

New Year – New Call

Exodus 17:8-12

Mark 1:4-11

The other day a non-Christian friend of mine was talking to me about the changes she noticed which she thought were due to the corona virus pandemic. “God seems to crop up far more frequently in conversation” - she said, then she added tentatively, “Just to say the name is a start, isn’t it?” Well, perhaps it is.

It certainly made me think of names and their significance in general. Our own names, for example. As a rule, it is our parents who are responsible for naming us and in some cases this happens at the time of our baptism. Then the circumstances, in which we have to produce our names to prove our identity; the way other people use our names. If we think of the beginning of any human relationship, the first step is that, we learn each other’s names and address each other by that name. To be called by our name is a sign of some familiarity. But there is a progression in this, isn’t there? The Tesco delivery man wouldn’t call us by our Christian name. A formal letter would start with “Dear Mrs or Mr... so and so”. Using Christian names is a next step within an acquaintance. In a family or close relationship sometimes we may also acquire more intimate names of endearment, which are special to us and suppose special relationships. So what happens when these different spheres meet? Accidentally, or otherwise. When the Tesco delivery man overhears you being addressed ‘darling’ in your home?

Well, this is the way I imagine the scene described in our Gospel reading today. This Gospel, Mark’s Gospel does not tell us why Jesus got his name, which is the Greek version of the Hebrew name Yeshua or Joshua. We know it means ‘saviour’, but we also know that it was a common name in first century Galilee. Apparently, archaeologists unearthed over 70 tombs with the name of Yeshua in Galilee from the time of Jesus’ death. So, if the Tesco delivery man had called on him in his home at Nazareth, he wouldn’t have looked for someone called Jesus Christ, but someone with the name of Yeshua ben Joseph, or in the Greek version, Jesus, son of Joseph, as children were called after their father.

When Mark opens the baptismal scene at the beginning of his Gospel, Jesus is introduced as someone from Nazareth, who like the others, comes to John to be baptised in the river Jordan. Of course, the crowds and we the readers have already heard John’s words foretelling the arrival of someone special, who would be a far greater Baptizer, able to fill the people with God’s very own Spirit. But within Mark’s narrative Jesus doesn’t know that.

When he turns up at the river, nobody really knows him. He comes as a Jesus from Nazereth and he gets baptized along with everyone else. As he comes out of the water he sees the heavens open and the Spirit descend on him like a dove, accompanied by a heavenly voice “You are my beloved son; in you I take delight”. For Mark, this is the moment when it becomes clear that the ordinary young man, Jesus of Nazareth with his ordinary human relationships is also part of something greater, yet something more intimate, he is declared as God’s beloved son. So, in this earliest of the Gospels, where there is no miraculous birth, no angels, shepherds or magi, this is the definite point in Jesus’ life, when earth and heaven meet and he is adopted by God as the beloved Son.

As we said, Mark doesn’t tell us anything about the life of Jesus up till this event of his baptism. All we know is that he was named Jesus, presumably by Joseph and that he may have been a carpenter, like his father. Then at his baptism he has this tremendous experience, it is revealed to him that beyond all his existing human connections, there is another, wider and deeper claim on his life, and that from now on first and foremost he belongs to God. Well, when something like this happens, it changes everything. It opens up a new vista before Jesus, it plucks him out of obscurity, it gives him a new name, confers on him a new identity, the details of which will have to be worked out later, but for now there is just the amazing feeling of being affirmed as a child of God. Without having to fulfil any conditions, without having to pass any exams or prove his worthiness, God’s love pours out on him, and he is given to understand that God is well pleased with him, in fact, absolutely delights in him.

The words bring to mind the first pages of the Bible, when at the time of Creation God looks at all that's been lovingly created, delights in it, and declares it to be good. Perhaps this is Mark's way of saying that Jesus' baptism is a new Creation and as such it will be the defining influence on everything he will say and do for the rest of his life.

But, of course, Jesus could've missed all of this, if he did not look up to see the heavens break open, if his ears were not tuned to the right wavelength to hear the divine voice. There is a remarkable story told about the discovery of the most ancient cave-art near Altamira in Northern Spain in 1879. An amateur archaeologist had been working in the cave for four years without any major finds, when one day he took his 9 year old daughter Maria with him to work. The little girl wandered off, as children do, she went a bit further in the cave and looked up. Then she shouted to her Father: "Look Papa, oxen!" Well, they turned out to be bison, but no matter, little Maria didn't realize that she had made one of the greatest discoveries of pre-historic art on the walls of that cave, which were later verified as between 25 thousand and 35 thousand years old. Her father had been within a few feet of a monumental treasure, yet he missed it, because he had forgotten to look up.

The idea of 'Looking up' is an important Biblical concept. It has both a physical and a spiritual significance. "*Lift up your eyes on high, and see who has created these things*", says the prophet Isaiah (40:26) to the downcast exiles in Babylon looking forward to returning home after their captivity. "*I lift up my eyes to the hills, where shall I find help*", says the author of Psalm 121 to the pilgrims gathering for worship. And in our first reading we have heard a little known story from Exodus recounting Israel's escape from Egypt, where again 'looking up' plays a crucial role. Moses has just brought the Israeli slaves out of bondage. Up till now all that happened to them were the actions of God delivering them through the leadership of Moses. Now they are free, it is a new dawn, a new leaf in their history, they think they can relax. Then they find that whenever one door is shut, suddenly another door is threatening to shut on them again. And don't we know what that feels like?

There is an unexpected attack on the freed slaves by the Amalekites, a neighbouring pagan tribe. And this time neither God, nor Moses is going to fight for Israel. They have to grow up and do it themselves. Yet, they are not left on their own. Moses climbs the nearby hill, where in full view of the battlefield he lifts his staff up to encourage his people. When they look up and see him there with uplifted arms they seem to win, but when they don't see the arms and staff, they lose against their enemies. All sorts of interpretations have been put forward about the meaning of this story. Like, it is Moses' prayer that makes the people win. Or it is the magical powers of his staff that brings victory, etc. But the most likely explanation is that by making them look up, Moses reminds them of the saving, protecting power of the invisible God who has brought them out of Egypt, who even now stands beside him and gives strength to the people to fight their own battles.

Perhaps it is not a coincidence that this event takes place at the beginning of the long-long wandering in the wilderness. It is first lesson God's people have to learn. There will be untold trials and tribulations stretching out in front of them before they reach the Promised Land and their attitude will be of crucial importance for their survival. After this experience they will remember to 'look up', because it's from there they will receive guidance for holy living, daily bread and life-giving water for sustenance and the divine call to be a light for the nations.

In the first days of 2021 a radio commentator summarised our current situation as "New year – new variant – new Lockdown". In other words, not much to look forward to. But today we are given the picture of Jesus at his baptism looking up receiving his new name, a new assurance of God's love and the outpouring of the divine Spirit, which gives a new direction to his life. Like him and through him we are also the recipients of the same blessing. As the Israelites did in ancient times, we too can 'look up' and see ourselves, as Jesus did, with the eyes of God: we are beloved children of God, in whom God delights. And that will make all the difference, it will enable us to rephrase the slogan for the 2021: "A new Year – a new Hope – a new Call". Let it be so.