

Sermon for 1 January 2023
The Holy Name of Jesus (The Octave of Christmas)

Numbers 6: 22 – 27; Galatians 4: 4 – 7; Luke 2: 15 – 21

“But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.”
Words from our gospel reading, Luke Chapter 2, verse 19.

May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today might seem a natural time for a fresh start. The small number crowded around the cheese and wine in my kitchen last night certainly thought so — we discussed new year’s resolutions in that inevitable way of New Year’s Eve. But it’s worth remembering that the Gregorian New Year we celebrate is a little unnatural in the overall arc of human, and particularly agrarian human, existence.

Christmas, which we kept a week ago, falls on the 25th of December not because it is piggybacking on pre-Christian, pagan mid-winter celebrations local to these isles, nor because it is sharing a season with the ancient Roman feast of Saturnalia, but because it falls, quite simply, nine months after the Feast of the Annunciation.

The Annunciation is celebrated on March 25th each year, marking the conception of Jesus in the womb of Mary. This feast, also known as Lady Day, was for early Christians the much more obvious beginning of the year, a time when the earth comes back to life, when insects and flowers reappear, when the air is warmed and the privations of winter are finally over, and people began to plant for a new round of growing and harvesting. A proper fresh start, full of hope and renewal. Our tax year begins at the same time for just this reason: not that taxation fills us with hope and renewal, but because our year once began on Lady Day, and the transfer of systems from Julian to Gregorian calendars shifted the date from March 25th to April 6th.

Our lovely children's church made Annunciation pictures a few weeks ago, and one example showed expressions of surprise on the faces of both angel and Holy Mother. They looked simple and ancient and quite unnerving, like those on figures in a cave painting: a terrific depiction of the shock of that great event, like the coming of the first spring. The angel, faced with she who ranks above all angels, the future Mother of God; and the virgin, surprised too -- but not speechless, and certainly not unwilling.

A week has now passed since we celebrated the outworking of that message in the birth of God's son. Of course, when we celebrate Jesus' birthday we know that the date is wrong -- but this doesn't matter. We mark our seasons in the way we have done by long tradition, and this gives shape to our year. So now we keep a feast called the Most Holy Name of Jesus, marking the day he would have been circumcised as a child of observant Jews. Our gospel describes it succinctly: "After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb."

The naming of a child is serious business nowadays. It is three and a half years since I last had to do it, but the memory is very fresh, because let's just say I got a little caught up in trying to find the perfect name. The data on names is, thanks to the internet, an essentially bottomless rabbit-hole. I won't go into it here, but I will say that it sounds very relaxing to have an angel make those decisions for you. Jesus had *his* name before he was even conceived; Mary didn't have to spend even a minute considering whether the family would like it.

A good thing, too: she is occupied with more important matters. Unlike the shepherds, who rush off to proclaim the good news everywhere and even come back rejoicing, Mary is a silent, thoughtful recipient of the angel's pronouncements. A new baby is all-consuming, but also, she knows who this baby is, and something of his purpose.

When Luke writes that Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart, those "words" are in the sense of "be it unto me

according to thy word” - we might include in our broad understanding of this word the idea of “commands” or “matters”. A week beyond Christmas, there is that question not only of how we will take the Christmas message into our own lives, but whether or not we should make New Year’s resolutions, which after all are attempts to change and better ourselves in some way. Perhaps, in a world that runs faster than is good for us at times, the simplicity of Mary should be our pattern. She does not make lists of things to do. She gazes at the Christ child with love, and ponders all these things in her heart.

So often our resolutions, no matter how noble or health-conscious, are really outward-facing, for the benefit of other people. Get fit, or lose weight; learn a language; read a certain number of books by next January - how many times are these laudable ambitions motivated by a desire to please or impress someone else?

Perhaps we ought to be motivated not by outcome, but by virtue; not by lists of achievement, but by what is in the heart. Let this year be one in which we, like Mary, place Christ at the centre of our being, making a place for him in our hearts, a holy dwelling within our selves. Let us, like Christian pre-teens of the early 2000s wearing stretchy rubber bracelets, ask ourselves, “What would Jesus do?” Or, perhaps more wisely, “What would Jesus have *me* do in this one life I have been given?”

If we keep Christ at our centre, his love will shine through us, in our virtues and our actions. This is not a fluffy message of bland or unthinking niceness to all. Jesus was angry at injustice, and impatient for the coming of the kingdom; what our Lord would have us each do is often difficult and inconvenient. The message of the Christ child is a message of demanding, difficult love for and in a world that rejects such things. It is a message of selflessness, an insistence on loving others despite all odds. It is a message of peace, which can be the hardest thing to achieve among messy, frustrating humans, and within our own families, and especially within our own turbulent hearts.

The Holy Name of Jesus is not a bad theme for the year. It is better than a list. If we, like Mary, ponder it in our hearts, we may find we don’t need

resolutions after all. The star that led us to Bethlehem is the Daystar who has come among us in human flesh. He is with us, and he is for us. Christ's quiet voice demands that we follow, and it has the power to conquer all our fears. So let us keep his holy name today, and always, and ponder all these things in our hearts.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, amen.