by the time Jesus was born, no one had uttered the name revealed to Moses for centuries, and its pronunciation was entirely forgotten. One could write God's name (without vowels), but one could not say it. Thus, the believer was shielded from

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overpowering presence at inopportune times, and God Himself was protected from insult and profanation. Christians later tried to recover that name in their translations of the Bible: first with ‘Jehovah’, and later with ‘Yahweh’ (which is probably closer to the original), but neither of those is certain.

So, oddly enough, Jesus was raised in a society that could not name God – and, had it not been for Jesus, neither would we be able to, because remember, ‘God’ is not God’s name! The only name we have for God is Jesus.

There’s an interesting symmetry here we should consider. God comes to us at Christmas as a child and in so doing puts Himself in our hands, becomes vulnerable in a way it is still hard to grasp. Eight days later, He comes to us in a Name, again, putting Himself at our mercy, so to speak,

by stepping out from behind the unpronounceable Name, so that now we can make Him present whenever we wish and under whatever circumstances, as a blessing, or as a curse. It is an awesome and a costly gift.

And we are here, this morning to receive that gift and to celebrate it. Let us use it wisely! Paul reminds us today in his letter to the Philippians of the power of this Name: every time we say the Name, Jesus, it rebounds through the cosmos. We should bear that in mind every time we pronounce it! But pronounce it we should, and often, in reverence, love and gratitude, and no moment better than now as we enter this new year. Let us here today rededicate ourselves to this Holy Name and strive to make it the center of our lives, and to bear it consciously with us in the world as we go about our business and His during the months ahead.

SAINTS:

Basil the Great, Bishop of Caesarea & Gregory of Nazianzus, Bishop of Constantinople,

2 January. Gregory and Basil were two friends bound together by their desire to promote and defend the divinity of Christ as proclaimed in the Nicene Creed. This was against the seemingly overwhelming pressure from both Church and State for the establishment of Arianism, which denied Christ's divinity and thus the whole Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Basil was renowned for being headstrong and forceful, in comparison to his friend Gregory, who would rather spend his days in prayer and living the simple, ascetic life. Gregory's brilliance in oratory and theological debate meant that a hidden life was virtually impossible and Basil drew him into the forefront of the controversy. Their joint persuasive eloquence convinced the first Council of Constantinople, meeting in 381, that their teaching was the truly orthodox one and the Council ratified the text of the Nicene Creed in the form it is used in the East to this day. Basil died in 379 and Gregory ten years later.

Vedanayagam Samuel Azariah, Bishop in South India, 2 January. Samuel Azariah was born in 1874 in a small village in South India, his father, Thomas Vedanayagam being a simple village priest and his mother Ellen having a deep love and understanding of the Scriptures. Samuel became a YMCA evangelist whilst still only nineteen, and secretary of the organisation throughout South India a few years later. He saw that, for the Church in India to grow and attract ordinary Indians to the Christian faith, it had to have an indigenous leadership and reduce the strong western influences and almost totally white leadership that pervaded it. He was ordained priest at the age of thirty-five and bishop just three years later, his work moving from primary evangelism to forwarding his desire for more Indian clergy and the need to raise their educational standards. He was an avid ecumenist and was one of the first to see the importance to mission of a united Church. He died on 1 January 1945, just two years before the creation of a united Church of South India.