

Christmas 2-C; December 31, 2006

Theme: The Holy Name of God

Text: Luke 2:221 “On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived.”

Let us pray: O God, our Father, take these feeble words of mine and make them yours; fill the gaps of my inadequacy; forgive my pride and error; and grant that whatever is said in honesty and truth, may be used for the upholding of your people and to the glory of your Holy Name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN!

On this, the 7th day of Christmas, a blessed and Merry Christmas to you! And as tomorrow is New Year’s Day, Happy New Year!

For the world, tomorrow is New Year’s Day. The Church does not celebrate New Year’s Day per se, but as Christ was brought to the temple, circumcised and named on the 8th day of Christmas, tomorrow, January 1, is the Feast of the Holy Name of our Lord.

My text for today’s homily is Luke 2:21, “On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the *name* the angel had given him before he had been conceived.”

Nursery rhymes are familiar to all of us. We learned them as small children and have taught them to our own children and grandchildren. Many nursery rhymes are fun to say and fun to hear. Just about everyone knows such nursery rhymes as “The three Little Kittens” who lost their mittens, or “Little Jack Horner” who sat in a corner. Some nursery rhymes teach historical events such as “Ring Around a Rosie,” a pocket full of posies, etc. This nursery rhyme tells of the Black Plague in Europe during the Middle Ages.

There are also nursery rhymes that teach incorrect thinking, and in a sense, teach a lie. One particular rhyme is “Sticks and stones will beak my bones, but names will never hurt me.” How many times have we said this rhyme as young children or have heard others say it? We usually hear this rhyme used when someone has been insulted by another, and this rhyme is said in defense. Improper names, insulting names, names that attack our very person, do hurt,

and, if persistent or are quite cruel in their descriptiveness, such names can leave deep and long-lasting emotional scars. Names are important; names are very personal, not only to us, but also to God.

If you are a parent, remember the process of choosing a name for your child? I do. The process of choosing just the right name is entered into with great seriousness, much thinking, and with much discussion.

A man whose name was William Stinks went to a judge to get his name changed. The judge said to the man, "I don't blame you for wanting to change your name. What name would you like to be known as?" The man replied, "Bill Stinks."

Names are labels. All be it convenient labels, the purpose of which is to distinguish one thing or person from another. The character or identity of a god or person is expressed in the name. Until we have found a name for some object or experience, a word to indicate its true character, we cannot begin to understand it or make use of it. In some oriental religions, the very notion of naming God makes no sense; God cannot be defined or limited. Therefore, how can God be distinguished from something else? No one name fits Him, and yet, all names fit Him. To Adam was given the privilege of naming the objects of creation. To be in a position of giving a name is the position of authority and control. If we are under the authority and control of God, His created beings, then how can we adequately and properly name Him?

Through the centuries, many theologians have written voluminous books attempting to Name God; all have come up short.

In the Israelite tradition, in the Old Testament tradition, a name represented the inner most self or identity of a person. Thus, naming a child was a significant event. Even today, if one wanted to know someone personally, to establish a relationship with any one, it is necessary to know the person's name. *Try getting married without knowing the future spouse's name!* Thus, it naturally follows that if we wish to have a personal relationship with God and to be able to call upon His Name, then we ought to know what name to use.

So what name do we use to identify God? For the answer to this question, we need to go back into the Old Testament Hebrew language, a language which, in its original form, was written only in consonants. There is evidence that the ancient Hebrews used only the letters *Y H W H* to name God. Much later, when vowels were added, this spelling became *Y A H W E H*, pronounced “Yahweh.” However, because of its Holy character, because of its holy nature, this name was neither written nor spoken. O, such reverence and respect we, too, ought to possess.

What, then, is the source of the name, Yahweh? I thought you would never ask. For the answer, we must go to the second book of the Bible known as Exodus, chapter three. Here we read about Moses being up on Mount Sinai asking, “When I go back to the Israelites and they ask me your name, what shall I say to them?”

I invite you to turn in a pew Bible to page 49, to the lower section of the right hand column, and to verse 14. I invite you to read with me God’s response to the question Moses put to him.

3:14 God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

God replied to Moses, “I AM who I AM. This is my Name for all time.” The Name of God - as given by God - is “I AM.” A God who is constant, unchanging; was, is, and always will be, God. When we look closely at the Hebrew words for “I AM who I AM,” we can easily understand how the encrypted Name of God *YAHWEH*, was formed. Yes, it is Yahweh, the God of Israel who is the God of all creation and history. There are no others!

Eventually, descriptive terms were applied in an effort to expand the meaning of “I AM.” *Adonai* - meaning the Lord; *Elohim* - meaning God; or *El Shaddai* - meaning The Almighty, All Sufficient God.

Having this understanding into the naming the identity of Yahweh God, the first commandment ought to have greater significance for us. From Exodus 20, we read, “Then God spoke these words and said (and note in particular

the first two words), “ I AM (that is Yahweh), the Lord (*the Adonai*), your God (your Elohim) who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery...you shall have no other gods before me.”

YAHWEH (I AM) *ADONAI* (the Lord) *ELOHIM* (your God). For Israel and for us, YAHWEH is our God, and we are to serve no other.

