

By Father Charles Bowes

Num 6:22-27

Gal 4:4-7

Luke 2:16-21

Jesus is our way to the Father.

Names are important. All of us like to be called by our names.

It indicates recognition and even friendship. We are annoyed when someone gets our name wrong. We are embarrassed when we do not know or forget the name of someone we should know. When others make fun of our name or deliberately mispronounce it, we are insulted. In many cultures, including the biblical, names have even greater meaning than in our own. They may reflect the hopes that the parents had when the child was born, or the admiration that they had for an ancestor or relative or friend, or some personal characteristic that they perceived in the infant.

January 1st is New Year's Day. In the church calendar, it is also called the Octave of Christmas, the Solemnity of Mary the Mother of God, and the World Day of Peace. One theme that runs through all the Scripture readings is the "name." Thus, we honor Mary as Mother of God and the name of her son.

According to Luke 2:21, Jesus was circumcised and received the name Yeshua eight days after his birth. The name is a form of Joshua ("Yehoshua") and derives from the Hebrew verb yashah ("save"). It means "Yahweh saves." Implicit in this name in the Old Testament context is the theological claim that

the creator God, the lord and sustainer of all, has entered into human history, established a special relationship with a people and promised to save them from their enemies.

Jesus seems to have had a special name for Yahweh, the God of Israel. That name was "Abba," an Aramaic word and meaning "daddy." It is how young children address their fathers in the streets of Jerusalem today. Many sayings in the Gospels suggest that Jesus thought of and addressed God as Abba, and invited his followers to do likewise. In its historical context, the title implies personal relationship, dependence and respect.

I learned the meaning of "Abba" for God the Father from a classmate of mine at Hebrew Union College many years ago. My classmate was a married rabbi in his late twenties, and I was a seminarian studying for the Catholic priesthood. During exam time, we studied late into the night at the college library. As a result, the rabbi had been unable to see his children until the afternoon after our final exams. He and I walked together into the concrete parking garage of the college, and there from one end of it came two small boys rushing as fast as they could, their voices echoing through the low ceiling. "Abba, Abba, Abba," they cried

as they flung themselves into his arms. And he swept them up into his embrace. They were so glad to see their “Abba,” their “daddy.” It was then that I understood the radical character of the name Jesus gave to God, his God and our God – a name so intimate and personal and tender – a name we can all employ in prayer and faith.

It brings to mind Saint Augustine’s wonderful expression, “God loves each of us as if there’s only one of us,” like a daddy loves his child.

We believe that, through Jesus, we have been freed from the dominion of sin, death and the Law, and freed for life in the Spirit. We believe that “God saves” us in and through Jesus. His name accurately reflects what we believe about the one who bears it and reveals to us the Father, the “Abba,” the intimate God, the daddy we call upon forever.

The name of Mary, Mother of God, is presented to us on this first day of the New Year. We pray to her: “Hail Mary, full of Grace.” When wars raged in the Middle Ages and cruelty was inflicted on women and children, the cult of Mary grew. When men saw women as the objects of their pleasure and lust eroded love, Catholics pushed Mary to the core of their hearts.

During the plagues, people prayed to Mary, the compassionate mother. And today, centuries later, on this New Year’s Day, we once again honor Mary, fittingly, to begin 2006. We reflect on the tender heart of a woman, obscure in birth, obscure in life, obscure in death...but shining through history, first to say “yes” to the birth of the One whom the shepherds announced and praised. As she treasured all these things in her heart, we treasure her as the Mother of Grace and honor her name as well as that of her son.

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