

NEW YEAR'S EVE 2009: THE NAME OF JESUS

Numbers 6:22-27; Philippians 2:9-13; Luke 2:21

He was called Jesus.

Most of you have known me long enough to know, especially if you've been in class with me, that I can have my fair share of theological and liturgical pet-peeves. One pet-peeve that never fails to bug me when I hear it is when pastors say, "We begin in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." I just want to say, "No, we don't, and stop saying that." Some of you may be wondering why that would bother me. Let me tell you. It strips the invocation of its meaning and divorces God's services from our worship throughout the week in our vocations, at home, in the workplace, and wherever we find ourselves living out our faith in life as God's people.

The invocation is a reminder of our Baptism where God's name was placed upon us, where we were renamed, so to speak, where we became an adoptive part of the Holy Trinity's family. So, if anything, instead of saying, "We begin in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," pastors could at least say, "We continue in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." That would be better theology, although I still think it would bother me. Sticking to what's on the page is probably the better way to go. The church did take thousands of years testing and trying it to make sure it works.

So, why my little rant? Because today, on New Year's Eve, we're celebrating the name of Jesus, which actually falls tomorrow in the Church Year. Why in the world is there a day dedicated to the name of Jesus in the Church Year? Let me tell you why. His name is just that awesome. Do you remember what Jesus means? St. Luke doesn't tell us in our Holy Gospel for today, but St. Matthew does fill us in, as we heard in one of our midweek services from the first chapter of His Gospel:

When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

Jesus name means what He will do. Understand? Let me say it more clearly. Jesus name means "He who saves," and that is exactly what He will do as He grows in wisdom and stature, keeps the law perfectly, suffers and dies, rises and ascends: He will save us from our sins. In that way, His name alone is a prayer for the believer, a *hosanna*, "Lord, save us."

Jesus name deserves a day, because, as St. Paul reminds us in our second lesson, ***“Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”***

Let me let you in on a little secret. You have to promise not to tell anyone else, though. What we do in God’s services actually means something. I know, it’s a shocker. I’ll give you a moment to let it sink in. No, really, what we do in God’s services actually means something. And you don’t really have to keep it a secret. Pass it on. What we do in God’s services actually means something, and notice what we speak first and what we speak last in them: God’s name, in invocation and benediction. We begin in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. (Did you catch that? I just pet peeved myself). And we end with God’s blessing for His people first entrusted to Aaron, from our first lesson:

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them,

The LORD bless you and keep you;

the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;

the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.”

So, back to my pet peeve. We don’t begin in the name of the Father of the Son or of the Holy Spirit, even though I just said it. We’ve already begun in God’s name. No, we continue, we press on in it, in the confidence that He will continue to be for us who He was born on Christmas: Jesus, He who saves. And yes, we will one day end in it, that is, we will all asleep in Jesus, but that is really no ending at all, but the beginning of a blessed eternity.

“And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.” Why give the name of Jesus a whole day in the Church Year? I don’t know. It doesn’t seem like enough, does it? Surely God’s name deserves a lot more. How about, while we celebrate God’s name on this day, we give His name our whole lives, for in Jesus, He who saves, God’s name is no longer only His own, but ours as well. How great is that! Amen.