

St Columba
24th May 2009: Easter Seven

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Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

1 John 5:9-13

John 17:6-19

What's in a name?

National, Labour, Key, Goff, English, Clark, Bush, Obama
King, Adams, Smith, Hall, Paterson
Campbell, Holmes, Armstrong, Roughan
Prius, Holden, Citron, Ford
Levi's, Wrangler,
Jesus..! God...!

What's in a name?

In today's world we are bombarded with names.

Yet a name is not enough...we want evidence the name being promoted can be relied upon –can produce the goods – will say something worth listening to!

We are 'name' or 'brand savvy', and the older we get the less we are willing to go with something or someone just because it is 'a name'.

Mind you, if I am honest, a name I recognise is more likely to catch my attention than a name I have never heard of...Like last week at the airport trying to chose a book to read on the journey home...I was scanning the shelves for a name I recognised so I might have a better chance of assessing whether I was prepared to spend the time to read the book or not.

What is in a name?

So you find a name you recognise...and you open the book, or listen to a message being conveyed...can you make sense of it? Does it ring true for you? Does it connect with your experience and help to elucidate what you know - taking your thinking a bit further?

I know the name of Jesus, and I am used to listening to messages and teachings from things he has said and done... So, this passage, with all its references to names and glory and testimony... I am wondering how it connects with my experience and how it helps to explain my experiences positively so I can live more fully and vibrantly.

When I hear today's Gospel reading it seems incomprehensible at first...but then it is the middle-part of a prayer Jesus is uttering... and in my experience private prayer, overheard by another, is likely to be incomprehensible to the eavesdropper!

The prayer opens with 'I have made your name known' and then goes on to reflect on the implications of this for those to whom the name was made known. What was in that name?

The name I settled on when I was choosing my book was Richard Holloway – previously Bishop of Edinburgh, Scotland. Holloway has been in NZ and in Australia as part of the Readers and Writers Festival and each time he spoke I was in the other place and missed hearing him. His most recent book is called 'Between the Monster and the Saint'. It is a reflection on the human condition – and as I understand it

– continues the discussion Keith opened last week on how, within each of us, the potential for both (heaven and hell)... is only a hairs breadth apart, only a hairs-breadth separates them – the monster and the saint.

Once upon a time a preacher held up a mirror to 'his' congregation and reflected back to them this 'hairs-breadth'; their capacity to turn 'monster. And then with threats of hell fire and God's damnation urged them to remember the good name of God and do the 'right' thing. In this way it was thought, in fear of damnation we would avoid the broken relationships and violence and corruption that await us as individuals, and a society if we did not look to God and call on his name for help – thereby following our higher instincts and be 'saintly'.

I am not sure it works for us like that today. We no longer expect that by calling on God to save us we will be prevented from 'going off the rails'...falling in to 'monster' ways. Holloway insists, as do most contemporary religious leaders and therapists and spiritual advisors, that calling on God and carrying on in the same ways will change nothing! If we would change our lives and our world we must first know who we are...recognise our own name as it were ... and be so familiar with ourselves that we are fully aware of the danger spots in our lives; we must be able to recognise the occasions when we can be tempted to make decisions that take down a path that is not in the best interests of ourselves or our families or communities.

'God knows us all by name...before we were born God knew us...every hair on our head is counted by God...' This is a picture painted by Jesus and the early writers of just how intimately God knew the people who

called on his name. Today we are urged to know ourselves this well; to spend the time required facing ourselves with open honesty and coming to recognise our strengths and our frailties. In this way we can know what our name stands for, what it means to be Susan or Mary, Tim or George; we can make choices about what we want it to stand for.

What's in your name?

Who are you?

Jesus was calling on God to honour the people who had responded and followed the teaching and call that he, Jesus, had put out in God's name...He wanted these people to be protected, saved from danger and, when they got it wrong, redeemed; brought back again to the ways of righteous living. The prayer suggests Jesus expected God to do this so that both the people and God could be 'glorified' by the way the people lived.

Our experience today shows us that no amount of calling on the name of another (God or anyone else) is going to do it for us; is going to make our bad decisions good. If we do not redeem ourselves no-one will do it for us. In other words we have to take action ourselves to right the wrongs.

In Saturday's paper there was an extensive article on P addiction. The article was one in a series and explored the need for rehabilitation centres to be more readily available - for the government to take stronger action to help P addicts and alcoholics and others with terrible destructive addictions. It ended with the comment, 'but first the addict needs to want to heal themselves'

In other words first they need to face the monster in themselves that is destroying them and call on their own name, their own deep desire in the search for healing. The intercession of another will not do it for them...though undoubtedly it will help, it will not work a miracle for them without their active involvement. That is so for each of us and for world we live in. The damage we have done to ourselves and to this world will not be put right because we call on another to do it for us.

No amount of calling on the name of Jesus or God will 'fix it'. If we cannot redeem ourselves from the monster's grip then no one can do it for us.

This does not mean we are alone in our efforts. The story we are reflecting on is as much a collective story as it is the story of our individual selves. We, you and me, us, we need to redeem our world - make good the destruction humanity has caused - as much as we need to redeem ourselves from our individual destructive behaviours; from the grip of the monsters we can so easily be. It is a hairs-breadth from monster to saint and we can cross that. The Gospel stories are all about the power of the 'we', the strength of the collective doing things together to put right what has gone wrong.

So what is your name?

What does your name represent to those who know you and hear it?

What will people expect when they hear your name?

Will the fruits of your life choices be recognised when your name is called?

Each of us is urged to consider the fruits of our life choices, so that our name stands amongst those who would be saints not monsters.