

“What’s in a Name?”

Today is a special day. Obviously, it’s New Year’s Day, so “Happy New Year!” But also, and not quite so obvious, today is a feast day on our church calendar. Today, January 1, is the feast of The Holy Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ. It used to be called the feast of The Circumcision of Our Lord Jesus Christ. I’m glad they changed the name. But if you were listening to our gospel reading, you know why either name might apply, when Luke writes:

“After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.”

Normally, when a feast day falls on a Sunday, the feast day is transferred to the following Monday, and observed on that day – Sunday, the “Lord’s Day,” is that important. However, the feast of The Holy Name is one of the few exceptions to that rule; it takes precedence over Sunday, and probably because names are important – what we call people, and what we say about people, is serious business.

The name of Joseph and Mary’s son, when translated from Hebrew into Greek, and then into Latin, and finally into English, is Jesus. But in the original Hebrew, his name was Joshua, which means “God saves.” For Jesus, therefore, his name not only identified and distinguished him, but it also said something about what God would accomplish through him. This practice of giving a child a name that meant something significant was common in the time of Jesus.

Even in the early history of our country, when people of faith settled into communities or colonies of faith, it was common for parents to give their children names that expressed something of their relationship with God. For a child to be named Faith, Hope, Charity, Justice, or Perseverance, or some other familiar Biblical name, was common, and it expressed not only something of the parent’s relationship with God, but also it expressed their hopes for their children’s relationship with God.

Nowadays, however, I think this practice has fallen out of favor. But names are still important – not only the official names our parents give to us, but also the names we assign to each other. The things we say about each other mean a lot.

For example, a child whose parent says to them “You’re beautiful,” or “You’re smart,” will likely turn out very different from a child whose parent says to them “You’re ugly,” or “You’re stupid.” And recent studies in childhood bullying have shown that the things that people say about each other can have a tremendous impact on the outcome of a person’s life.

We can use names to affirm people, or to negate them. We can use names to include people, or to exclude people. We can use names to build people up, or to tear them down. However, as Christians, the names we ascribe to people, or the words we use to describe people, should be a reflection of our faith, and relationship with God.

Near the end of his letter to the Philippians, St. Paul wrote these words:

“Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (4:8).

With this in mind, allow me to make a suggestion. This is the time of year when people often make resolutions. And often, those resolutions will involve changing something that we do: perhaps it’s to go on a diet, or exercise more, or simply avoid things we know are unhealthy. But I would like to suggest that, instead, we resolve to change something about the way we think, and especially about the way we might be tempted to think about people who are different from us.

This is how it might work. Whenever we encounter someone who follows a different religion, or who supports a different political party, or who prefers different music, or who embraces a different lifestyle, rather than giving in to a knee-jerk reaction to think the least of them, strive instead to find something positive about them. Strive, in other words, to focus on what St. Paul said in his letters to the Philippians: Look for something in that other person that is true, or honorable, or just, or pure, or pleasing, or commendable, or excellent, or praise-worthy.

It's easy to think the least of someone. It's easy to give in to prejudice. But God calls us to a higher level of living and thinking. I believe that if we will strive to change this one thing about ourselves – and, honestly, we all have our prejudices – we will grow as individuals, we will increase in the image of Christ, and we will improve our chances of having a truly happy new year. Amen.