

Sixth Sunday After Pentecost 2019

Dearly Beloved,

Today we mark the sixth Sunday after Pentecost, and, as is the case with so many of the summer Sundays, while the Epistle and Gospel are worthy of meditation, the Collect is a perfect example of Roman brevity and poetry: “O God of strength, possessor of all that is best; infuse into our hearts a love of Thy name, and grant us an increase in the virtue of religion, that Thou may nourish in us the things that are good, and by the zeal of Thy mercy, protect the things which Thou has nourished.” Each phrase of the prayer deserves consideration, but I wish to focus on the first petition: infuse into our hearts a love of Thy name.

But before we love the name of God, we must know it; love always follows upon knowledge; while the Lord can infuse into our hearts a love of His name independent of our knowledge, it makes sense to cooperate with His work in us and come to know His name so that we can love it. Hopefully some of my words will help foster such knowledge and then such love.

First of all, names are important. We may live in a culture in which certain people name their children Blue Ivy and North West, but names still matter. It is a unique aspect of intellectual beings that we not only name the essence and important qualities of a thing, we also give persons individual names. Adam was given the responsibility to name all the animals presented to him, which he named according to their essences, but it was only his wife to whom he gave a personal name. The bestowal of a name is a great privilege and duty, so those of us with beautiful and thoughtful names should thank our parents. And even those of us with less meaningful names should consider how God’s hand was in its bestowal, for His Providence works despite the occasional short-sightedness of man.

Second of all, the exchange of a name is also important. It is a privilege to know someone’s name: it is a significant moment in an introduction between persons, and it is even more meaningful when we are allowed to use a name as a sign of love. Moreover, we don’t use names that others don’t like, unless we don’t like that person, and if someone insists upon a name being used, or drops obvious hints to that effect, we don’t use a different name. We use the name they have given to us or revealed to us. A case in point is my middle brother Michael. Though we called him Mike, our parish priest called him Steve. In the beginning it was funny, because his middle name is James and no one in our family is called Steve, but eventually it became offensive and even hurtful to my brother. He began to think he was not important enough to be called by his proper name.

In the case of God, we could say that the history of mankind is the history of forgetting God’s name, and man’s fabrication of divine names based upon his knowledge or supposed knowledge of God. In response to this folly of man, God revealed His name first to His chosen people, the Jews, and then revealed it to all mankind in the person of Jesus. The most important thing that Christ revealed to the world was the Trinity of persons in God, and that is, in a very real way, a matter of revealing their names. By knowing their names, we know something about their persons, and theology is, with the help of Scripture, a contemplation of those names. Thus we should strive to know the names of the three divine persons, and then use them lovingly.

Father is the name of the first person of the Holy Trinity. Though it is rarely used in the Old Testament, Jesus clearly taught us to call God Father, both in His own prayer and conversation with the Father, and in the way He instructed us to pray. St. Paul also says that the gift of the Holy Spirit moves us to cry out, Abba, Father, just as Jesus did in His earthly life. The name of Father is a fitting name, since He is the origin of other two persons, and the Father loves the name because it gives proper honor to His Son and acknowledges that He is divine and worthy of adoration. Thus a religion which purposefully avoids the name Father and does so to deny the divinity of the Son is in error, and insofar as it chooses to be in error, is offensive to the Father.

In our relationship with God, however, Father can be a difficult name for us to love, since our experience of God the Father is so colored by our experience of our human fathers. If our fathers have been absent, cruel, harsh, dismissive, or cowardly, we think of God the Father in the same way. Yet it is not so—He is Father in the fullest sense of the word and all that we would wish of a father: present, encouraging, protective, courageous, generous. Perhaps the best Scriptural verse to help our understanding of this is Jeremiah 29: “I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope...you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me; when you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you, says the Lord.” We should think of the Father as providential: He knows the plans He has for us, which are for good and not evil, and He will make them come to pass, not by forcing us, but by our free cooperation. And it is not like the father who wants his son to do exactly what he did for a living, no matter what gifts or desires the son has; this Father is divine, and therefore whatever desires He has for us to be like Him are such that cannot but fulfill the desires of our heart: He is good, holy, eternal, happy, and He wishes us to be like Him forever.

Jesus is also the one who gave us the name of the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. His name is, in a way, more generic than Father, for all three persons are holy, and all three are immaterial or spiritual. Nevertheless, the name is personal, for, as St. Augustine explains, the Holy Spirit has such a name because He proceeds from both the Father and the Son, and therefore since He belongs to both, He bears a name from what is common to both persons.

The name of the Holy Spirit can also be considered in His relation to us, for He both makes us holy by His presence and grace and He inspires us by moving our minds and hearts. St. Thomas Aquinas explains that He moves us particularly in terms of the virtue of charity, since He Himself proceeds as the mutual love of the Father and the Son. Thus, if we wish to love God, we should love the name of the Holy Spirit, who moves us to love the Holy Trinity and to delight in His love for us. And to love His name, as with the Father, is to ask Him to do in us what His name denotes.

And then there is the name Jesus. In way, though the names of Father, Son and Holy Spirit represent greater intimacy between us and God, the name Jesus is the name we should love most, for it is the name of Our Savior. If He had revealed to us the truth of God but not died for us, we would be the most pitiable of men. Instead, through His blood, we have the knowledge of God and the power to live with that God forever.

In today's Church, we could rightly say there is a certain embarrassment over Jesus' person, and therefore His name, and so all the more reason we should love that name. We should all intuitively groan with St. Bernard and say, "If you write, I do not enjoy your writing unless I read there the name of Jesus. If you teach me, or converse with me, I do not delight in your words, unless I hear you say the name of Jesus."

And what does Jesus mean? It means, the Lord saves. And if the Lord saves, you want to be in need of saving and desire to be saved. When Jesus says in the Gospel that He is Physician and Shepherd and that He has to heal the sick and find the lost, we should desire to be sick and lost. Unlike the pharisees and scribes, we should admit that we are sick and lost so Jesus can minister to us. Unlike today's world, we should admit we are in need of salvation, so the Savior can save us. The current debate over the morals of sexuality and marriage boil down to the question: are we, as a race, in need of salvation or not? If we are born a certain way and cannot change it, and there is no one who can help us live better lives, then what need do we have of Jesus? But if we are fallen and broken and weak, then we need a Savior and delight in Him. At the end of the world, which we seem to be approaching, things will be simpler; we already see a sharper delineation of good and evil and that will only intensify. In the end, there will be two types of people: those who know they are sinners and wish to be saved; and those who say they need no Savior, and even worse, that they don't want one. "The kings of the earth stood up, and the princes met together, against the Lord and against his Christ. Let us break their bonds asunder: and let us cast away their yoke from us."

So how can we love the name of Jesus? Not only by saying it reverently and never using it in vain, but by wishing to be saved. To admit that we have parts of us that are wounded and in need of healing; and if we think we have no wounds, to at least confess the wound of pride. The more we realize our need for salvation, the more we will honor and love the name of Jesus, for the Lord saves, and we are they whom we saves.

"O God of strength, possessor of all that is best; infuse into our hearts a love of Thy name, and grant us an increase in the virtue of religion, that Thou may nourish in us the things that are good, and by the zeal of Thy mercy, protect the things which Thou has nourished." May our prayer be heard, and may we thus come to be counted among those who are saved by the blood of the Lamb and thus worthy to enter the New Jerusalem, and praise and thank the Father, Son and Holy Spirit for all eternity.