

Year A, 2017
Fr. Robert D. Arnold

Holy Name of Jesus
St. Luke 2:15-21

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

When a new baby arrives, the new family is asked first whether it is a boy or a girl. Of course, today you can find out the sex of the baby weeks before it's born. The second question is the name: What are you going to name the baby? Most families give four names: a Christian name, a middle name, a family name ... and a nickname. The nickname sparks most of the attention and, therefore, is the most formative. I've heard some pretty strange nicknames in my time—Butch, Fluffo, Hoss, Tinkerbelle, Bubba (or if you're from South Carolina, "Buddha"). My folks often call me "Bud", but it never stuck. "Bobby" was my name growing up. I hated it, as kids often do their name. I was named after my Uncle (which was okay to me), but being young, Bobby was what everybody used, except for my great uncle who liked to call me "Obby". When I became an adolescent, I decided I was old enough to be called Bob, and it took a fair amount of effort to make that change. After graduating from college, I went out to Nebraska to visit my grandfather, whom I hadn't seen in six years, and he called me "Bobby." To him, I was still that young tyke. I forgave him.

This, however, is not to blame all our parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, friends and colleagues for giving us such fortuitous names. Who would think that such names can have such an influence on us? Well, the answer, interestingly enough, is that most ancient people did and placed great emphasis on naming. They seemed to have a grasp of the dynamics of character development as a result of naming, of parental expectations, hopes and dreams that could be passed on through names. On the 8th day after His birth, Mary and Joseph presented their baby boy for circumcision, as required by Jewish law and, as the law required, Joseph accepted paternal responsibility and named the boy. The angel in his visitation to Mary, Luke tells us, had already assigned the name before He was conceived, and Joseph followed Mary's guidance. They named Him *Ye-shua* (Jesus) – God saves. Clearly the angel, Mary, and Joseph had some large expectations, hopes, and dreams for this child!

Did that make a difference in Jesus' self-understanding? We insist that Jesus was fully human and fully divine. Because He was fully human,

He came slowly and gradually, I believe, to discover His identity, just like the rest of us. As a child He must have felt an intense affinity with God the Father, coming to address Him as *Abba*—Papa, and explaining to Mary at age 12, after He wandered off to the Temple instead of staying with the group visiting Jerusalem from Nazareth, that she should have known that He would be in His Father’s house and about His Father’s business. I think His naming must have had some influence on that developing self-understanding, just as I think our names have influence on ours. Names have power! Words have power! When we are baptized, we are baptized in the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We are signed with the cross and marked as God’s own forever. That’s a major deal! The holy name we thus receive and bear influences who we will become, because it says out loud whose we are!

Life is full of dynamics and special interests that want to name us. Families give us name. Careers give us names. Culture gives us names. The entertainment industry tries to name us as one who much be entertained with the allure that we can become celebrities too. The educational institutions want to name us B.A.s, M.A.s, or PhDs. and assure us that what we know is all that really matters. Masters of Divinity seek to turn us into little theologians. Politics wants to convince us that it’s not what we know, but who we know that really matters. Capitalism wants to name us “Greedy,” and tell us that’s good and ought to be celebrated. Wall Street wants to name us “Consumer,” turn everything into a commodity, and seduce us into believing that all meaning is to be found in possessing and accumulating. One or all of these dynamics and special interests are going to name us to some degree ... and names and words have power. That’s why I so strongly support infant baptism. I want the church to get hold of our children early and name them “Christian” before the world gets the chance to name them something else. Baptism gives birth into the Family of God with a new family name; but it won’t mean much unless they live in that Family and watch how we live our lives, eat at our Lord’s Table, and learn and become inspired by our story. The whole state of Christ’s Church has been losing that battle of naming. Like Thomas on Easter night, who was absent when Jesus appeared before His disciples in that Upper Room and would not believe, too many of our little ones are absent from the One

who is never absent from us and who never gives up on us. They miss the chance to meet the One who has named us and called us His own and who always works to seduce us into falling in love with God, so that when we are old and gray, and the priest turns from consecrating the bread and the wine and pronounces “The gifts of God for the people of God,” we will know what it means to be so called and so consecrated. It is so important to do everything we can to get the name “Christian” to stick.

Being a bit of a pessimist, I worried about this most of my vocation. I have seen churches I once served now shrunk to a handful and one closed. We have seen the Roman Catholics consolidate parishes and import priests from foreign lands. But I don’t worry so much anymore. For 70 years what churches were not closed and turned into museums in the Soviet Union somehow stayed alive. What priests were spared the Stalin’s executions served those few remaining “working” parishes (as they were called) like the early Christians did in the catacombs of ancient Rome. But in 70 years time people forgot or, worse, had no knowledge of the church or it’s faith. What baptisms were administered were done secretly, often done without the permission of the parents. The only ones left were the “babushkas” – the grandmothers and great grandmothers. But guess what they did. They outlasted Communism and the atheism of their time. The holy name pronounce on them stuck and they kept that name alive and their family of God working. Today the Russian Church is flourishing.

So, I don’t worry so much today. And I don’t worry about Trinity as I come to the end of my stay. Your commitment is strong; you keep the church working and you keep hope alive. You carry with you the name of the Holy One.

They named Him, *Ye-shua*. It stuck. Jesus saves—that is to say, Jesus, as His name proclaims, can get us unstuck and give us life in Him. Amen.