

## Sermon for John the Baptist 23th June 2019

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight o God our rock and redeemer.*

Good morning -it's good to be here and thank you for your warm welcome. I was delighted to be asked to come and preach here at St Johns – although a little anxious as to what insight I might offer that is new and fresh when preaching to St John the Baptist church about St John the Baptist!

But I was struck in this morning's gospel passage by the theme of names and the importance of naming. Naming a child is a big moment. I remember when my husband and I were expecting our baby – we had chosen a name very early on, and were keen to keep it a secret and not to discuss names with anyone, until 'the naming'. There's always that risk that everyone has a different opinion, someone criticises the name you love – they once knew someone whose aunties dog was called that! I am sure that the argument had in the family of Zechariah and Elizabeth on John's naming day was not the first of its kind, nor the last! Names are powerful and important, they give you your identity – you become your name.

In today's gospel passage naming is crucial, and in first century Palestine, the meaning of names was very important, much more so than today. Traditionally the new baby boy would have been given his father's name, in this case 'Zechariah' – meaning 'the Lord remembers' – not a bad name. At this time a son would take his father's name to symbolise the child walking in his father's footsteps, and the father living on through his offspring. John's naming here is important precisely for this reason – he will not be following in his father's footsteps, he will not be taking on a priestly role like Zechariah - John's calling is unique, and sets him apart, his life will look very different from his father's. We are reminded from today's OT passage, from Isaiah, of what John's role would be - 'to cry out in the wilderness', 'to prepare the way for God's coming', to urge people to get ready for the coming Messiah.

We find throughout the Bible, that names are very important and significant. A careful look at biblical names and you find all sorts of meaning behind them. The word for God in the OT was 'El' and this is found within many familiar biblical names – Daniel, Samuel and Elijah to name a few. Often, we find that people are given a new name by God, at an important moment. For example take Abraham, originally known as Abram meaning 'high father', he was given

the name Abraham when called by God. His new name means 'father of a multitude' – indicating the promise God made to him that he would father a new people. In the NT of course, we have Simon, the disciple of Jesus, renamed as Peter – the rock – on this rock will I build my church.

John's is not a renaming, and the meaning of his name - 'the Lord is gracious' is not so significant as the naming itself, that John is set apart by God and is different from anyone else in his family. It is at John's naming that his calling is made clear, he will be different, he has a special part to play. And as this is made clear, those gathered pondered, 'what then will this child become?'

Naming is significant for us as Christians too, God creates each of us and calls us by name. In the baptism service the priest will ask the family of a baby to 'name this child'. This partly has a practical purpose so that no priest gets the baby's name wrong! But symbolically a naming of the child at his or her baptism is a reminder that God calls each of us by name and that we have a new identity in Jesus, being adopted into God's family at our baptism. So too in the confirmation service we find the words, 'God has called you by name and made you his own'.

Both baptism and confirmation work powerfully to remind us that we are all called and commissioned by God. God has a purpose, a role, for each of us. And its not always very clear, or obvious what that calling is, but there may well be pointers and moments that help us to discern God's calling on each of our lives.

When I was exploring going into ordained ministry, part of the process is going along to a kind of 3 day residential in which you do a presentation, attend various interviews with a number of different people, and spend time in prayer and fellowship with others who are on the same path as you. For me this time away was a time of discernment, I didn't approach it like a job interview, and so when one of the interviewers asked me 'how do you know that you are called to be a priest?' I answered honestly, 'I don't. I'm hoping you will tell me!'. Sometimes we need the wise counsel and help of others to discern where God is leading us.

There is a close link in the OT between creation and calling – God created us, and God calls us. And God creates us each wonderfully different, each with our own gifts, skills, interests, passions, and God calls us to be the person he created us to be. As we read in Isaiah 43 – 'thus says the Lord, he who created

you, he who formed you, do not fear for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name you are mine'. We are not called to be someone that we are not – we are called to be just who we are. I read recently about Revd Katie Tupling<sup>1</sup>, who is coming to the Oxford Diocese to take up a new post as Chaplain among Deaf People and Disability Advisor. Katie was born with cerebral palsy and didn't walk until she was five. Growing up as a female and disabled, she had significant barriers to her calling to ordination but since being ordained in her 20s her roles have included being disability adviser to the Bishops of Derby and Sheffield, being co-founder of [Disability and Jesus](#) and being part of the organising group for a disability conference at Lambeth Palace. What some might see as constraints God has worked through to do amazing things. We are encouraged to live life to the full and to challenge ourselves, but we shouldn't be anxious that God asks of us things we feel unable to do. God created us and calls us – just as we are.

So too we are not called to just one role in life. We may be called to be a teacher, and then later in life, to be a dancer. We may be called to be a father, but also a son. We may be called to be a singer, but also a carer. As I've found, I may be called to be a priest, but also a wife and a mother.

But whilst God doesn't call us to be someone different to the person he created us to be – we may be surprised and challenged by what God does ask of us. Sometimes God calls us to do and be, more than we thought possible, but in his strength we find that it is possible. When Oscar Romero was chosen to be archbishop in an unsettled and deeply divided Latin America, he was chosen because they thought that as a quiet, scholarly pastor, he would keep his head down and not cause any trouble. Surely this introvert priest would not upset the corrupt elite and their death squads. But Romero quickly realised that his role required that he speak out for the poor and downtrodden, giving them a voice where before they had been silenced. He persisted and persevered in the face of threats and persecution, and in the end, Oscar Romero was martyred as he presided at HC. I am sure that he would not have thought himself strong enough, brave enough to do what he did. But in God's strength he challenged the corruption and the injustice of his society and he died for God and for his people.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.oxford.anglican.org/katie-tupling/>

<sup>2</sup> This is our calling, Ed Charles Richardson

John the Baptist, in being named John, was shown to be set apart for a distinct and important role, proclaiming the coming of God to earth. We may not be called to such an illustrious role, but God has created and called each of us by name. He has set us apart for that which we are called to do. It is up to us to discern where God is calling us in life, and to have the courage and the faith to follow that calling, in God's strength.