

SERMON FOR SUNDAY 2ND AUGUST 2020

ORDINARY 18A

Readings: Genesis 32:22-31 (but please consider reading the whole chapter), Romans 8:14-25

Our names are important. They are an important part of our identity. From the beginnings of our lives people reach out to us and connect with us using our names. We are forever writing or typing our names on forms and orders and letters and cheques and labels. We often wear badges with our names on them in order that other people know by what name to address us. Our names are on our birth certificates, passports, driving licences, bank statements, bills, credit and debit cards, Centrelink and Medicare cards, and all the other important documentation necessary for modern lives.

But more than that, names often say something about us. Our surnames identify our family or origin or our family by marriage or adoption. Our names may also identify our cultural background. When we hear the name Patrick or Seamus or Brigid we automatically start thinking, "Are they Irish?" Or if we hear the name Duncan or Alistair or Aileen or Campbell or Dougal we wonder if they are Scottish or of Scottish descent. But a Giuseppe is much more likely to be Italian, and an Athena or a Socrates Greek.

Sometimes names have been chosen for their meaning- my name Sandra, which is derived from Alexandra means helper of mankind. I don't know whether mum or dad knew the meaning of my name or whether they just liked it, but I certainly enjoy having a name with a positive meaning.

Lots of names have interesting meanings. Did you know, for example, Alice means noble or of the nobility, that Margaret means 'pearl', that Andrew means 'virile or manly', Gordon means 'great hill or triangular hill', Gregory means 'watchful or vigilant', Joan means 'God is merciful', and Susan 'lily or rose'.

Parents today may or may not have thought about the meaning of the names they give to their children, but in the Bible naming is very significant. In the near-Eastern cultures in Biblical times, names are far more than a way of identifying a person. Names in those cultures are meant to reveal something about a person's character and sometimes even their destiny. So in those cultures, to know a person's name was to have a certain power over that person. For their name told you something important about them. Once you knew a person's name, you were let into important information about them.

Even more significant was the power of naming. When in Biblical stories God or Jesus re-named someone, it proclaimed a change of direction or the making of a covenant or the fulfilment of a promise or a new destiny or calling. A well-known example is when Jesus re-named Simon son of John/Jonah, he renamed the budding disciple as Cephas (Peter). This was significant in that the name Peter means 'Rock'. This change of name was explained in Matthew's gospel by Jesus stating that Peter was the rock (foundation) on which the church was to be built. But also it clearly celebrates Peter's steadfast nature.

So in today's Old Testament story God's renaming of Jacob as Israel is very significant.

In those days, Jacob wasn't a very nice name to give your child, as it meant heel or usurper/deceiver. It came out of the fact that Jacob was born already grabbing his twin brother's Esau's heel. It was said that from the moment of his birth Jacob was trying to supplant his older brother.

Certainly, his life to this point had illustrated how appropriate a name Jacob was. For Jacob had devoted his energy and wit to usurping what rightfully belongs to others. Beginning with tricking his brother and father, then moving on to his father in law Laban, who it would have to be said was an even greater trickster and cheat and perhaps deserved being taken down.

Jacob's name reflected the fact that Jacob at heart was a charlatan and a cheating scoundrel. And deep down, you see, Jacob knew this and perhaps even rejoiced in this identity.

And so, when the Lord wrestled Jacob down and demanded to know his name, God was demanding nothing less than that Jacob confess -- confess his ill-gotten gains and shoddy character, confess his misused talents and wasted life. But to truly come clean, was for one such as Jacob, nothing less than death to self. For when he was revealed to be the con man and phony that he was, what would he have left of his identity? What hope would he have left? What future could he possibly have?

If we view that wrestling scene in that light, we may be inclined to rejoice, for at long last Jacob was about to get his proper punishment, to be put in his place once and for all and finally get what he deserved for all his cheating ways.

Except ... except that that's not how the scene played out.

For in the face of Jacob's confession of his name, the Lord -- far from doling out the punishment Jacob both certainly merited and probably expected -- the Lord gave Jacob a new name.

