

In Emmanuel ... everything!

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Fourth Sunday of Advent—18 December 2016
Reverend Martin Johnson

Isaiah 7.10-16; Psalm 80.1-7, 17-19; Romans 1.1-7; Matthew 1:18-25

Do you have one of those names that you always have to spell? I know some of you are out there because I have a copy of the Parish Roll! I'm lucky in that my name is fairly easy to spell, but there are always Ts and Es lurking that people are keen to insert into 'Johnson'. We do need to have our names spelt and recorded correctly; it's important to us. Our names are important; they speak of our ancestry, what our forebears may have been or where they came from. For most of us they were given to us thoughtfully and lovingly by our parents at our baptism. From thence they take on another significance reflecting those lovely words in Isaiah 'I have called by your name, you are mine.' While I was serving in Afghanistan, I was allocated an interpreter: he introduced himself to me: 'I speak Pashtun, my name is Pashtun, I am Pashtun.' He was immensely proud of his name and what it meant. I used to be somewhat distracted by the mullahs who would converse with me, through Pashtun, whilst at the same time fingering beads and mouthing the many names of Allah. This is not just an Islamic idea; we too have many names for the divine.

Shakespeare's Juliet famously said 'What's in a name?' She, a Capulet of course, had her eye on Romeo, a member of the hated Montague family; it is a reminder that names can divide. They are very powerful; we know the schoolyard saying 'sticks and stone may break my bones ...'! But I wonder about the truth of this ditty; name calling does indeed hurt us. We are currently embroiled in a debate over the rights and wrongs of section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act and the question, "Do we have the right to insult or offend?" We can isolate or insult people by refusing to use their names. Regimes will dehumanise folk by simply using numbers. Alternatively, we can protect folk by not using their name ... 'He who shall remain nameless!'

In this biblical tradition of ours, names are crucially important. They are descriptive and they even change as individual circumstances change: Abram becomes Abraham, Sarai, Sarah and Simon, Peter the Rock. Names also elicit a response from us. Think of that great hymn, 'At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow.'

As we draw ever closer to the great feast of Christmas, we are challenged to answer the question: "Who is it exactly that we are welcoming?" and, paradoxically, "Who is it that we are continuing to wait for; whom do we seek?" Many of the writings of the New Testament open with statements about the nature of Jesus and they use different names for him—too many to list here. Matthew's gospel opens with a family tree. Fortunately, the lectionary doesn't have the genealogy set down as a Sunday reading; talk about spelling—most of the names are unpronounceable! But it is interesting that the list takes the fathers' line: Abraham was the father of Isaac. Isaac was the father of Jacob etc., etc., until the end, when it states that Joseph was the husband of Mary of whom Jesus was born—the first clue that we dealing with a new order of things.

John's gospel famously begins with the great canticle of the incarnation. 'In the beginning was the Word,' echoing the beginning of Genesis. Again, we are seeing the beginning of a new order, a new creation. The beginning of St Paul's letter to the Romans we heard this morning, and it is significant for our understanding of Jesus. Paul gives him two names; he calls Jesus both Son of David and Son of God. He is Son of David according to the flesh and

Son of God according to the Spirit. We are dealing with the new order and the beginning of the greatest debate of the Christian faith, the nature of Jesus.

Now is not the time to rehearse the theological and philosophical arguments around the nature of Jesus. What I would like to do this morning is concentrate on one of the other names attributed to Jesus, that of 'Emmanuel'. The gospel tells us the name means 'God with us'. Emmanuel is mentioned in the prophecy of Isaiah and is beautiful in its simplicity and yet so evocative ... 'God with us.' It speaks to us of reconciliation. Jesus: both the human Son of David and the divine Son of God. In Emmanuel, these two are brought together, the human and the divine reconciled in the person of Jesus. And this has personal, corporate, universal and—dare I say—cosmic ramifications. Karl Barth, the great Protestant theologian of the 20th century, described reconciliation as 'the centre of all Christian knowledge.' 'The character of God, God's very nature is none other than reconciliation. Reconciliation is at the heart of the story of creation, the story of the covenant, the story of Israel, and the person and the work of Jesus Christ.'

In Emmanuel, the Son of David—the one promised as Messiah, the redeemer—and the Son of God, the creator, are brought together as the embodiment of reconciliation. It points the way for us into a new order and new way of being and of belonging. This new way of being and belonging has its outworking in the way we live together in profound unity, both with each other and with the creation that sustains us all. The 'Jesus event' is a moment when space and time one, are as it were—when the human vocation to reconciliation, unity and healing is revealed and where the universe is sanctified.

But what does it mean? Ultimately it is everything, absolutely everything,

Emmanuel is at the heart of every human tradition and endeavour and relationship.

Emmanuel is at the heart of our care for the environment, at the heart of our recognition of the indigenous people of this land and every land, at the heart of our ethics, our relationships, our politics. Karl Barth once wrote, 'Anyone who has really understood that God became human can never speak and act in an inhuman way.' Reconciliation has a name and that name is 'Emmanuel'.

What's in a name ...? In Emmanuel ... everything ...! Amen.