The term YAHWEH is one that God *used to name himself!* Neither Moses nor anyone else named God. So who named Jesus? Mary, his mother? In a sense she did, but who gave her the name to use? Remember at the time of her conception, Mary was visited by the Angel Gabriel who announced to Mary that she would conceive a child and give birth to a son, and *she was to give him the Name of Jesus.* Mary was given the directive to Name her son the name God’s messenger, Gabriel, had given her. In Exodus God names himself. In the New Testament, God as Father, as the parent, names His Son, Jesus. By so doing, as St. Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians, “God exalted him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name, that at the Name of Jesus, every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth, and under the earth.”

God the Father gave Jesus a name that is higher than any other name on earth, and not just any name, but a name given by God Himself! This fact alone makes the Name of Jesus as Holy as the Name of God the Father! And if the ancient Hebrews so respected God’s Name that they neither spoke it or wrote it, then what is our expected behavior for the name of God’s only Son, Jesus?

Not as the French speaking Canadians, I hope and pray. Doug Struck wrote in the Washington Post Foreign Service on December 5 of this year, that the French-speaking people of Quebec prefer to turn to religion when they are mad and swear. People use religious terms when swearing. Language that usually is reserved for dock workers of New York City is so mild for the Quebecois French that such raw profanity appear routinely in the newspapers. But not religious terms used for swearing, for such words are considered too severe. “You swear about the things that are taboo,” said Andre’ Lapierre, a professor of linguistics at the University of Ottawa. “If you are going to use a

taboo word, it would be anything related to the Christian cult, to Jesus Christ, the Communion wafer, vestments, elements of the altar, such as the tabernacle that holds the reserve sacrament for the sick.” Because of the tremendous drop in church attendance, “When the young kids on the street are swearing, they don’t even know what they are swearing about,” said Monsignor Francis Coyle, pastor of St. Patrick’s Basilica in Montreal.

Quebecers swear using religious words in highly inventive ways. For instance, “You Christ that guy” means to throw a person violently. Lapierre stated, “I don’t know any other language that does that so well. The oaths are so ingrained that one cannot converse fluently without them. I teach them in my class.” As a former teacher, I cannot begin to imagine teaching children how to profane the Lord’s Name. Truly boggles my mind.

Bottom line, in French Quebec, it is perfectly acceptable to teach the profanement of the Lord’s most holy Name, to teach in direct opposition to the third commandment. Satan is, indeed, alive and well.

Marv Rosenthal wrote:

To believe that God is something other than what he truly is –

Is to take His Name in vain.

To deny His existence –

Is to take His Name in vain.

To deny His creative power –

Is to take His Name in vain.

To deny His Holy standards for life –

Is to take His Name in vain.

To deny His redemptive work at Calvary –

Is to take His Name in vain.

To deny that He is coming again –

Is to take His Name in vain.

When, then, are we to use God’s most Holy Name? Only in prayer or in proclamation of God’s Word! To use God’s or his Son’s Name in any other way is wrongful use. To use God’s Name for our own uptight, angry, or

emotional purposes is wrong! God said so! And that is all that needs to be said about it.

YAHWEWH (I AM) ADONAI (the Lord) ELOHIM (your God). I sincerely hope the 3rd Commandment will have greater meaning for you. The King James Version of the third Commandment is, “Thou shalt not take the Name of the Lord thy God in vain..” This is usually all we hear about this commandment, but there is much more. “...for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh His Name in vain.” The New Revised Standard Version says, “You shall not make wrongful use of the Name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses His Name.” The Lord will not make innocent, but will hold guilty anyone who misuses His Name. God said so. Case closed.

If we have a personal relationship with God, then it naturally follows that you ought to love him as is directed to us by the first Great Commandant: that we are to love God with all our heart, mind, and soul. And so loving God, if we hear his Name being used improperly, His Name being profaned, something within us ought to hurt. Our hearts ought to cringe with sadness at the misuse of our Lord’s Name. If it doesn’t, then just what is your relationship with God and His Son, Jesus?

In today’s culture, it seems as though that which is regarded sacred is prime target for abuse. One cannot go to the movie theater or turn on television without hearing the third Commandment being brutally beaten up. God says don’t do, and that is exactly what is blatantly done. If God’s Name can be dishonored, if God’s Name can be reduced to common place swearing, culturally accepted profanity, then what does this do to the character and nature of God in the mind of those using such profanity? I don’t even want to go there.

What is the Christian community’s responsibility? Would Jesus permit the inappropriate use of His Name or his Father’s Name? I think not. Then neither should we. It isn’t easy to stand up to the world. St. Paul wrote that we are in the world, but we are not to be of the world. Strength through

prayer and the blessing of the Holy Spirit will enable each and every one of us to honor the Name of Jesus; to use the Name of Jesus with deep reverence and respect. As children of God, we are to remind others to honor the Name of Jesus. Remember the third Commandment: God will not hold one guiltless, that is God will not acquit or declare innocent, one who profanes His sacred Name. Jesus has only you and I to be the messengers of His Word. May God grant you the strength and courage to proclaim His Word. And he will, when you reverently and respectfully call upon his sacred Name.

Do remember the first and third Commandment, especially tomorrow, on the Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus.

And now to God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, be ascribed as is most justly due, all might, majesty, dominion, power and glory, world without end,

AMEN!