

FEAST OF THE MOST HOLY NAME OF JESUS

Sunday 3rd January 2016

“There is no other name under heaven given to men,
whereby we must be saved.”

– Acts 4:12.



There is no other name by which we may be saved. These words, from St. Peter's truly apostolic speech recorded in the Book of Acts, are like the echo of the words spoken by the angel to St. Joseph: “thou shalt call his name JESUS. For he shall save his people from their sins” (St. Matthew 1:21).

The great importance of a name can sometimes be lost on us modern people, because we tend to view names simply as a sort of label. After all, you need to have *something* to call people. But in the Scriptures names have a great importance, because they reveal who someone is and what God's plan for him or her is. Indeed, the act of creation itself is presented by the Book of Genesis as a sort of divine naming process. “And he called the light Day, and the darkness Night” (Genesis 1:5), and so on. It is clear that God was not speaking these names out loud with a palate and a tongue, but this manner of explaining the Creation as a process of giving things names highlights the role of the Word in the Creation of the universe: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... All things were made by him: and without him was made nothing that was made” (St. John 1:1-3). The Greek word used here by St. John is *Logos*: it means not only a literal word, but also reason or intelligence itself. So when God names things, he is not just assigning random labels, he is actually *making them what they are*. In the act of creation God gives being in fact to things that existed potentially in his divine mind from all eternity. When the Bible wants to reveal to us the purity of Adam's mind before the fall, it speaks to us again of naming: “the Lord God having formed out of the ground all the beasts of the earth, and all the fowls of the air, brought them to Adam to see what he would call them: for whatsoever Adam called any living creature the same is its name” (Genesis 2:19). In the state of original justice, Adam understood the inner harmony of God's creation; naming the lower creatures means he understood what they were and their place in God's plan.

Throughout sacred history, when God intervenes to give someone a special role, he often will change that person's name, as when Abram becomes Abraham, or when Simon bar-Jonah becomes Peter. The biblical genealogies often explain the symbolic meaning of people's names. So, you see why the angel speaks the way he does to St. Joseph: “thou shalt call his name Jesus, for

he shall save his people from their sins.” That “for” is important: the Baby will be called Jesus *because* he is the Saviour. We celebrate the feast of the Most Holy Name on the Sunday after the feast of the Circumcision. In keeping with the Jewish custom, Our Lord received his name like other boys eight days after his birth, when this sacred rite was performed. In the case of Our Lord, this naming ceremony had a special significance, because he received the name of Saviour at that very moment when he shed the first drop of his blood for our redemption. The feast of the Holy Name, therefore, is one of the many reminders we receive in Christmastide about the reason this Divine Infant has come to us: to save us from our sins. His name, therefore, is not just a label, but it tells us everything we need to know about him.

Reflecting on the suffering and exaltation of Christ, St. Paul says: “He humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death, even to the death of the cross. For which cause God also hath exalted him, and hath given him a name which is above all names” (Philippians 2:8-19). It has been suggested that the *titulus* – the sign bearing our Lord’s putative crime inscribed in Latin, Greek and Hebrew – hints at the real identity of the man hanging from the cross. We are unable to confirm this, since the remaining relic of the *titulus* in Rome is missing most of the Hebrew inscription and St. John’s Gospel, which gives the charge “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews,” comes down to us in Greek, but it is very likely that the first letters of the Hebrew version of the accusation make an acronym spelling out Divine Name itself. This four-letter word, accordingly called the Tetragrammaton, is the name which God gave to Moses when he appeared to him in the burning bush. “Moses said to God: Lo, I shall go to the children of Israel, and say to them: The God of your fathers hath sent me to you. If they should say to me: What is his name? what shall I say to them? God said to Moses: I AM WHO AM” (Exodus 3:13-14). If indeed the learned scribes at the foot of the Cross noticed the Divine Name inscribed above Our Lord’s head, this helps to explain their rage.

In any case, we know that some time earlier, on that occasion when Our Lord most clearly revealed his divinity to the Jews, he did so precisely by laying claim for himself to the holy name of God. “Abraham your father rejoiced that he might see my day: he saw it, and was glad. The Jews therefore said to him: Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham? Jesus said to them: Amen, amen I say to you, before Abraham was made, I am” (St. John 8:56-58). It seems strange, of course, to claim to have existed before Abraham, who had lived over 2000 years before, but it is even stranger to say “I am” rather than the past tense “I was” – unless, of course, there was a reason. We know that when they heard this, the Jews took up stones to kill our Lord, but as it was not yet the time decreed by Providence, Our Lord slipped away from them. The essential point is that the Jews understood exactly what Our Lord was doing. By applying to himself that mysterious name “I am” – the personal

name of God himself – Christ was indeed claiming to be God. On this feast of the Holy Name we also need to understand this: we are not only celebrating a name day the way good Catholic families do to help their children learn to love their own patron saints; we are in fact acknowledging God-made-man.

The Christmas season presents him to us from a number of angles, and today we are reminded that the boy who received the name of Jesus from the lips of his foster father Joseph is in fact God himself: the one whose very name was so sacred that no pious Jew would dare to pronounce it out loud. Whenever it appeared in the Scriptures, the Jews when reading aloud would replace the Holy Name with *Adonai*, “the Lord.” The Gospels present to us a striking parallel: the name of Jesus is often mentioned in the text of the Gospels, in the narrative bits, when describing the things he said or did. But whenever the Apostles speak to Our Lord, whenever they address him directly, they never use his name; they always call him Lord. This custom of theirs, recorded under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is another implicit reminder of the divinity of Christ.

Under the Old Law, then, the name of God was an object of such awe and dread that to speak it could almost be considered blasphemous. Only the High Priest, once a year on the feast of the Atonement, wearing on his mitre a golden plate with the divine name inscribed onto it, would go into the Holy of Holies and here – alone in the earthly dwelling place of God – he would speak the Holy Name whilst offering the blood of the beasts slaughtered for the sins of the people. Here again, a link between the sacrificial blood and the divine name. Like the High Priest of old, Our Lord brings the blood of sacrifice into the holy of holies bearing upon himself the Holy Name of God. “But Christ, being come an high priest of the good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hand, that is, not of this creation: Neither by the blood of goats, or of calves, but by his own blood, entered once into the holies, having obtained eternal redemption” (Hebrews 9:11-12). Unlike the Hebrews, we *do* now speak the name of God, because Jesus is the name of a God who has come among us; we say this name with reverence but also with confidence. As we contemplate the triumph won by our Saviour as he merited that name above all names, we look at the High Priest of our salvation entered into the heavenly tabernacle and we remember these other words of St. Paul: “Let us go therefore with confidence to the throne of grace: that we may obtain mercy” (Hebrews 4:16).