

What will this Child Become?

*Birth of John the Baptist, Luke 1:57-66, 80; Stoke D'Abernon,
23.6.19*

'Ella, Arman, Sean, Hazel, Katie, Amalie, Ava-Marie, Monique, Maria, God has called you by name and made you his own... Confirm, O Lord, your servant with your Holy Spirit'.

It's one of the greatest privileges of being a Bishop: the chance to affirm both the name and the calling of a confirmation candidate before anointing them with oil, placing my hands on their heads, and praying for the Spirit to come upon them afresh. In one sense, we might think, it *wasn't* God who first called them by name: it was probably their parents, or maybe an older sibling, or a rather formidable grandmother who first bent over the cot and said, 'I think we ought to call her Ella: she looks like an Ella'. But however it came about, the name of a person – and the individuality that name represents – has deep significance, as expressed so clearly in holy baptism and the rite of confirmation that succeeds it.

So how do we go about choosing a name? Do we choose it for its sound, perhaps, or its meaning, or its family connotations? Or do we choose it following a long period of research, poring our way through half a dozen books of names we've borrowed from the library, drawing up long lists and short lists before finally plumping for our favourite?

My wife and I, perhaps predictably, went for Biblical names for all of our children, and it was the character and faith of the Hannah and Samuel, the Joseph and Lydia in the Bible that helped swing it for us. Living with us for a few months was a family with *five* children – and yes, that was quite a squash in our three-bedroom house in Notting Hill - and Dominic and Elisa had chosen a Celtic theme reflecting their deep love of Cornwall: Bryher, Perran, Tegen, Arthur and Columba; indeed, the parents among us will know Bryher's face from when she was a small child, because until recently she was the girl on the Calpol bottle!

The *meaning* of names is significant too: the name 'Godfrey', for example, means 'God's peace', while the name 'Andrew' means 'manly'. And *families* often have names too, sometimes of a rather embarrassing nature, that pass from one generation to another - an old history teacher of mine, for example, whose first name was the innocuous Simon, but whose second was the embarrassing Flowerdew: now just imagine how *that* went down in the cruel world of a secondary school history class!

And Zechariah and Elizabeth in this evening's reading were spared the need of choosing a name for their child: because in *this* boy's case, God had indeed called him by name and made him his own, and in the most literal way possible. As we read earlier in Luke chapter 1, '*Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear a son, and you will name him John*'. The shock of it all had been too much for Zechariah, not least given the advanced age of both he and his wife - and the result was

a temporary muteness: he was struck dumb for the full nine months of Elizabeth's pregnancy.

When the baby finally arrived, the family expectation was clear, as that formidable grandmother bent over the cot. The boy should be called Zechariah like his father: that's how they'd always done it in the family; instead of which Elizabeth insisted on the name John. The relatives began 'motioning to the father', we then read, perhaps forgetting that he was mute but not deaf (indeed that remains the experience of many disabled people today, when those around them confuse one condition for another, often leading to the most awkward and patronising of exchanges). So Zechariah took his slate. He wrote the words, 'His name is John'. And then he opened his mouth for the first time in nine months and, filled with the Spirit, proclaimed the beautiful words of the Benedictus, *'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel who has come to his people and set them free'*.

For Luke, who tells the story, Zechariah was a symbol of the voice of prophecy in his day – a voice that, as the rabbis agreed, had fallen silent not just for nine months, but for hundreds of years. But *now* the waiting was over; now the days of the Messiah foreseen by the prophets were finally on their way; now prophecy was back! And the moment Luke leaves the story of John, he takes up the story of another baby whose name was chosen by God Himself: but *that* story will have to wait a while: it's still 180 more shopping days till Christmas!

So why John? What does the name signify? Along with the name 'Sean', it's the shortened form of the name Jehohanan, which means 'God's gracious gift'. In John, and in Jesus, whose name means 'Saviour', the themes of God and grace and gift and salvation are all combined – the themes that have brought us together this evening, as God's grace and gift and salvation are expressed through word and sacrament, and through the worship and fellowship of all God's people.

