



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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Sunday, January 1, 2006

The Feast of the Holy Name

Festal Eucharist

at 11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Victor Lee Austin
on
Luke 2:15-21

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A SERMON FOR THE FEAST OF THE HOLY NAME

This is a feast of the fulfilling of the Law, and with the Law, all things. The Law prescribed that on the 8th day a male child would be circumcised. There is nothing about Jesus that is a rejection of his heritage; everything about Jesus speaks to the most perfect fidelity to the Law. As an adult, launched onto the stage of history, Jesus will make it explicit: *Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil.* His teaching will be a decisive summation: *Hear, O Israel, thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind and with all thy strength. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like unto it: thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.* Yes, he will summarize, definitively, and in doing so republish the Law, showing authoritatively what the heart of the Law really is. *You have heard it said, Thou shalt not murder. But I say unto you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment.* So he taught, decisively recapitulating the tradition, both fulfilling it and interpreting it for the new creation of which he was the firstborn. That tradition, that Law, marked his life all the way to the end: it was in fulfilment of all that had been promised that he was lifted upon the tree of the cross to breathe and bleed his last. Today, in token of all that is to come, he receives the mark in his flesh, his circumcision.

And at that time he was given his name. It was a name pronounced nine months earlier by the angel Gabriel when she brought Mary news that she, a virgin, would conceive and give birth to him, the Son of God. It means “The Lord saves.” To say his name is, in a way, to speak a very short creed. “Jesus” means “God is savior”: but Jesus also himself is called Savior: So Jesus as both “Son of God” and “God of God” is built right into his name.

To know someone’s name is a great privilege. We can understand this by reflecting upon a phenomenon of our culture. Like all cultural matters, it is not an eternal truth, but a concretion of a particular history, something that did not have to be this way and need not remain this way. In other cultures there are other practices. Still, it seems to me, it is a helpful way to understand the power of a name. The phenomenon is this: in the world, I am properly addressed as “Mr. Austin” or “Dr. Austin.” (I leave aside “Father Austin,” since “Father” is a family word. What I am saying is equally true of every one of you.) But when someone comes to know me, and we come to share a degree of intimate communication, I cease to be “Mr. Austin” and become “Victor.” In this cultural practice (which, again, does not have to be this way, and could easily be different in some other cultural universe—say, California), in this practice when I hear someone

say “Victor” I know that the speaker has a particular claim on me. If I am walking down the street, I must stop and look around to see who it is. If I have just picked up the phone, I must pause and give my attention to the person who has called me by name. My point is this: when you know someone’s name, when you have permission to call on someone by name, then you are able to make claims upon that person.

The incredibly good news is that not only has God sent his Son to be conceived of Mary, born in a stable, receive the worship of shepherds, teach the Law, fulfil the Law, die on the cross, and be raised again: not only all this, but God has given us his name. We know his name. He is no longer “Dr. God” to us: to us, he is Jesus.

Which means, to repeat, “The Lord is savior.” To call on his name is to believe in his name, and that is for what his name means to become true. When Jesus is called upon, Jesus is Jesus; that is to say, in being called upon, Jesus does indeed save; in the speaking of his name, what his name means comes to be. This (perhaps obscure) way of putting it is literally true. Think of what salvation means. Salvation means deliverance from sin. And what is sin? Sin is of course bad stuff, which comes as we know to our cost in quite a wide variety of forms; yet in every form, at its core, sin is the choice of isolation rather than communion. She, and then he, took the fruit that had been forbidden because they would prefer to decide for themselves what is good and evil. It is, in the first generation, the choice of self over God, and in the second, the choice of myself over another. So the blood of Abel is spilt, and the multiplication of alienation spread over the planet, blighting all relationships, personal, political, social, familial, even ecological. It is alienation, sin is: the rejection of communion.

To save the likes of us is to give us back to relationship; and like floundering men and women, struggling to breathe, our nostrils and throats coughing against the cold salt water, near other people but lacking effective communications and unable to do much more than survive for a bit before we succumb to the inevitable last breath and slip down, down into the deep from which no one returns, to us comes down from heaven a flotation device, something to cling to, this Name, this most holy Name. He will not have us be isolated any more. We can call on him and be saved.

He intends to restore us all, not only to communion with him, but to communion with each other, the true communications of the true city of which he is the Law and judge and light. Salvation is neither individual nor social, as we see in the Bread of the Eucharist, which is the Body of Christ: any crumb of it is the whole thing, and yet no piece can be what it is save it subsist in communion with all the others.

Even the Name of Jesus exists not alone. I said earlier that to speak this name is to confess a short creed, because if Jesus is savior, and if “Jesus” means God is savior, then to say “Jesus” is to say “Jesus is God,” and that is to open us up to the Triune Identity. God’s full Name, we are reminded, is “Father, Son, and Holy Ghost”: for God is a communion of being, an integrity of subsistent relations (Grandfather, what big words you use!): God does not start out as a monad, an individual, who then acquires a Son and starts loving him; God is always, was always, always will be, triune: a perfect communion enjoying unimpeded communications. There is no sin there, no darkness, no rejection of relationship.

There he would bring us, we who cling to the life preserver of the name of Jesus: he draws us up, not only to have communion with each other, not only to have communion with Jesus, not only to *have communion with God*: but to *enter* the communion of God, to sing and dwell and rejoice there where the Law—everything—is fulfilled, there in the midst of such glory and beauty as no tongue can tell.

By coincidence, today is not only the feast of the Holy Name, it is also, as we currently reckon things, New Year's Day. To begin this year, return with me, if you will, to solid ground, in fact, to a garden. It is early Sunday morning. A woman is in this garden weeping, because she knows only that the man who answered to the name Jesus has been killed and buried. Her weeping is not only for his death but from her anxiety that she cannot find his body. She is alone, anxious, and sorrowful. A man approaches her, but in her isolation she does not recognize him. He asks her twice why she is weeping, what she seeks. She replies that she is seeking for her Lord, that they have taken him away, that she does not know where he is—and to this stranger she then adds—*if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him*. And then he says her name. He says to her, "Mary." It is the hearing of her own name that restores her to relationship with him (and in fact brings her within the life of the Trinity), for at once, hearing her name, she recognizes him, and now her tears turn to joy. He has spoken (shall we say?) the holy name of Mary.

Your name, too, which God spoke when you were named in baptism: your name, too, is a holy name. It would not be a bad thing, it would not make a bad new year's resolution, to dedicate the year 2006 to the Holy Name, and to remember each day for a moment that the names of the people I meet, the names of the people I communicate with, they too are holy names. Maybe I'll do that this year. Maybe you will.

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.