

Called by name

Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

You could be recently bereaved. All your adult life you've been part of a couple, then death comes, and that which gave you your identity is no longer there, and you wonder who you really are now.

You move to a new school, or go to university, or start a new job, or join a different church. You know nobody. You're on your own. You have the chance to reinvent yourself, start afresh. But who are you, and what would you really want to become?

You've just become a new parent, and you're holding in your arms, for the very first time, this tiny, bawling, let's face it not particularly attractive but definitely yours, scrap of humanity. What are you going to name it so that it becomes a he or a she?

Imagine Adam's problem in the second of the Creation poems in the Book of Genesis, when God, to ease Adam's loneliness, forms every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brings them to Adam to see what he will call them. The late American poet Anthony Hecht wrote a little poem called 'Naming the Animals.'

*Having commanded Adam to bestow
Names upon all the creatures, God withdrew
To empyrean palaces of blue
That warm and windless morning long ago,
And seemed to take no notice of the vexed
Look on the young man's face as he took thought
Of all the miracles the Lord had wrought
Now to be labelled, dubbed, yclept, indexed.*

*Before an addled mind and puddle brow,
The feathered nation and the finny prey
Passed by; there went biped and quadruped.
Adam looked forth with bottomless dismay
Into the tragic eyes of his first cow,
And shyly ventured, "Thou shalt be called 'Fred.'"*

In ancient cultures to give a name was to give the bestower of the name some form of control over the named. Where do you begin with names? What does a name say about you, or a

place, or a thing? To give something, some place, someone a name gives the potential of description and of identity.

“Who am I? Where do I belong? What makes me worthy? These questions which come to the forefront in adolescence and young adulthood never really go away. Whether we ask them explicitly or only subconsciously, we often look for the answers in the wrong places: in our roles, our work, our peer groups, or our accomplishments and acquisitions. Ultimately, none of these can deliver what we need. What we need, according to Isaiah, is to hear how God gives us identity and value.”ⁱ

Our reading from Isaiah reveals to us again the hands-on-nature of God. For sure, God is mysterious, often beyond our understanding, hard to come to terms with, but now and again in God’s dealings with humanity, the distance vanishes, and the nearness of God, and the pressing personality of God, breaks right through. Christmas, with its message of incarnation, God made flesh, is such a moment. The Epiphany, where God reveals His face to the world, is another such moment. So here, in Isaiah, when the prophecies about Jesus were only that, just prophecies, we get that insight into how intimately involved God wants to be with the things of earth. God has created, more than that, says Isaiah, God has ‘formed you’.

It’s like another Creation poem. God has formed us. God has taken the time, and the effort, to form who and what and why we are. There are many scandals in our world, and one of the greatest is the waste of people that we see all too often. Children, not given their full opportunity because of lack of funding in education, or lack of time given in parenting. Young people, not given their full opportunity, but put into dead-end jobs, or driven by lack of interest shown in them to dabble with drugs and petty crime. Refugees from Syria, not parasites on the states through which they pass, and certainly not all embryonic terrorists, but frightened, broken, homeless people driven out by cruelty. The working population, often grinding away at thankless tasks simply trying to keep things together for themselves and their loved ones, with so little time to create and enjoy and broaden their own horizons. The elderly, shunted to the

side-lines, isolated on their own, their rich experience of life and their memories of the ordinary and the extraordinary left to rust and rot until it is too late.

Yet each one of these people in all of these groups, 'formed' by God. Formed with skills and talents, formed with ideas and imagination, formed to be unique and distinct. Not all great minds and great leaders, but so much more than the rubble of humanity life reduces them into being when that divine spark is snuffed out in whatever way. All that 'form', wasted, unrealised, confined, repressed, blunted. Yet beneath all the burden and responsibility and dullness, that form still exists, waiting, just waiting, to be called, and released.

For not only does God form us, God saves us, and God calls us. "I have called you by name, you are Mine."

To call someone by name is to recognise them. To call someone by name is to throw the sparkling light of identity upon them and distinguish them from everything and everyone else.

And it is God Who does this. "I have called you by name, you are Mine."

It is why a baptismal service is so important. It is not just about the giving of a name; it is not just about the welcoming into the family of faith, important though these things undoubtedly are. It is the acknowledgement that each life, brought to that font, and all the other fonts, is special, wonderfully formed, uniquely gifted, with none other like it. On the gravestones of members of the armed forces who died in the war but who were never identified these words are carved, 'Known Unto God'. It's attributed to Rudyard Kipling. God knows us, even when others forget. God knows us, even when we forget ourselves. God knows us, should we never be loved by anyone. God knows us, when the ravages of dementia and Alzheimer's robs us of identity. God knows us, after the years erodes the words on our gravestones, or fades the ink on a book of remembrance. We are 'known unto God', because God has formed us, redeemed us, called us by name because we are God's, and reminds us that we are precious in God's eyes, and honoured, "and I love you", says the God of all time.

There are some people who think the Old Testament is a stretch too far when it comes to contemporary belief because of some of its difficult, context-bound history and story-telling.

Then you stumble across this luminous passage from Isaiah that cuts through eternity to the heart of the matter, and speaks as clearly to the foundering souls of today as it first did in the 6th BC. Writing to a people whose world was falling apart, through war and invasion, famine and disaster after disaster, the steady chiming of God's eternal presence rang out then, rings out now. Formed. Redeemed. Named. Precious. Honoured. "I love you."

Says God.

"I love you." However young or old you are; however ordinary or extraordinary you are; however talented or humdrum you are; however male or female you are; however believing or doubting you are; however gay or straight you are; however sinful or saintly you are; however Syrian or Libyan or Scottish or English or American or South African or Iranian or Indian or Sikh or Hindu or Muslim or Jewish or atheist or Christian you are.

"I love you," says the God of the prophets. "I have called you by name, you are Mine."

This passage from Isaiah is paired with that reading from Luke, that tells us about the baptism of Jesus. It is done with good reason. In the waters of baptism, we are invited to believe that God marks us and claims us as God's children. In the waters of baptism, God seals God's love for us, no matter what we might have done and what might happen. In the waters of our baptism, God gives evidence of what God says to Jesus: "You are my (child), the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." These comforting and hopeful words of Isaiah are easier to read and write about than they are truly to hear and believe. We need to return to this passage over and over again, just as we need to be reminded of our baptism. Words this good – love this uncommon – take time to be believed and absorbed.ⁱⁱ

But, beloved in the Lord, know this, if nothing else today. By God, you were formed; by God you were redeemed; by God you were named; by God, you **are** loved.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ W Carter Lester, Feasting on the Word Year C vol 1 pps219-220

ⁱⁱ ibid p222