There's one haunting question, though that especially stands out for me in our gospel reading this morning - the words of the villagers as they hear of the extraordinary circumstances of John's birth. And here's the question: 'What then will this child become?'

It's something in which you and I might have sometimes shared, as we've held the latest addition to our family, and to the human race, in our arms: 'What will this child become?' It's a question that speaks of potential – of the extraordinary promise contained within this 5 or 7 or 9 pounds of living, breathing, noisy, messy, vulnerable humanity. What shall we call him? That's generally up to the parents at the end of the day, who have six weeks to make up their minds before formally registering the birth. But 'what will this child become?' Now, that's likely to take a lifetime to unfold. And the parents have a significant role in that becoming, of course, and so do the extended family and the wider community, and the church and the education system. But most importantly of all, what this child *becomes* will rest on the decisions, the moral choices, the

abilities, the ambitions, hopes and dreams of the child him or herself, in the years and decades to come.

We know, of course, what *this* child became. John, the son of Elizabeth and Zechariah, became a prophet and preacher, sparking a religious revival, as thousands of Jews responded to his invitation to enter the desert and be baptised in the River Jordan; and yes, he became a scapegoat, a martyr, the victim of a king's lust and a queen's anger and a princess' dirty dancing. If Zechariah and Elizabeth and the well-wishers who surrounded them, had been given an immediate answer to the question, 'What will this child become?' they would have been very proud, and very thoughtful, and sad as well.

But how about us, young and older, who are still in the process of 'becoming', or at least should be? How about us, who as St. Paul writes are 'children of God through faith', who are being 'transformed from one degree of glory to another'? What will *this* child become?

There's a tendency among some people – especially apparently 'successful' people – to feel that somehow they've arrived and that their becoming is behind them. They've already made up their minds about the most important things in life. They've settled into a routine that is secure and comfortable, if not exactly adventurous. They've come to a fixed view about faith and where they stand in relation to it; and any sense of 'becoming' beyond the desire to climb a little higher up the greasy pole, or improve their

golf handicap, belongs firmly to the past, and not to the present or the future. After all, 'You can't teach an old dog new tricks', they say with complacency in their voices, especially if the old tricks still seem to be working pretty well.

For those who are apparently less successful, the situation is different. Life's been a disappointment, frankly – it's not lived up to their expectations. Maybe *they've* not lived up to their expectations either. But now the years have somehow slipped past, and a sense of fatalism has crept in, so that the idea of 'becoming' something different looks like wishful thinking, unless perhaps they bring it on with a classic mid-life crisis: buying a boat, perhaps, or – more damagingly – walking out on their family.

But here's the thing, for our confirmation candidates tonight, and here's the thing for each one of us – that whenever Jesus calls us by name, it's always because there's more 'becoming' to do: that however young or old we are, however raw or well-seasoned, we've not arrived; in fact, perhaps we've hardly started. The Christian adventure is both life-giving and lifelong – that's been the experience of countless generations of Jesus' disciples – and I've met many of them over the years, sometimes people in their eighties and nineties still fresh, still learning, still growing, becoming more faith-filled and loving and wise and peaceful and prayerful with every passing day. And may I, may you, one day be among them!

'What will *this* child become?' It's a great question to ask of our confirmation candidates this evening: for this service isn't just a piece of Anglican ritual, a rite of passage, a passing out parade: this service packs a spiritual punch, and make no mistake about it. Yet God hasn't gathered us together tonight to administer a spiritual punch to just nine people. He has gathered us to explore together what each of us is becoming and what we *might* become, were we to place our lives and our gifts and our hopes and dreams and ambitions into his hands afresh. God has called us by name and made us his own. May you, may I, be confirmed in our faith this night, and filled afresh with the Spirit of God, that we might reach our fullest potential as sons and daughters of the King of Kings. Amen.