

Monastic Scribe XLI: December 15, 2022

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

“You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.” (Luke 1:31). “Look, the young maiden will conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel which means ‘God is with us’” (Mathew 1:23).

Names are important and they often reveal much about the person. This is especially so in the Bible. Adam named his wife Eve and she was the mother of all the living. Together they named all the animals. Jacob wrestled with an angel and sought to know his name which the angel refused. Moses encountered God in the burning bush and was sent to Pharaoh to free the people. When Moses asked God what name he could give, the Divine answered enigmatically “I Am the I Am.”

And so in our trying to really understand who Jesus Christ is and is for us, we can look at some of his many names. The angels announced to the shepherds that a Savior was born. He is also referred to as Redeemer or simply as Lord. These are somewhat abstract titles. Likewise, after three hundred years of discussion, he will be proclaimed as God from God, light from light. But those who knew him had to discover who he was very slowly and with some uncertainty. I think it is helpful to put ourselves back into the beginning of his public life and understand what those who knew him thought. By immediately calling him God or the Son of God, we don't see him as the early followers knew him. And we miss the fullness of his humanity and what he opens up for our humanity.

What did Jesus call himself? Often he referred to himself as “the Son of Man.” This title (which comes from the Prophets Jeremiah and Daniel) really means Human One and this tells us how closely and intimately he identifies with all of us. He is truly a flesh and blood human being. For 2000 years there have been followers and movements which have denied his full humanity. Since the heresy of Arius in the third century, there has been over emphasis on Jesus as God.

Jesus used many names and descriptions to share himself. “I am the way the truth and the life,” he said. Calling himself the way was a help to early Christians who called their Jesus movement “the Way.” Before there were doctrines and beliefs and creeds, disciples were called to live Jesus, the way. Saint Paul said, “for me to live is Christ.”

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Jesus used many other names to identify himself. "I am the Good Shepherd" showed us his close love and relationship – he probably smelled of sheep as Pope Francis says. "I am the vine and you are the branches" also expresses closeness and intimacy. The gospels also call him both Lamb of God and Lion of Judah to join together two images. He is called the bridegroom in a love relationship with us.

The canticle of Zachary refers to Jesus as the dayspring from on high, that is the rising sun that brings us light and warmth. Various Christian traditions have used other names to signify Jesus' meaning to them. Armenians were among the earliest Christians. They called Christ the Apostle of the Father. They also called him Varapet which means Master of the Way, which meant his followers were all apprentices of the Way. One writer has compared this image to Obi wan Kenobi, the master who teaches you into virtue. Still another Armenian image is Christ the Blossomed Rose.

Other names come from the scriptures. The apostles and early woman followers called him Rabbi, or Teacher. They knew they had much to learn. Others recognized him as a prophet like Isaiah, Micah, Amos and others who focused on justice in peoples' relationships. He is described as often rising early to pray and likewise spending nights on the mountain in contemplative prayer. He is thus a mystic, a way of life that is once again being found in our religion. He called us friends and not servants; so he is our friend as well as our brother. One title for God in the psalms is my rock. I like to think of Jesus as my rock of safety on which I look for strength. Saint Paul quotes another Psalm in speaking of Christ as the stone which the builders rejected which has become the cornerstone.

Finally Paul also called Christ the visible image of the invisible God. We really don't know what God is truly like. Thus we try to take the humanity of Jesus seriously so that our understanding of him may reveal to us who God really is. I want to really know Jesus in his humanity and I also want to know him as the resurrected cosmic Christ who transcends all limits, even of sexuality. The Christ loves me and embraces me. I am slowly coming to love this Christ more and more and finding life's meaning in Christ.

At Christmas we start off well recognizing Jesus as a baby with two very human parents. We don't always succeed in coming to know and love the adult Christ.

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“For me to live is Christ” said Saint Paul. All life’s meaning was in Christ for him. During the final week of Advent we call on Christ with the “O antiphons” and call him Wisdom (a feminine term in the Old Testament), Adonai, Root of Jesse, Key of David, Radiant Dawn, King of nations, Emmanuel. May Christmas help us to know this life and love. You can contact me at: joycet@glastonburyabbey.org

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Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.