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# The Name of Jesus

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**Text: Luke 2:21**

In the second act of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet remarks, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." I'm sure that on one level she is quite right. And yet, at the risk of challenging the great bard of Stratford, I would (for the most part) have to disagree with him.

"What's in a name?" Juliet is right; names are meaningless aside from their attachment to a thing or person. But once that happens, the name takes on life; it takes for itself the essence of that to which it has been joined.

For the first three days of her young life our daughter was officially designated with the generic term, "Baby Pryse". She was nameless because her parents couldn't decide what to name her! It was an important decision. We wanted to choose a name that would be just right for her. Once the name was chosen, it began to live. It carried a power that didn't exist so long as it was only a word in the "name the baby" book.

Names are precious. Twenty eight years ago a young Inuit was taken away from the north for tuberculosis treatment and never returned. Aside from the pain of being torn away from his family, his people, his roots, the greatest indignity done to him was the taking of his name. His birth certificate reads E7-1411. A terrible thing; what a monumental assault upon his person.

Names *are* important. This is a truth acknowledged by today's festival commemorating the *Name* of Jesus.

Luke informs us that the name Jesus was given by the angel even before our Lord was conceived in the womb. It was chosen, tailored, specifically for him. Taken literally, the name means "Yahweh saves". And given the fact that the whole purpose of God reached its climax in the incarnation of Jesus, it is quite natural that his name would suggest the purpose for which he had come.

What a name means to us is very much shaped by our experience with the one who bears that name. Some names are detested: Judas, Jezebel, Hitler, Stalin. When you're naming a child you immediately discount some names because they are the names of persons whom you've disliked in the past. The British royal family, for instance, won't name a male child John because of the evil associations with King John of the Magna Carta era.

Of course, the opposite can also be true. Certain names make us feel good and carry pleasant thoughts. The name Jeanette, for example, always conjures up the image of a lost love: the girl who sat beside me in the first grade! French Canadian names like Jacques or Jean carry me back to distant Saturday nights when freshly scrubbed I would watch the "Flying Frenchmen" do their hockey magic, live from the Forum!

But no name, I would hazard to guess, is so loved as that of Jesus. Thumb through the hymnal sometime and see how many hymns speak of the love of Jesus. "Jesus still lead on"; "At the Name of Jesus"; "Jesus thy boundless love to me". Or step into any Sunday School and listen to the children speak and sing of their love for Jesus.

One Christmas a little girl in a parish I once served did a remarkable thing. She took her dolly, hitherto named Mary or Maggie, and renamed it Jesus for the Christmas season. Aside from her parents' quite natural shock at finding out that they were now the proud parents of a God, it was a beautiful gesture, one that speaks profoundly of the power of Jesus and of his Name in the life of this little soul.

But we can also use names in bad ways. Names carry power—power that can be used for good and for bad. Your own name can be used in destructive ways that hurt, that tear you down and make you small. Or it can be used well in ways that bless you, build you up and make you large. A name is a precious thing and needs to be treated with care and respect.

“You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain ... but call upon God in prayer, praise, and thanksgiving.” Jesus’ name is no different from our own names. It too needs to be used properly, used well. There is great power in the Name itself and where his Name is used in blessing, he is present in blessing.

This is a fact the Christian church takes very seriously. I once had a confirmation class do a little exercise in which they were instructed to go through our Sunday liturgy and count the number of references to Christ, either as Jesus or Lord. What would you guess, ten, fifteen, twenty? We stopped counting when we passed fifty, and that didn’t include all the references in the hymns, lessons, and sermon. On a standard Sunday morning we use the Name of Jesus well over 100 times in our worship!

Two thousand years of Christian worship and religious experience have taught us that there is power in the Name of Jesus. For Eastern Christians of the Orthodox communions this power is acknowledged through the so-called Jesus prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.” That prayer, or a similar one such as “Come Lord Jesus” is repeated inwardly over and over and over again. It is a technique so simple as to be accessible to all, and yet it is so penetrating as to open us up to the deepest mysteries of the contemplative life.

Prayers don’t need to be wordy or preachy to be effective. In fact, more often than not the opposite is true! The power of this prayer does not reside in its content, which is simple and clear, but rather in the Holy Name of Jesus itself. In that Name is Jesus’ own power, and through the repetition of that Name the power which Christ has bestowed upon our hearts is communicated anew. “The light of the name of Jesus pours through the heart to irradiate the universe, a foretaste of that final transfiguration in which God shall be all in all.”

And why shouldn’t that be the case? Did not our Lord promise that “whatever we ask in his name would be given”? Did not the apostles say, “In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, rise up and walk”? Did Paul not tell us that the Name of Jesus was above any on earth and that at that Name all knees should bow and every tongue confess that Christ is indeed Lord?

Charles Wrigley of chewing gum fame had a motto: "Say it simply and say it often." As Christians we have a message that needs to be shared and I can think of no better way to share it than through the Name of Jesus, the Name of Jesus said simply and said often. Our world needs to hear that Name, needs to be claimed in that Name, needs to be blessed and healed in that Name, and we are the ones to do it, for we have been blessed and healed ourselves by that Name.

Today we begin a New Year. The old has ended and under our breath we utter a quiet benediction, "Thank God!" My guess is that most of us are worn out, feeling like our faith got lost somewhere between the Christmas party and the tenth chorus of "Auld Lang Synne". If so, let me offer a simple remedy, the Name of Jesus.

If the year ahead is to be a really *new* year and not just another year, we need to ring out the darkness that is and ring in the light, the Christ, that is to be. Lord Tennyson, in his famous New Year poem, knew that victory over falsehood and strife was contingent upon the enthronement of Jesus in the lives and hopes of humanity: "Name of Jesus, softly stealing ... o'er a world of strife and shame ... Thou canst bring us heavenly healing, O thou all-restoring Name."

There you have a resolution that is good and achievable. The Name of Jesus. Use it well; use it simply; use it often!