

What is in the power of a name? 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.

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.¹

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. And it is not just individual names that have power. Names are powerful for places, events, items and even concepts.

In our Gospel reading from Matthew today Jesus addressed the disciples as he travelled throughout towns and villages. Initially we see Jesus preaching and then healing people. And the Matthew does something very interesting. 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 story because Matthew says their names! Names evoke power and connection². Giving these followers names appears to give them authority to act.

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 Christians 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

¹ <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.>

² <https://www.davidlose.net/2020/06/pentecost-3-a-just-start/>

also see each other. Names often help us see those we might otherwise unintentionally ignore.

Yesterday I had the privilege of reflecting on this idea of naming with a number of people over the course of the day.

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. Even people can feel less scary when we know their name.

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 give a name to the person who is inflicting that pain, I have less power to change my situation or protect myself. In this sense names, and the ability to name, can give us power and strength.

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. Enabling justice in naming those who had been invisible, giving power by naming where things need to change. And we are called to do the same.
Amen