

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

ABOVE EVERY NAME

How very thoughtful of Netflix to release series four of 'The Crown' just in time for the feast of Christ the King! If, like me, you're a fan, you'll have watched most of it already ...

In one scene, - Diana newly-engaged to Prince Charles - is introduced to the rest of the Royal Family and she must curtsey to each member in strict order of precedence. Of course, she gets it all wrong and it's terribly awkward.

Christ the King reminds us that whatever authority may exist on earth, our allegiance to Christ comes first and foremost, taking precedence over everything else. As St Paul says in Ephesians, Christ is *'far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name that is named'*. And elsewhere Paul writes that *'at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow'*.

Paul would have disagreed with Shakespeare's Juliet when she said *'a rose by any other name would smell as sweet'*. Paul identifies something important about the name of Jesus that is significant, and I want to explore what that is.

YAHWEH

The idea that God's name is something worthy of respect has its roots in Jewish worship. In Exodus we find the third Commandment: *'You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God'*.

Although this only explicitly forbids wrongful use, ancient Hebrews erred on the side of caution and the custom developed of avoiding all use of the name of God – after all, what human being is worthy to utter the name of God who is unutterably holy?

When Moses encounters the Lord at Sinai in the Burning Bush he meets the one who has no name but is simply an overwhelming existent reality – 'I AM who I AM'. This contrasts with the pantheon of lesser pagan gods all of whom have specific names. So to name the God of Israel is tantamount to both blasphemy and idolatry – it is to make God less than he is and to worship something he isn't.

So even in the reading of scripture itself, the name for God – Yahweh – was never spoken aloud, and the reader would replace it with ‘Adonai’, meaning Lord. Today, many observant Jews continue to avoid writing the word ‘God’ in full, and any paper with His name on it must be reverently disposed of rather than just thrown away.

The reticence to speak of God’s name is a sign of his transcendent holiness, but also his immanent glory in the world. He is the one who cannot be named, and yet also makes himself known to us. It is this paradox between mystery and revelation which makes the name of God an object of reverence.

HOLY NAME OF JESUS

Christians too, have traditionally taken the third commandment seriously, even if today it is more observed in the breach.

One of the experiences I have quite often as a priest is when people happen in daily speech happen to say ‘O God!’ or ‘O Jesus!’ and suddenly feel the need to apologise to me. There is in our culture still a residual sense that these words are special and shouldn’t be used carelessly – at least, in front of the Vicar!

From earliest times, Christians transferred the holiness of God’s name onto Jesus Christ as a sign of his divinity. One of the Canons of the Church of England says that: *‘the congregation shall give ... due reverence to the name of the Lord Jesus’* (Canon B9). One customary way of doing this is for people to slightly bow their head when the name of Jesus is mentioned.

The very first church where I worshipped regularly did this very enthusiastically. Not just a few people, but the entire congregation would bow their head every time. This was easy to do when it occurred now and then in the liturgy, but some preachers with a sense of mischief would delight in saying ‘Jesus’ as many times as possible in quick succession to try and catch people out!

It could be a little silly and fussy at times, but posture encodes belief, and outwardly expresses inward faith, and I often think there is something to be learnt from that congregation, who had a deep faith in Christ as *‘head over all things’* which was expressed in that slight bow of the head at the mention of His Holy Name.

But unlike the name of God in Judaism, Christians have given prominence to the name of Jesus as something that can and indeed should be used in the right way. After all, in Luke's Gospel, the Angel Gabriel says to Mary 'you shall name him Jesus'. It is a name that means 'Saviour' and everyone is to know it.

The biblical principle is that a name captures someone's nature, so when we give that name honour, we reverence the person who bears it. Devotion to the Holy Name of Jesus, is a way in which Christians show reverence to Christ, and may even come to share in the holiness of God.

ACTS OF MERCY

It is through such reverence that may show our devotion to Christ and his authority over our lives.

But such acts of reverence are only half the story.

Without also acts of love and mercy they are only empty gestures.

As Christ makes clear in the Gospel today, there are certain responses that tell us whether we are living as disciples or not and by which we shall be judged.

feeding the hungry

giving drink to the thirsty,

welcoming the stranger

clothing the naked,

visiting the sick and the imprisoned.

These are known by the Church as the Corporal Acts of Mercy, and Christ's full sovereignty over our lives is demonstrated by the priority we give to fulfilling them.

So there is, and must be, a relationship between our acts of devotion in worship and our acts of mercy in the world – indeed, the two are inextricably connected.

For just as the name of Jesus is representative of Jesus himself, so the Lord tells us that the hungry, the thirsty, the foreigner, the poor, the sick and the imprisoned all represent him to the extent that they are to be directly identified with him:

'Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me'

Let us bear this in mind on this feast of Christ the King – that our spiritual worship of Christ as King of all Creation is borne out in our concrete deeds by which he shows his kingship in our lives.

And let us carry it through into Advent as we consider what acts of charity and kindness may best prepare our hearts to welcome Christ who comes as Child of the stable and King of the universe.