

What is in the power of a name? During the week I was watching a re-run episode of the Big Bang Theory, a situational comedy about a group of scientists. In this episode the group of friends were discussing possible names for a new baby. Every name they suggested to each other was quickly discarded for different reasons. Name of an ex-boyfriend, too strange, too old, too comical...

Any of you who have had the joy of naming a child know that it can be a tricky thing – a name can arouse many feelings and emotions. For each of us names can evoke memories or experiences. The German poet Christian Morgenstern once said that “all seagulls look as though their name were Emma.” As one commentator reflected though Morgenstern was known for his nonsense poetry, there was truth in his suggestion that some linguistic labels are perfectly suited to the concepts they denote.¹

A name is a powerful thing. It is a descriptor that allows people to make quick judgments and assumptions about us. While we can understand the harm of assumptions, for the human mind it is a fast way to categorize a lot of information in a short amount of time.²

I wonder if this definition is true about our own names. When you hear my name, or I hear yours – what image or assumptions do we make? Some of these assumptions will be based on our knowledge of the person, or our relationship with them; but sometimes they will be based on the power of that name. As a teacher I had a list of names I preferred not to have in my class as the name seemed to equate with hard work! But of course, whenever I made this assumption – it was quite often proved wrong.

The challenge of a given name is that for most of us it is not unique. At St Anne’s for example at last count we had 5 Liz’s, at Christ Church I think we have four Stephen’s. But once we add an initial or a family name, suddenly the name becomes our own. And it is not just individual names that have power. Names are powerful for places, events, items and even concepts. In the hymn we sang before the Gospel reading we are reminded that God calls each of us by name – knows each one of us.

The readings we hear today on this first Sunday in ordinary time an interesting mix. In Exodus we have Moses and the Israelites at the base of Mt Sinai, where God makes a promise. The promise not a general promise however, he makes it to the House of Jacob – and in hearing the name Jacob assumptions about the promise are made. God also names not only who the promise is for, but names what the promise will be. The power of naming, or identification in this story helps the community to begin to construct what they want the future look like – who they think they will

¹ <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/the-power-of-names>

² <https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/identity-power-of-name-0625135#:~:text=A%20name%2C%20or%20identity%2C%20is,judgments%20and%20assumptions%20about%20Us.&text=Assumptions%20also%20give%20us%20social,with%20new%20and%20different%20people.>

become. The power of naming in this situation helps the community to begin to create its future.

Our Gospel reading is a real mix of stories and experiences as Jesus addressed the disciples not at Mt Sinai but as he travelled throughout towns and villages. Initially we see them following as Jesus preaching or telling his story, and then healing people. And the Matthew does something very interesting, he says their names. Amongst all the crowds he meets, and those who are healed- Matthew lists twelve apostles about whom we know next to nothing, twelve among a large community of more who bore witness to Jesus. Yet we remember these 12 rather than all the others, or maybe even the rest of the surrounding story because Matthew says their names! Names evoke power and connection³. By naming them, they also appear to have the authority to act as Jesus has instructed.

Naming names is important – not just for connection but because names make a difference. Sadly over the last few months I have spoken to some who feel our reaction to the pandemic has been over the top and maybe even a hoax. But if we name the names of the more than 40 000 people who have died in our country alone, and by naming their name we see in their faces someone we know and love, the pandemic is suddenly very real.

Similarly there are those who claim that Black lives Matter is a phase, but if you name George Floyd, if you name every young person who is stopped and searched because of their colour, if you give names to the individual people who die as a result of oppression or injustice – we are challenged to change our behaviour.

Naming the names honours all who have unjustly lost their lives, and as such calls us all to account for how such things might happen.

Our mission as churches is based on our shared belief that each person, each individual is made in the image of God. This means each of us is of value, each of us is beautiful, each of us is creative, each of us is due respect and each of us equally have a name. When we name each other as a person made in the image of God, we also see each other. Names often help us see what or who we might otherwise unintentionally ignore.

I have struggled a lot this week with how best to say this, because words are sometimes hard to put together, and words, particularly online do not always convey the meaning that we hope. And naming people and situations can often be challenging. Also as someone with power, do I have the right or maybe a responsibility to name? But as I was struggling with this I was reading an article by David Lose who reminded me that Jesus said to his disciples as he sent them out then, he also says to us today: “do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you” (10:19-20). This

³ <https://www.davidlose.net/2020/06/pentecost-3-a-just-start/>

isn't license to say whatever we want, justifying it as the Spirit's words or even giving us permission to hurt others or misuse power with what we say. Rather it is the promise that the living Spirit of Christ will continue to work in us, if we pray about the things we need to name, if we hold each other to account in Christ for the things we are called to name, and if our heart is focused on the reality that we are all made in the image of God⁴.

Yesterday was one of the fullest days of people I have had in a long time. Now we are able to meet together outside I had a series of people who came and sat to talk with me in the vicarage garden. While each conversation, like the people I met with was unique, there was a familiar resonance in our words when we shared of experiences of the past weeks and even months. One of the things that became evident was that it is not just naming names which brings about change and connection, but naming situations and experiences. Because I was writing my sermon throughout the day, I asked each person about this.

One person I was speaking to reflected that so often when we name a situation, or give name to an experience we fear it less, and also it helps us in our understanding.

Another person shared that names help us to communicate and actually help us have more power. Language, especially language that gives names to things and people, gives us the ability to name more difficult things. If I cannot give a name to what is happening to me, or a name to the person who is inflicting that pain, I have less power to change my situation or protect myself. In a sense names, and the ability to name, can give us power and strength.

Two different experiences of the power of naming!

After Jesus names them, the Apostles are sent out but they are reminded that this comes at a cost. It will take all their strength and faith. But I like the way Matthew structures his writing. This task is not given with no training, rather first he records the example of Jesus doing these things, then he names the apostles, then instructs them to do what they have already witnessed and been part of doing.

God does not ask anything of us, that Jesus has not already done. Jesus ministry was about naming. Giving power through a name to those who had been invisible, giving power by naming injustice and calling for change.

And if we need courage to name, maybe the words of our gradual will hymn might help:

Will You Love The 'You' You Hide
If I But Call Your Name?
Will You Quell The Fear Inside
And Never Be The Same?
Will You Use The Faith You've Found
To Reshape The World Around,

⁴ <https://www.davidlose.net/2020/06/pentecost-3-a-just-start/>

First Sunday after Trinity – 14th June 2020
Exodus 19:2-8a; Romans 5:1-8 and Matthew 9:35-10:8

Through My Sight And Touch And Sound
In You And You In Me?⁵

Amen.

⁵ Will you come and follow me Author: John L. Bell Iona Community.