

Happy New Year!

Today marks the start of a new adventure, new opportunities – a new calendar year. In the last 24 hours across the world, and I suspect many of us in this room, many resolutions of things that will change will have been made – from the weight we plan to lose, or the exercise we plan to do, to planning to be nicer to our neighbour, or partner or maybe we have even resolved to start to learn a new skill; or even coming to church more!

I spent a long time on Friday looking at a plan of 2017 I had drawn to try and plan in some holidays – which was my resolution – to try and be more organised about my holidays – but even before I had finished my plan I was having a conversation with my brother where it became clear – with all the travels my family may or not be planning this year – that I may need to be more fluid about what I will be doing when I am on holidays... My resolution didn't even make it to the New Year.

It didn't take away my hope or desire however and I am looking forward to all that 2017 has to offer – and the positive thing was I will see my family (one way or another) and our relationship will continue to grow!

Today within the church liturgical calendar we celebrate the naming of Jesus. If we start with Christmas Day, December 25, and count eight days, we come to today, January 1. It is on the eighth day of Christmas that the church celebrates the Holy Name of Jesus.

We celebrate the Holy Name of Jesus on this eighth day of Christmas because it was on the eighth day that Jesus was circumcised and received this name. This story is told in a single verse of the gospel we just heard.

The shepherds, summoned by an angel, have visited the baby in the manger. They return home, praising God for what has happened. Then comes the focus of today's celebration. "After eight days had passed," we hear from the gospel, "it was time to circumcise the child; and he was named Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb."¹

The angel who has named Jesus, however, as the one who accomplishes the glory of God. Jesus is of the house of David; he is Saviour; he is Messiah; and he is Lord. Mary accepts this name and so this will be the message proclaimed for generations to follow. ².

I don't know about you, but this feels like a lot to take in on New Year's Day. It feels a little to me like earlier in the week when I was trying to plan for the New Year, and there was just too much information to process in a holiday (or slow) week.

¹ <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/stw/2013/12/23/holy-name-abc-2014/>

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1181

But the promise of Christmas is so much summed up in the name of Jesus. Jesus, as I said on Christmas day, is a promise of all that is possible for humanity if only we are willing to change; and allow for us to grow in our love and service of God.

It is poignant then we celebrate this festival on New Year's Day – because it is a day that holds so much potential, so much hope.

Our hope surely for the New Year is that the power of the name of Jesus – the promise of peace and justice – will finally be embraced by all humanity. It is definitely our prayer – and it is up to us to live it out – that justice may reign. And this comes through a relationship – both with God and with each other.

The name Jesus receives is heavy with significance. It is Latin version of which in Hebrew is recorded as Joshua, the Old Testament hero who leads Israel into the land of freedom. The name means literally “The Lord is salvation.” This is the name that Gabriel, at the Annunciation, tells Mary to name her child. It is the name that Joseph is told to name the child by an angel who appears to him in a dream.³

We would miss the significance of the name of Jesus if we took that name as only a label, a way to distinguish one person from the next. The name of Jesus points us to who he is, and what his purpose is.

New Year's Day does the same thing. Our hopes for 2017, our prayers – need to not just distinguish this year from the last – but it should also point us to where we are headed – show us the path that we might walk in the days to come. I hope that one of these paths will be that our relationship with God will continue to grow, and that our relationship with God will inform all our living more and more.

There is another significance in celebrating the Name of Jesus – and this too is to do with our relationship with God – and I hope informs our New Year resolutions. I was reading an article which helped me understand this more than I have before.

About 600 years before Jesus was born, and well after psalm were written, the divine name, the name God gave Moses, was not spoken in Israel, so attempts to re-create how it sounded have led to a variety of conclusions.

The name of God was not spoken, in part to keep it from being profaned – you couldn't take the name of God in vain if you didn't say it – but on an even deeper level, not speaking God's name says something very important about how Israel had come to understand God, and Israel's relationship to God.

The name of God was not spoken – and at the same time Israel came more and more to understand God as distant, as apart from his people.

In other words, Israel was no longer on a first-name basis with God; and this lack of the use of God's name was both a way of expressing and of constituting this new,

³ <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/stw/2013/12/23/holy-name-abc-2014/>

and more distant, relationship, and of removing from Israel an important key to God's immediate presence.⁴

This is why the Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus is truly important; and why it belongs right next to Christmas.

The point here is not that we're celebrating the fact that Jesus was named "Jesus" instead of, say, "Jack" or "George." Instead, today we celebrate the fact that God has again spoken his name to his people – and not just as a word, but as the Word made flesh.

God has spoken his name to us as a person. Eight days after Christmas, God again gave us his name, this time with a force, a potency and a significance that overshadows Sinai, and for us, supersedes whatever Moses was told on the mountain.

For in speaking his name as "Jesus," God has changed forever God's relationship to us – from the studied formality of a name too holy to speak to the special intimacy that is implied by being on a first-name basis at its best – and more.

It's not that in the name "Jesus" we have some kind of magic word, a sort of verbal talisman we can wave around and make things happen. That's not it all. Instead, God has given us the fullness of what is only hinted at in our own names. We have been given the gift of a new relationship with God, a first-name relationship that is more intimate than casual, more immediate than informal.

And with that comes an invitation; an invitation to intimacy with God – to intimacy with all of the power, the love and the inherent connection to all of creation that are parts of who God is. Remember, the name of Jesus is the name of God the Son, and it is in the person, the whole person, of Jesus Christ that we see and know most clearly and most completely who God is, and what God is about as far as we are concerned.

It is more than the gift of a name, it is the gift of a relationship. And as we start this New Year together – may we resolve to build on this gift, to allow our relationship to grow.

And so maybe our hope for this 2017 is marked by the growth of our relationship with God; and in our relationships with each other. For it is in strong and positive relationships that peace and justice truly are realised.

And as we start this New Year, let us remember the promise of relationship offered in our first reading too – and may it be our prayer for 2017: *The Lord bless us and keep us; the Lord make his face to shine upon us, and be gracious unto us; the Lord lift up his countenance upon us, and give you peace.*⁵

Amen

⁴ <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/stw/2012/12/27/holy-name-2013/>

⁵ Number 6:23