

**SERMON – 30/12/18**

Luke 2:15-21

‘A week later, when the time came for the baby to be circumcised, He was named Jesus, the name which the angel had given Him before He had been conceived.’ (Luke 2:21)

Luke ch.2 is probably the chapter in the Bible that is most often read from in public worship given that it contains the account of the birth of Christ that is read at virtually all of the many Christmas themed services that are held each year. It surprised me therefore, that although I have probably preached at least 30 sermons on sections of this chapter – the birth of Christ, the appearance of the angels to the shepherds, the coming of the shepherds to see the Christ-child in Bethlehem, the response of the shepherds and of Mary, the presentation of Jesus in the Temple and the stories of Simeon and Anna, the return to Nazareth and the visit of Jesus as a 12-year-old with His family to the Temple – I have never (as far as I can recollect or find any documentary evidence) preached on the verse that I have taken as our text this morning, the circumcision and naming of Jesus. ‘A week later, when the time came for the baby to be circumcised, He was named Jesus, the name which the angel had given Him before He had been conceived.’

A week, they say, is a long time in politics. While we have been mercifully spared much politics in the last week, it does nonetheless seem a long time since last Sunday – the fact that this is the sixth act of worship in this building in eight days and that well over 700 people have been through the doors contrasts with the fact that many (although not all) have had at least a couple of days holiday. This time of year brings extreme busyness but it also brings the opportunity to rest, and beyond that I am struck as we pause today between Christmas and New Year that we are in a kind of thin place (as the Celtic Church would have described it) a time when angels draw near the earth, a time when – as 2018 passes away and 2019 dawns we are very conscious of the passing of time – the message of eternity breaking into time is proclaimed and celebrated. At this festive season we are brought face to face both with the realities of heaven and eternity and of the time-bound earth and it is on the significance of those themes that I would like to reflect with you for a few minutes this morning.

In obedience to the Law of Moses and as a sign of the covenant between God and His people Israel, all male children were to be circumcised on the eighth day. The giving of a name to a baby is not directly connected with circumcision and in fact was and is usually done at or around the birth of the child but in our text this morning, the giving of the name is of equal if not greater significance than the performing of the rite of circumcision, as we shall see.

Who gives Jesus His name? In Matthew's Gospel we are told that it is Joseph but it is clear from both Matthew and Luke that the naming of the boy was not some spur-of-the-moment decision by His parents nor even the result of careful planning having taken into account any family traditions. Luke reminds us here of what he has recounted in the previous chapter that the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that the boy's name would be Jesus before she had even conceived, and Matthew reminds us of the ancient prophecy given through Isaiah that a virgin would give birth to a son who would be known as Immanuel, God with us.

There are many stories in the Old Testament of babies being given names with a meaning and of people being given new names by God to draw attention to a role that they were to have in God's purposes. Hebrew names often have a very evident meaning – like Abraham (Father of many nations) or Daniel (God is my Judge). Also in the previous chapter of Luke's Gospel you may remember that when Zechariah is told that he would become a father in his old age and that his son was to be called John, he is struck dumb for the duration of his wife's pregnancy. When their son is born, much to the surprise of those who thought the boy would be called after his father, Zechariah writes: 'His name is John.' In all of this we get the sense that beneath the very human story of the birth of these two boys an eternal story is being written, long-prepared and with heavenly significance. Heaven is drawing near to earth; eternity is breaking into time. What is going on here in this verse, and what does it have to do with us in our time. Let's take a closer look.

### **The Significance of Time**

First of all, we read: 'A week later, when the time came...' There's a very clear echo here of what Paul writes to the Galatians in one of very few references to the birth of Christ outwith the Gospels: "When the right time finally came, God sent His own Son. He came as the son of a human

mother and lived under the Jewish Law.” (Galatians 4:4) It points us to the significance of time, where every moment – stop and think about it, this moment right now – is pregnant with eternal possibilities and opportunities. Here we are in this Festive Season, all mixed up as to what day of the week it is, just as new parents are in a complete jumble, coping with the seismic consequences of a newborn coming into their lives. There *has* to be something to bring stability, and here it is: a week later, the time came. We all need routine and ritual to bring order to the potential chaos of our lives. For Mary and Joseph it was the deeply-engrained tradition that on the eighth day of a Jewish boy's life there was an act to perform that would connect their son with the community of faith and that would reconnect them to the God of covenant faithfulness. For us as Christians today in fellowship with our brothers and sisters locally and across the world it is the Lord's Day, the first day of the week, the day of resurrection, a time to connect us and reconnect us with the God who has made covenant with us and calls us to be His children.

