

The Holy Name of Jesus (1/3/21)

What's in a name? For us a name is simply an identifier - a label to indicate one individual or another. In English names rarely have meanings, but as we know from other languages the words used for names are also other words in that language - for example my name Stephen in Greek means "wreath." We don't usually select names for our children for other than their sound (or connection to the name of a past relative), however, in other cultures names are selected specifically to indicate something about a person.

This is true about how God uses names. Names are very significant for God, and we see many instances of a name being changed to signify a change in life mission, for example Simon to Peter which means "rock." In the passage of Peter's renaming Jesus is essentially saying "you shall be called Rock, and upon this rock I will build my church." In other cases, God specifically selects the name for a child to indicate something about the child. God gives the name "John" to John the Baptist - the Hebrew version of John translates to: "Yahweh has been gracious" - as indeed God was gracious in granting Simeon and Anna this child, the name also fits with the message he would proclaim. "God is gracious" was the person who announced to the world the greatest act of graciousness - the Divine condescension that brought us the Savior of the world. This savior, whose birth we celebrate, is Jesus whose name itself means "a savior" or "Yahweh saves."

What we know is that that Holy Name of Jesus indicates that He is more than just any savior. "Joshua" is also a variant of the same name. Joshua was also a savior to Israel as he led them to the promised land. However, Jesus is not just one who will restore to people an earthly inheritance, an earthly land of promise - this savior is one of a wholly different kind. When the Angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, the specific type of savior Jesus would be is clearly stated: *She shall bring forth a son; and thou shall call his name Jesus. For he shall save his people from their sins.* The Holy Name of Jesus is given a specific and exalted meaning. He will indeed be a savior (as his name indicates), but not like any savior that has come before him nor any that follows after. Not a savior in an earthly and temporal sense, not one who will leave behind the people to need another savior as Joshua had - but a savior who brings salvation in a

place beyond this frail and passing world. He brings an ultimate and eternal salvation from the debit we owe to God due to our sins.

The Angel entrusts the naming of the child at his circumcision to his foster father Joseph, and in doing so allows Joseph to adopt Jesus into the line of David - a legal effect of Joseph speaking the name - and by this Jesus fulfill the prophecies and mounts the throne prepared for Him. This king and savior is king in a wholly transcendent way, he is savior in a wholly permanent and final way. We, for our part, are called as members of his Body to accept that salvation by our actions of worship, our sacramentally joining to that Body, and by maintaining that connection through the Church and in discipleship to Christ.

The Church has known the power of this name from earliest times. We hear in scripture that the very mention of the sacred name effected miracles. There is the time Peter encounters a paralytic begging for money: *Then Peter said silver and gold have I none; but such as I have I give thee: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk.* St. Paul writes in the letter to the Philippians: *... at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those that are in heaven,, on earth, and under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that the Lord Jesus Christ is in the glory of God the Father.* It is reported that evil flees from the mention of the name, and a share of salvation is granted when one is baptized *in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*

In more modern times we bow our heads slightly when the name is spoken out of reverence, and we know it is grave sin to use that name in vein. In the fifteenth century St. Bernadine of Siena popularized the use of the first three letters of that sacred name I-H-S as a representation of the name that is above all other names. As the saving sacrifice is offered on this altar today, look at the representation of that name embroidered on the vestments. Know who it is who stands before you to offer sacrifice to the Father, and see him fulfilling the meaning of that name as the sins of the world are atoned for and salvation is finally achieved. Blessed be the holy name of Jesus, and fortunate are those who know what this name means, and revere what the bearer of this name does.