

9 August 2009

Sunday 19B (off RCL)

Sermon notes on Ephesians 3.12-21

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Our reading from Ephesians this morning is basically a prayer, and it's a prayer addressed, to quote from Paul, to "the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name". A more literal translation sounds quite ingloriously patriarchal, but could run like this: "... I bow my knees before the Father, from whom all fatherhood in heaven and on earth takes its name". It's important, for understanding what Paul has said to this point in the letter and for what he is yet to say, to come to grips with what he refers to here in this way of describing God. Despite the language, what he is *not* doing is being patriarchal, although there are all sorts of possible abuses of human relations which might be built upon the language of "Father" for God in the New Testament.¹ What Paul *is* doing is challenging the way in which we name ourselves.

Our names, in a sense, sum up who we are and what our value is. My wife and I grew up in East Keilor (or "Keilor East", as the rest of the world knows it). East Keilor is a Baby-Boomers suburb, established in the sixties peopled by the middle class in what was relatively cheap housing. My mother tells us that there's been a suggestion made locally that the suburb be renamed, and that the response from some quarters has been vitriolic. The vitriol, however, has come from those in neighbouring suburbs. It's a short leap across a small valley from East Keilor to Essendon, an entirely different kind of suburb and community, and one where the property prices are considerably higher. The objection to the name change has been to suggestions that some version of "Essendon" might be used for East Keilor – "Essendon West", or whatever. The fear of the objectors is that East Keilor, so renamed, will lead to a drop in property prices in old Essendon. I suspect that this is well understood by those who've proposed the name change in the first place, as it may lead to some increase in the property prices of the then erstwhile East Keilor!

Now, we won't be worrying too much this morning about that debate except to draw from it the observation that the same thing can be named in different ways, And, most importantly, *become something of quite different value* simply because of the new name. For naming is a process of *association*, a process of linking one thing with another, and associations matter.

Our personal names in themselves mean much less than once they did, but the rationale of our naming of ourselves remains significant. Recent changes in our naming of ourselves are worth noting, for they also reflect changes in what we associate ourselves with. It was not so long ago that a child would almost certainly be named to honour a grandparent or an aunt or a king, so that names like John or George or Mary or Elizabeth have had a very long history and been quite common, not because they necessarily have been thought to sound nice or mean much in themselves, but because they placed us within a certain family and tradition. Today, however, a kid can be called anything from Apple to Tiger Lily to Zeppelin. In a similar kind of shift, it is today probably as common as not that women don't change their family name when marrying. My point in observing these shifting patterns is to note the way in which our habits in naming ourselves have altered to reflect changes in what we think we are, how we stand in relation to each other, and where our value comes from. Retaining a family name after marriage asserts an identity which is not simply a matter of who your husband is, and having a first name that no other person in all of history has had is a matter of our parents wishing for us an independence and individuality which is signified by the uniqueness of our name. How I name myself reflects what (and who) I think I am; we place ourselves, and are placed, by our names.

Now, let's get back to Paul's "Father from whom all fatherhood gets its name": Paul wrote in a time when who we were, what was expected of us and what we might ourselves expect out of life was rather starkly determined by what might broadly be called our "family". And that these families – whether clans or religions or nationalities – were largely patriarchal was just how it happened to be. But because it *was* that way, Paul takes the "fatherhood" of our race, culture, clan, religion and nation – our usual ways of naming ourselves – and contrasts these with what it means to live under the "fatherhood" of the God of Israel, the God of Jesus Christ. Paul does then, what he always does – he calls us to consider whether our lives are built upon what God sees in us and calls us to be, or whether they are built upon what we call ourselves and see in ourselves. With what, or with whom, are we most fundamentally associated?

As human beings always have, we tend to believe that we already *know* who we are, and that the real question is only what we *do*. And so,

¹ And, occasionally, in the Old Testament also.

when it comes to matters of belief, we are more interested in action than in talk, more interested in doing than in understanding. In the three chapters up to this point in the letter Paul has been giving an extended and rich account of what he believes God has done for his people. He has, then, been speaking about who we are – we for whom God has done this, and what we have become through God's work. With today's passage we come to the turning point in the epistle, and from here Paul moves to the question of "how then should we live?" But we must note the "then" – how *then*, how *therefore*, should we live? On the basis of who we are in the God from whom all humankind receives its name, how should we behave? To understand what we are to do, we have to understand what has gone before, else the "therefore" makes no sense. And what has gone before is Paul's account of how, according to the secret at the heart of God's creative purpose, we are in the process of being renamed by God. And so his point is that to "do" properly, we must "be" aright – we must know our names.

But this is not easy, for we are complicated creatures, and what Paul presents here is a challenge to what and who we think we are, at the deepest level.

And so Paul is moved to prayer:

¹⁸ I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

¹⁶ I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, ¹⁷ and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. [NRSV]

To put it differently, we might say that Paul prays here that we might learn the name by which God would call us. How we name ourselves matters, and is important, of course. But to name ourselves is only to *guess* at what we are from the vantage point on which we stand, for our view will be limited. Paul prays therefore that we might yet comprehend – might yet see – with breadth and length and height and depth, that we might know what surpasses knowledge, coming to know more than can be known.

To know more than can be known is to *be*. For knowing how *God* renames us is to *become* something different: *children*. For God's naming of us does not just *re-label* us, it *makes* us what

we are called – *children*; "You are my children; today I have 'begotten' you" (cf. Ps 2, Mark 1).

The manner of love God has shown us is one which does not simply "forgive" or "heal" or "promise" but claims us as children, as those who have in common nothing other than the Father's love, and Jesus as Brother, and so the Holy Spirit which makes this so. In our lives many things make us who we are: what my father did to me, what siblings didn't do for me, what my children have done, or that I don't have children, what I experienced in school, or where I work. Even if they are not the heart of what I am, these things are important because they mark me off as someone unique, for no one else has experienced what I've experienced, felt what I've felt. These things are part of my name, and give colour to the history which my name brings to mind.

But these details are not yet me, and neither can they be the final ground of my relationship to you, for you are all also different in the same ways. As we are children of our parents, children of our age, children of what has happened to us, so now, by God's grace, all our families are brought together under the one name: son, daughter, child.

The miracle at the heart of Christian belief is not this or that wonder or spectacle – whether the healing of a blind man or the raising of a dead one; rather the heart is what these "lesser" miracles refer to: that the secret of what we really are in all our living and dying is that God would make us his children, that our naming of our many and varied lives might be coloured by God's name for us, a naming which declares that we are God's, and God is ours.

This is the gospel – that whatever has been the quality of the "fatherhood" or "motherhood" we have known, in this God it has been embraced, surpassed and perfected.

This is indeed something far more than we could ask or imagine, and yet the power of God is present to make it happen.

For this promise and healing – now and in anticipation – all thanks be to God, now and forever. Amen.