

Christ Church, Georgetown

The Feast of the Holy Name, New Year's Eve, December 31, 2016

The Rev. Timothy Cole, Rector

Tonight presents us with a mixture of titles. Here in the US we have 'New Year's Eve'. Where I come from in Scotland, we also have Old Years Night (possibly showing the Celtic penchant for the negative over the positive!) and also Hogmanay which has a very blurred and uncertain etymology. It's probably linked to the Norse Celebrations around Yule tide and it includes the custom of First Footing after midnight. The first guest in the New Year carrying significance for the rest of the year to come. People bring symbolic gifts representing blessings for the coming year. Salt, coal or peat, shortbread, whisky, and a black bun (fruit cake). Drink is brought that the coming year may make the heart glad, food that there may be plenty to eat and fuel that there may be shelter and warmth in the home.

The church also has two names for tomorrow's feast which begins tonight. - It is known as the Feast of the Circumcision because, eight days after his birth, Jesus was circumcised and, like all Jewish boys, given his name. Hence the less graphic name the Roman Catholic Church and modern Anglican calendars have adopted - The Holy Name. We celebrate that tonight and tomorrow because all solemnities or important feast days traditionally begin the evening before the day itself.

Names are important, though it is hard to see quite how. I came across this American classic by Johnny Cash (we might get the choir to sing it one day!) called 'A Boy Named Sue'.

For those of you who don't know it, it is about a father who abandons his wife and son, but before doing so, takes the trouble to name the boy 'Sue'. Now, in our current more enlightened day, that might not be such a great problem, after all, celebrities name their children after all sorts of weird and wonderful things these days, don't they? But in the mining village in Scotland in the 60s where I was raised or where Jonny Cash grew up in Arkansas we can imagine that it would have pretty tough. Interestingly, Cash traced his ancestry to mining communities in Fife where I was first ordained. Being called Sue in Lochgelly in Fife would not have been a walk in the park either I assure you! They were the only constituency ever to elect a communist MP!

Anyway the song ends up in a big fight between Sue and his Dad and with Sue pointing a gun at his hated father.

He said: "Now you just fought one hell of a fight
And I know you hate me, and you got the right
To kill me now, and I wouldn't blame you if you do.
But ya ought to thank me, before I die,
For the gravel in ya guts and the spit in ya eye
Cause I'm the "So and So" that named you "Sue."

I got all choked up and I threw down my gun
And I called him my pa, and he called me his son,
And I came away with a different point of view.
And I think about him, now and then,
Every time I try and every time I win,
And if I ever have a son, I think I'm gonna name him
Bill or George! Anything but Sue! I still hate that name!

This is a funny song of course and, for most of us, our name is unlikely to have played such a horrific part in our lives. I suppose, if you know the meaning of your name, one can see how that might

influence you. We might perhaps, subconsciously, set out on an unknowing voyage of self-fulfilling prophecy because of the name we have been given. If you are a John, does that mean your life is likely to show that 'God is gracious' or if, you are an Allison, are you likely to be 'noble or exalted'. Maybe by naming me Timothy my parents set a direction for my journey - St Paul calls Timothy, 'My own son in the faith. The name comes from the Greek - Timo Theos - which means 'he who honors God'. Certainly a tough call to live up to. Yet I am skeptical that so much direction could come from a name alone. After all many people don't even know what their name means.

It is part of something bigger isn't it? Part of what makes us who we are. So much of who we are is given, like a name, isn't it?

When we are young our identity is very much that of our family, to some extent the school we go to, perhaps. Later we are also the college we go to and the job we do. In our society the job we do is a huge part of it isn't it?

Running through all that, there is also the faith we believe in, the church we belong to, the values we espouse and, of course, the politics we hold to. Perhaps when, we are young, politics can seem more important than religion but, later, for many people at least, as they have their children and as their working lives come to an end and after they have lived with some of the more bitter struggles of human existence, the deeper notes of faith, sound louder and have a deeper resonance for us.

The Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, was in the press a while back when he discovered that his father was not in fact his biological father. In fact, that turned out to be a certain Anthony Montague Browne who was Private Secretary to Winston Churchill in his later years. The Archbishop talked very openly about it and concluded, rather movingly, I thought, with the words "I know that I find who I am in Jesus Christ, not in genetics, and my identity in him never changes."

Who am I? It's not a bad question for Old Years Night is it? We are all the things I have mentioned of course. Perhaps we are, in some ways, many people, being a slightly different person to our family, our children, our workmates and our friends. Perhaps no one really sees all of who we are. Maybe, on a night like tonight, as another year turns, we have some doubts as to whether, even we ourselves, can say with confidence that this or that is actually who we are.

That is where Justin Welby's answer comes to seem more that just what you would expect a professional religious person and an Archbishop to say. In the stillness of this sacred space where earth and heaven meet, where we say the Holy Name and hold in our hands the life he gave and gives us, we begin to see that this, in truth, is actually who we are; the rescued child, the ennobled man or woman, the blessed of God.

So as we step into the New Year - whatever doubts about the world and ourselves we may have, we do so with a peace and a strength at the heart of who we are. We may not be the perfect parents, children, brothers, sisters, friends, Christians or people. We may have trouble, even after many years of living and loving and struggling, knowing who, in truth, we precisely really are. Yet, each of us can say, with Archbishop Welby that "I find who I am in Jesus Christ."

I leave you with the words I read to myself every New Years Eve. They are the words King George VI read to the people of Britain and the Empire in the first dark and uncertain days dark days of WWII. They are from a poem by Marie Louise Haskins called "God Knows" and they were given to him by his then 13-year-old daughter Elizabeth.

And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:
"Give me a light, that I may tread safely into the unknown!"
And he replied:
"Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God.
That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way."
So, I went forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night
And He led me toward the hills and the breaking of day in the lone East.

Marie Louise Haskins 1876 - 1957

A very Happy, prosperous and Blessed New Year to you all and the strong name of Jesus the Christ
be upon our lips, in our hearts and over our lives and the lives of those we love.