

Sermon – St John Baptist Patronal - Sunday 27 June 2021

Luke 1:57-66,80

What's in a name?



What do 'Moon Unit', 'Dweezil' and 'Diva Muffin' have in common? They are all first names of the children of rock star Frank Zappa! But I wonder if the children were happy with their names when they grew up? Names are important; they identify us and we try hard to remember a person's name when we speak to them,

it gives them value and respect and if names are incorrectly said or chosen lightly it can be problematic. We can all think of names or initials which can prove awkward for a kid growing up, and of course there was Johnny Cash's 1969 hit song, 'A boy called Sue.' Names also have meanings in religious faith and culture and often parents take a lot of time choosing a name for their child because of this and other reasons. Early on in Luke's gospel, we meet a couple who also have baby naming challenges, Elizabeth and Zachariah. They are contemporaries of Mary & Joseph, and are God-fearing folk, but have reputational damage. In ancient tribal culture, where life spans were shorter and there was no health care or hospitals, part of a husband and wife's duty was to safeguard the future of the tribe/family by producing as many children as possible, given mortality rates. Those who failed in this duty were scorned by their community; many saw it as a punishment from God if someone was childless. A man could take another wife if his first was barren.

So we begin to understand a little of the context in which we find Elizabeth and Zachariah. They have no children and no hope of having children because they are now well advanced in years. Zachariah could have divorced Elizabeth but they love each other and despite communal disdain have remained together. They are devout in their faith and Zachariah serves as a priest in the temple, being rota'd for duty from time to time. Have you ever prepared a church rota? Scholars tell us Zechariah is just one of 18,000 priests who could be drafted for a week's duty in the temple at Jerusalem. Try doing that rota without a computer, email or telephone! But not only is it his week to serve in Jerusalem, the priests cast lots to select someone to go into the 'Holy of Holies' and offer incense to God. It falls to Zachariah, a once in a lifetime occurrence, and the priestly equivalent of winning the lottery!

It is while he is ministering before God in the inner sanctum that the angel Gabriel, God's messenger, appears to him: *'Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.'* (Luke 1:11) To the news Gabriel brings however, Zechariah is incredulous.

He does the first-century equivalent of a Victor Meldrew, 'I don't believe it!' or as The Message translation puts it "*Do you expect me to believe this? I'm an old man and my wife is an old woman!*" (Luke 1:18). And yet we know this is something he and Elizabeth have prayed for, longed for, and thought they would never see. As they grew old, any hope of children would have faded and seemed impossible - like expecting streams in the desert. But what is impossible for us is not for God. The right time has finally come, it was just that Zachariah had given up believing he would see it. Might we resonate with how Zechariah and Elizabeth felt? Advanced in years, sceptical, feel we're beyond seeing God's goodness at work visibly around us, like there's nothing new under the sun? Zechariah, a priest of the Lord who is supposed to be an example to others, is struck dumb until such time he can believe God's promise. This occurs after his son is born and he names his son contrary to tradition and expectation (which suggested Zachariah, like his father). Instead the baby is named John, which means *God is Gracious*. Towards the end of their years, God was gracious to Zechariah and Elizabeth, but also gracious to Israel because it was John who was first to proclaim the good news of the arrival of God's kingdom through Jesus.

So where does that leave us? Firstly it begs of us the question, what is defining us? In Dylan Thomas play, 'Under Milk Wood' the character of the 'Wife' is obsessed with her standing in the community, '*What'll the neighbours say?*' she repeatedly cries. Zachariah and Elizabeth were also defined by cultural expectation. Felt ashamed and disappointed, humiliated, an

embarrassment to their community. What defines us - what the neighbours say? Academic accomplishment? Wealth? School or social peers? Our Job? Having children? Or even our role in church? John = *God is gracious*. Grace frees us from the encumbrance of defining ourselves by earthly values, and reminds us the only approval we need is God's. God is gracious in that he already loves us and has given himself for us. What defines us is that we are first and foremost God's sons and daughters, eternally loved by the King of Kings. Secondly, this passage challenges us that God's plans are not limited to the horizon of our sightline and that he has both our good, and the greater good, always in mind. Zachariah means *God has remembered* or *He will laugh*. Elizabeth means *God is my Promise* or *My God is bountiful*. Even their own names hinted to them what God was going to do! But they are so absorbed in their own circumstances and social bubble they forgot that God can do immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine (Eph 3:20,21). In His wondrous plan, he can accomplish what's best for us, at the same time as working for the restoration of humanity through the arrival of John and Jesus. Elizabeth and Zechariah are in the Bible because they faced life's disappointments and perhaps in common with us they felt there was no way that would change. But God did more than they could ask or imagine, and made streams in the desert, an oasis in the wilderness (Isa 43:19). Today, the one who is the '*name above all names*' (Phil 2:9) calls us by name to serve and follow him and place our faith in him: '*Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine.*' (Isa 43:1).

Sage Moonblood Stallone (boy)

Born: May 5, 1976

Parents: Sylvester Stallone and Sasha Czack

Peaches Honeyblossom Michelle Charlotte Angel Vanessa Geldorf(girl)

Born: March 16, 1989

Parents: Bob Geldof and Paula Yates

Kim Kardashian and Kanye West's world as their first born daughter North West

Pilot Inspektor (son of Jason Lee)

Blanket (Jackson, son of Michael Jackson)

Conclusion:

Name – 'I have called you by name'. Names speak something of person 'you are precious, bought with a price'