

Our two readings today led me to think about names and the importance of names.

Sometimes we chose a name for our children simply because we like the name (and hopefully it doesn't have a rather unpleasant meaning) but at other times we chose a name because of what it means or for another specific reason. There's a story attached to your name.

I happen to know that Ted's first and second names are to honour and remember his two uncles killed in the second world war. We read their names with all the others from this parish at Remembrance.

You might not like the name your parents gave you (one of my daughters isn't keen on her name which I liked when we chose it and I still do!)

You might use your second name or a shortened version of your name – which actually is what I do, my name is Jonathan not Jon.

My mother told me that they chose the name Jonathan because she loved the story of David and Jonathan in the Old Testament and hoped that I would have the same capacity and gift of friendship.

My Grandson is called Samuel but his middle name is after me Jonathan. Samuel means "God has heard" and Jonathan means "God has given". Two good names – God has heard, God has given".

I imagine that when we get chatting afterwards plenty of you will have stories about your own names or your family names.

It won't have escaped your attention that the Bible is full of characters whose names mean far more than something by which a parent can call you in for supper.

Sometimes the name has come to mean something different from its original meaning. In all my years in ministry I've never christened a child with the name Judas.

Judas originally was a corruption of Judah which means Praised. But the name is now synonymous with betrayal.

Names are changed to suit someone's calling, so Abram which means Father, becomes Abraham which means Father of Nations.

The name Jacob can mean the one who supplants (remember he stole his twin brother's blessing) but later God changes his name to Israel meaning he struggles with God.

I remember reading the stories in the first book of Samuel and being surprised that a child was named after something bad that happened.

At that time the Ark of the Covenant was kept at Shiloh where the priest was Eli.

The Philistines attacked the nation of Israel, the ark was brought to try and give them strength and hope and was captured and taken away. Both Eli's sons were killed in the battle and when Eli hears the news he falls over and breaks his neck. The wife of one of the sons goes into labour and gives birth to a boy and names him Ichabod meaning – the glory has departed.

I remember thinking that this kid would go through his whole life labelled with a name that recalled a disaster and God's glory departing. It didn't seem fair.

In our Old Testament reading today marriage and naming are poetically being used to inspire God's people with a vision of what God will do.

The exile of Jews from Jerusalem to Babylon has been referred to earlier in Isaiah as a separation, a divorce. Being separated from their land and home has been a bereavement and an estrangement.

But now God is promising something new and something very different.

You will be called a new name that the mouth of the Lord will bestow.

Quite apart from the names we are given and the names we use are the names we have been called and the names we label ourselves with.

In conversation I'll hear myself using a name about myself (I'm such an idiot) and I try to take notice and stop doing it. Because the only names I should use and think about in connection with myself are the ones God gives. I am loved by him. I am precious to him. Those two names will do nicely and you can use them too. Loved. Precious.

We can slip into labelling ourselves and naming ourselves inappropriately and we might have good reason to have done so. The people of Israel had good reason.

They called themselves deserted and their land desolate. But God is now doing something new and they will be called Hephzibah and Beulah – and those names mean "my delight is in her" and "Married"

for the Lord will take delight in you,
and your land will be married.
He is going to restore the nation.

In using the illustration of marriage Isaiah is creating the imagery for something new and exciting and hopeful and positive. A new start and a new beginning.

By replacing the old names of deserted and desolate with Hephzibah and Beulah he is thinking of the name change that comes at marriage.

Traditionally the bride changes her surname in our culture but that isn't always the case. A couple might take the bride's surname or create a new double-barrelled name, either way marriages are the beginning of a new life and it's that the prophet is using to speak of God's intention.

In the New Testament we have a very familiar reading on this first Sunday of Christmas. Jesus is named and the tradition of the first born male carrying the father's name isn't used. Jesus does not become BarJoseph, son of Joseph, but Jesus which means Saviour, God saves.

It's the last day of 2023 and I wonder what names you might use looking back over the year both about yourself or the year in general?

Do you remember when Queen Elizabeth referred to 1992 as her "Annus Horribilis", I hope 2023 has not been that!

Maybe you have been disappointed? Or a patient? Successful or Anxious? Distracted and dislocated from yourself, or perhaps it's been a really good year and you feel in a good place?

But how you name yourself and how you name the year are only in passing to be open too and ready for what God wants to call 2024 and what God says about you in 2024. What name is he giving you?

It would be lovely if Holy Trinity was also Hephzibah – “my delight is in her”.

In Isaiah 58 the people are told they will be called “Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.” Perhaps we will be called “Re-builders of my house of prayer”.

I’m going to give just a few moments without my voice so that you can quietly pray.

What have you been calling yourself that needs to stop?
What is God calling you as you go into the new year?
What is God calling us, as we seek to serve him and be faithful in 2024.

After a little quiet we shall sing In Christ Alone.

Rev. Jon Hutchinson, 31 December 2023