

June 21 Fourth Sunday After Pentecost

## Who is our God?

Genesis 21.8-21, Psalm 86.1-10; 16-17, Matthew 10.24-39

It is through the power and presence of God in our lives that we can find what we seek: what we seek to have, what we seek to do and what we seek to be.

In times of need, we can call on the name of God, and we trust in the nature of God.

Before we get to the nature of God, let's talk about names. We were given a name at our birth. Some of us acquired other names in our lifetime.

Have you ever been called by a name that is not your legal name? Just think about it for now. What you are called can be about relationship (Mum, Dad, Son, Mate, BFF), appearance (Red, Lofty, Shortie, Goldilocks), actions (Speedy, Thumper, Chatterbox), feelings (Sweetheart, Ace, Rockstar), and much more. These names are not just a label. They tell a story.

Acts 11:26 says, "And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians." This was something completely new. Nobody had ever been called a Christian before.

They were called disciples, believers, saints, brothers and sisters, and followers of "The Way." Then something happened in Antioch that caused the people around them to start using a brand-new term, different from what came before.

The word they chose to describe this was a label that identified to whom these believers belonged.

There is a good chance it was not originally intended as a compliment. Years later, Peter would write, "Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name." Just as an Australian is not just someone who knows about Australia, a Christian is not merely someone who knows about Christ. A Christian is someone who belongs to Christ. And honestly, there are far worse things to be known for.

It is a useful spiritual practice to observe the nature of God as seen in scripture, in our lives and in the lives of others. These observations are often the basis for the many names by which we know God, and the basis for our hopes, if not our certain knowledge of all God's plans.

Let's go back to our categories. Firstly, relationship. We have 3 straight away. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Actions (e.g. forgiving God), Can you name an action of Jesus? Jesus our ... . What about our feelings for God? (beloved God).

You can find many lists online – 100 names for God, top 10 names for God and so on. If we look at today's Psalm (Psalm 86) you will find the basis for many names or attributes of God that we can and do use in prayer.

In this one psalm, we can hear fragments of observation and possible prayers.

God listens, hears and answers. God answers the poor and suffering, preserves the faithful, saves those who trust, is merciful to those who call on the Lord.

We may pray to the God of hope, God of mercy and forgiveness, Lord hear my prayer, Lord answer us when we call, Lord there is none like you, Lord of all, Lord of power and might, Saviour, our help and our strength, Lord of joy and comfort. And that is from just one psalm. Like the psalmist, our prayers and our sharing with others can be rich in our knowledge and experience of God.

Do you have a particular name that you like to use to address God in prayer? [...]

Names tell a story, and refraining from naming can also tell a story. The name Ismael means God hears or God will hear. In today's reading from Genesis, this son of Hagar is not explicitly named. He is named both earlier and later in Genesis, but not in this chapter. However, we do hear a lot about him. We hear about his relationship to Abraham, to Hagar, to Sarah and to God's promises. This child is loved by Abraham. Abraham is stressed and distressed by his seeming fate. This child is loved by God. God makes promises about him that point to life, and not death, to a future of great promise. This is not a promise just to comfort him in a time or a life of abandonment. We are told that God hears him and is with him as he grows up, marries and becomes a great nation.

I am not sure why Ishmael is not named in this chapter, but we can speculate. It may be that this is the point at which he loses his place in the current story. Isaac will be the promise-bearer in the Abraham story. Ishmael becomes an extra, an early distraction, a red herring, a character who does not carry forward the main plotline. He must disappear, or at least diminish, so that the focus comes back to Isaac.

Or perhaps he is not named to indicate that his relationship with God is of greater significance than his personal identity. Perhaps we need to learn that we are safe in God's hands, no matter who we are or what is happening in our lives.

We are not promised a life without problems and troubles, but that God is with us. There is a possible alternative reading for today, instead of this reading from Genesis. The alternative is from Jeremiah 20.7-13. In this reading, Jeremiah is in misery and suffering. He bemoans his problems and cries out that God has deceived him, overpowered him and prevailed over him. Then comes the hinge word, BUT. All looks bleak and hopeless, BUT the Lord is mighty and those who trouble Jeremiah will be defeated. Jeremiah cries out, not after this divine intervention, but in anticipation of it, "Sing to the Lord ! Give praise to the Lord ! He rescues the life of the needy from the hands of the wicked."

We too can sing God's praises, even in the darkest times, because we know God's nature, and can be confident of God's help and salvation.

This brings us to our Gospel reading, teacher and students, master and servants. These are names of roles and relationships. Our relationship with Jesus is of supreme importance. We are to follow him and to learn from him. That relationship transcends all others. Our earthly relationships with father or mother or any other person we have learned from or followed are now secondary. We may still love and honour them, and still learn from them, but now we have a higher calling. And so we say, "Jesus is Lord".

I invite you to think of a favourite hymn [OR 8 am and 11 am, to open your hymn book at random] and see if you can discover a name for God. You might find a name for the Father, a name for Jesus, a name for the Holy Spirit, or some encompassing name for a relationship or characteristic within or beyond the holy trinity. [...]

I encourage you during this week to be observant of the language of your own prayer life, and to venture into a little bold innovation by identifying something different about your understanding of God or your relationship with God and using that in your prayers.

This will not change the eternal and the infinite, but it might open our minds and our hearts to a greater awareness of the greatness of our God.

Let's finish with some words of Jesus from John 14.16-17.

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate/Helper/Comforter, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

**Prayer:** Spirit of Truth, we thank You for being the source of all truth. Continue to speak to our hearts and counsel us when we are confused and need your clarity and your comfort. Remind us of who you are and who you say we are. Amen.

Helen Dean

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