

December 22, 2013 What's in a Name Homily

In the not too distant past it was not uncommon for a couple anticipating the birth of their first child to purchase a book entitled "List of Popular Names". Included in the handy reference book are common names from which a couple might choose and the origin and meaning of each name as well'. For example, the name "Jesus" is derived from the Hebrew and means "God saves" The name expresses both the identity of Jesus as savior and his mission, which is to "save his people from their sins" (Mt. 1:21). The name of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah is telling. It means "salvation of the Lord"

How times have changed! Recently a young celebrity in California had a child with a young man whose surname is "West" Do you know what she named her baby? North, North West! And I'm sure if she gives birth to a second child the baby will be named South. South West! And we know of a celebrity in New York who named her child "Apple"; and I can only imagine what she says to the child when she misbehaves: "You rotten apple!" Right, you know it! That's our contemporary society. I'll tell you another story about my friend Fr. DeFranco, who passed away at the age of 99 a couple of years ago, and his grandnephew, Michael. After Michael's wife had given birth to their first child, Fr. DiFranco asked Michael what name he and his wife had given their child? Michael replied, "We named our child 'Jordan'." Fr. was so excited "Oh you named your child after the Jordan River where Jesus was baptized". Michael replied, no we named our child after Michael Jordan!

Keep in mind that naming a child in the biblical world was not without significance. The name often said something about the parents hope for the newborn child. Even Heaven sometimes intervened in the naming of the child, for example, John the Baptist. The mother of the Baptist fully expected her child to be named after his father, Zechariah, a priest of the temple. God had other plans. Heaven intervened and insisted that the child be named John, which means "God is Gracious." But here in our Gospel reading today we have a very, very important point to be made. In the writings of the evangelist St. Matthew it is clear that Jesus is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. He is the one foretold by the prophets of the Old Testament to bring peace and deliverance to the Jewish people.

Now in the book of the prophet Isaiah we were told about a virgin who would conceive and bear a son and that the child should be named "Emmanuel", which means "God is with us". God is no longer above us but God is with us. It is interesting to note that at the end of Matthew's gospel the risen Lord says to his disciples, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." And how does the Priest greet his congregation at the very beginning of Mass? He says "the Lord be with you." The Lord indeed is with us.

So this is a time of fulfillment. Jesus is with us forever, and that's what we celebrate here today. Emmanuel is a prayer, a hope, a blessing, a fact! And let us hope that we see the significance of a name.

In the past, naming a child was often a response to a favor received by God, some years ago a woman I know was desperate for a child since she could never conceive. Well, out of the blue, she received a phone call one day from a woman she had met in Indiana. And through this woman in Indiana she was able to adopt a child. So overcome with gratitude and emotion was the woman that she named her child Bernadette in honor of the Blessed Mother.

And so, let us recognize in scripture the significance, and importance of a name. I have one last story to tell you about a name. Many years ago while visiting one of my parishioners at Ellis Hospital in Schenectady a young, college aged woman entered the room and the patient, Mrs. Tessitore said to me, "Oh, here is my rosebud!" Thinking that the young woman was a graduate of Saint Rose, I said to her "Oh! So you're a graduate of Saint Rose. You're a Rosebud" In response, the young woman snarled, "that's my name"! Oops!

And so as Christmas draws near, let us remember the name of Jesus Christ. He is a savior and our Lord He is God and he is with us forever!

Amen