

That's not my name!

Names matter: they are vital to identity and where relationships begin. When we meet someone for the first time we usually ask them their name – this moment of naming becomes a marker in the ground that gives the person significance: they have an identity; they count.

Because I believe names matter, I want to remember people – friends from the past; students I've taught and colleagues I've worked with; the people I have served in ministry, but my memory isn't perfect and sometimes I forget. Perhaps you've had similar experiences of forgetting names - it's disappointing when that happens, we know how we feel when we are forgotten or overlooked.

But why are some names so much easier to remember than others?!

A few years ago some musicians that call themselves the Ting Tings released a song called 'That's not my name' – if you haven't heard it, I challenge you to listen once and then try to forget it. The whole premise of the song is to recall the wrong names that have been applied to the singer - 'they forget my name' she sings, and then sings all the names she's not called. It's a kind of tragi-comedy where the singer lists all the names that have been given her. She's defiant: this is not the truth about who she is! The tragedy is that she never actually shares her real name – she is struck in a stream of misidentification.

Thanks to today's readings which also have themes of name and identity running through them, this song has now become a Lenten ear worm that needs evicting. In an attempt to silence this insistent refrain let me move to the readings and a quick recap before we begin to unpick and ponder.

Firstly, in the reading from Mark, we see Jesus, who has just been identified by Peter as the Messiah, inviting the disciples to accept their collective identity as his chosen followers, recognising that this means following him in the way of the cross. Then, in the epistle reading, Paul, looking to unite a divided community of believers, sets the story of this demanding calling within the bigger story of the whole Bible. Urging his readers to turn from their own preoccupations and recognise God's bigger picture, Paul encourages them to see that by God's grace, everyone - no matter by what name they are or have been known - is able to experience the enduring power of Christ's resurrection: this is the outworking and fulfilment of the covenant God made with Abraham.

In the Genesis story we see how God chose Abraham, promising that he would be the father of many nations and in the epistle, we read how Paul, embracing his new Christian identity, invites his readers to join him by sharing the same faith in Christ as Abraham modelled when God called him to follow all those years before.

The story of Abraham is the first of several examples in the Bible where God gives a new name linked to a new calling or identity. Here, as in other renaming events, Abraham's name and that of his wife Sarai, now Sarah, carries a promise, but it's a promise that's bound up in paradox – how can someone so old be the father or the mother of nations? It doesn't seem to add up.

Looking back, Paul reminds his readers that it was by faith that Abraham was able to become who God was calling him to be: for Abraham and for his readers also, it's faith that fills the gap left by the paradox. It's faith, Paul says, that enabled Abraham and us to step into the grace-filled, creative space between who we are and who God has chosen us to be: faith, built on immense trust and unfailing hope, is what enables us to find our collective identity as those chosen and called in Christ.

In our gospel reading, Jesus says there's a great prize for those who chose this path of trust and hope but this too is packaged in paradox: here is Jesus, the Messiah - the one his followers had hoped would liberate them from the Romans - but when he confirms this identity, he begins to tell them a very different narrative from the one they had hoped to hear; a narrative where life comes from death, and gain comes through loss.

If Abraham hoped against hope that God's promise would come true, the disciples surely must have hoped against hope that these promises wouldn't be fulfilled. Mark tells us that Peter voices such a response: taking Jesus aside he begins to rebuke him, but this is countered by a greater rebuke as Jesus, met with a wilderness of confusion, again resists the temptation of conceding to worldly voices. His mind is set on God – he will model the perseverance he requires of his followers.

So what, if anything, do these texts have to say to us on the second Sunday of Lent, 2021 at a time when some say we have been living a long Lent due to the pandemic. Where's the good news in these ancient promises and all their paradox? And what about that emerging thread: perseverance – haven't we all been persevering rather a lot recently as we all get heartily fed-up with waiting for a promised future?

The answer to that question is yes. The advance preoccupation and speculation relating to Monday's announcement of the road map out of the pandemic restrictions are a brilliant example of how much we all yearn to leave behind our persevering and move on from simple existence to fullness of life. We so want to be able to meet people again; to learn more new names; to know and be known. We say we dream big and yet when we hold these hopes alongside the stories we read today I want to suggest that our dreams aren't big enough.

Like the disciples in our gospel and old father Abraham, we so easily revert to grasping for certainty. Our yearning is largely in 2D: we make ourselves the authors of the solutions to our problems, when time and again we see how this leads to destruction and disappointment.

So here's the thing I think we need to ponder today: 2D solutions have no longevity but 3D, well that's different.

When we see in 3D there is good news because this dimension includes God whose promises always hold. As these readings remind us today, God isn't fazed by fallible people: time and again he chooses them, works through them, inviting them to grow and change as they realise their potential in him and their part in his purposeful plan of love.

The good news is that there is room for all of us in this story: we are part of the paradox that is grace; we have all been given the same invitation to put our faith in Christ and to help others accept this invitation too.

So today and in the days ahead, we need to silence any worldly voices that try to down out this truth, turning from human preoccupations and designs to God, who in Jesus meets our human limitations with his limitless love, power and authority. With his help, the dream of who we thought we could be can be bigger - the eternal promise is that he will always help us build back better.

We cannot know exactly how we will help us achieve this except to know that this will involve sacrifice – his and ours; we all travel via the cross.

Like Abraham, Peter and the disciples; like Paul and those early Christians in Rome, we need God's help to deepen our faith and enlarge our hope so that we too find the courage to persevere; holding onto his promises, trusting that all the paradoxes we see have been, are, and will be resolved in him.

So as the world begins to open up again let's be clear of the 3D identity that is available to us – we are released to rely on God, not self. God is always calling us into a bigger vision for the future - for ourselves, for each other and for the world. Whatever anyone else says, we know our true names. Individually and collectively we are flawed, yet forgiven; chosen – but beloved like Christ, and called to serve.

As we continue to reflect on what God is saying to us through these stories let's ask him to confirm who we are and when the names we give ourselves, or the names we are given do not reflect this God-given identity then let's silence them with the refrain - 'that's not my name'.

Perhaps my Lenten ear worm might not be so bad after all if it brings us back to God.