The Lord renamed Jacob as Israel. This new name Israel, is explained in the story as having come out of his wrestling with God and with man, and his tenacity and endurance in it, such that God had to sprain Jacob's hip and cripple him to prevail. His new name Israel means God rules. It is a name that indicates a huge change in his life. No longer the cheater, but rather one whom God rules, God directs.

And so the scene concludes with Jacob limping away from this contest not defeated but victorious, carrying a new name and character and living life as a new person. For not only will Jacob and Esau be reconciled in the chapters to come, but Jacob will also sire a nation from his twelve sons and they and their descendants proudly bear his name even to this day.

This tale, as phenomenally bizarre as it is, has been for years one of my favourites for two reasons. The first is that it reminds us that when we go through times of great turmoil and difficulty, when we lie awake in the middle of the night wrestling with our consciences trying to make difficult decisions or struggling with guilt or regrets or worrying about things, God is present. Whether or not we are actually wrestling with God or ourselves, I'm not always sure. But I do know that God is there; and that God waits for us to surrender our lives to God, and to give our needs, concerns, worries, and guilt completely to God. God does not stomp on us or force us, but rather God wrestles with us until we put our hands into God's hands, and lets God direct us.

The other reason is that it so clearly illustrates our understanding of Holy Baptism. For in Baptism we, too, are given a new name, as God beholds us, calls us God's own, and names us Christ.

For in baptism we are given through water and the word the name of Christ. It's where the popular word "christening" comes from. Way before we used this word to name ships or homes, it described Holy Baptism, the place where we were, quite literally, Christ-ened, that is, called by the name of Christ and made to be like him. For this name, our new name, not only describes us, but in time it also permeates all of our living and being as we more fully understand that in Baptism God has promised to regard each and all of us always as God's own beloved child and to account Christ's righteousness as our own.

And this is where things get powerful. Because if truth be told, we are each called by so many names day in and day out -- some of them good and affirming and loveable, but many more that are not. This can make it terribly difficult even to hear, let alone believe, that God chooses to call us Christ. And yet there it is, in the eighth chapter of Romans which simply brims over with baptismal imagery, Paul's promise that the Holy "Spirit and our spirit bear united witness that we are children of God; and if we are children, then we are heirs as well, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ."

So, who are you? What is your name? What is it that others call you?

More importantly, what is it that you call yourself? Do you call yourself 'Beloved child of God'? You should!

Or is there a name you can scarce speak for fear or shame? Maybe it's a hurtful name that others have called you? Ugly or stupid or slow or silly? Or do you call yourself unworthy or irresponsible? Maybe unfaithful? Or discouraged or hurt or burnt-out? Or a failure? Or unloved or unloving? Disappointed or disappointing? Abused or abuser? Fat or skinny?

It's not easy to admit the power of these names over us as it implies a significant amount of vulnerability. But I think that only as we confess the names we wear and bear can we also hear God's unrelenting response: "No! No! You are Christ! To me you are Christ! You are my beloved, the one I chose and redeemed at great cost, the one to whom I am committed and to whom I promise to protect and care for all the days of your life. For you are my child. You are Christ!"

What if we imagine that worship (whether it is in a church building or not) is a place we can come to each week and bring all our other names with us, confessing them honestly and then leaving them behind, departing the gathered community simply as *Christians*? As Christians - as those who bear the name of Christ and who are armed with the love, commitment, and courage of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Israel, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

For our true name and identity is that of being God's own beloved children.

For that is what Jacob discovered when he became Israel. He discovered that 'God rules' and God loved him and would guide him and strengthen him and show him the path on which to walk. And with the strength of that knowledge and love Israel was able to leave the fear behind that had crippled him and go forth and seek reconciliation with his estranged brother.

As God's beloved children, may we also embrace our present and our future hand in hand with God. Amen.

Rev Sandra Houghton

Traralgon/Glengarry/Rosedale Uniting Churches