It is not just at this crazy time of year when the working week and the television schedules and the refuse collections offer us no stability that we appreciate the ringing of the church bell and the call to corporate worship. As we enter upon a new year, let me encourage you to make this weekly fixed point of Sunday worship an anchor point in your life when we pause to allow the eternal to give significance to time. A week may be a long time in politics but a week is also the God-ordained building block of time that we ignore at our peril. Take the sabbath rest that God has commanded for your well-being and gather with God's people to celebrate His presence among us in Christ.

### **The Significance of Symbol**

Secondly, Luke goes on: “When the time came for the baby to be circumcised...” As we will see again in a couple of weeks time when we come to the account of the baptism of Jesus, Scripture is at pains to emphasise the extent to which God's Son identified with human beings. At His birth the eternal Son of God enters in to the world not like some Egyptian god in the form of a hybrid animal and not in the way of Greek and Roman deities as some kind of super-human extra-terrestrials but in precisely the same way as each and every one of us, in flesh and blood from our mother's womb. At His baptism He will identify with our need for cleansing from our human sinfulness, even though He Himself was

without sin, and here in the rite of circumcision He accepts the mark in His very flesh that each of the physical descendants of Abraham had borne before Him. Jesus is God but He is truly Immanuel – God with us.

And if He identifies with us and shares completely with us in our humanity, then it is for us to accept His invitation to identify with Him, to be united with Him through faith. As a new year begins will you take a conscious step towards Him. If you have not been baptised will you submit this year to that rite as Jesus submitted to the rite of circumcision? If you have received the outward sign of baptism but have not taken the step of putting your faith in Him or of professing that faith publicly will you identify yourself with Him as He has identified with you? Will you symbolise that identification by coming to this Table and sharing regularly in the Lord's Supper?

### **The Significance of the Name**

Finally, Luke tells us: “He was named Jesus, the name which the angel had given Him before He had been conceived.” So what's in a name? The name Jesus is Yeshua in Hebrew, the name that is more commonly brought into English as Joshua – and it means 'Saviour.' Just as Old Testament Joshua saved the people of Israel from their enemies and delivered them into the Promised Land, so Jesus would save His people from their sins and deliver them into the Kingdom of God. The giving of the name Jesus to the child that was born to Mary and Joseph was the fulfilment of what had been spoken about Him to His parents before He was even conceived. In doing what they had been told by the angel, they were completing the obedience they had begun by trusting God to be faithful to them through all the potential misunderstandings and trials that this particular pregnancy brought. They were saying to God that they believed He was the One who was the author of all that was happening to them and through them. And in giving Him this name they were pointing the way to what He would become and what He would accomplish in and for the world through His life and death and resurrection.

The name of Jesus in our society is more often than not heard as an expletive on the lips of those who are making no reference to the Son of God. How frequently, I wonder, is it heard on our lips outwith the worship we offer? And what will others learn from us of the Saviour from what you and I have to say about Him day by day? May this coming new year be

one in which the name of Jesus is often heard on our lips telling others of the salvation and new life He has brought us.

In the words of a contemporary hymn:

Jesus, what a beautiful name, Son of God, Son of Man, Lamb that was slain  
Joy and peace, strength and hope, grace that blows all fear away.

Jesus, what a beautiful name, truth revealed, my future sealed, healed my  
pain. Love and freedom, life and warmth, grace that blows all fear away.

Jesus, what a beautiful name, rescued my soul, my stronghold, lifts me  
from shame, forgiveness, security, power and love, grace that blows all fear  
away. Jesus, what a beautiful name. (Darlene Zschech)

At this festive season we lift our eyes beyond these moments to reflect on  
and to celebrate the coming of the Saviour into our world; we look back to  
the year and the years that are past and we look forward into the year  
ahead; but in this particular moment let me invite you to recognise that  
right here and now eternity is touching time – Jesus is here. Let me invite  
you to receive Him as your Saviour and allow Him now only to touch this  
moment but to touch your life. He will fulfil the promise of the Word made  
flesh and for those who will receive Him, still the dear Christ enters in.

### Prayer

Lord Jesus, what a beautiful name you were given, and how we rejoice that  
you are Son of God, Son of Man, Lord of eternity and yet right here with us  
– Immanuel. You are the Wonderful Counsellor, the Mighty God, the  
Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace of whom the prophets wrote. You  
are the Word of God who became a human being and who come to us in  
this moment, full of grace and truth. Thank you that you are the Saviour  
who came to rescue us from our sin, who died on the cross for each one and  
who rose again for us. Come to me in this precious moment and make your  
home in my heart; take charge of my lives by your Holy Spirit that this new  
year may be one in which everything I am and everything I do will be  
subject to your lordship. We ask this in your name, Jesus.