

Homily for the Fourth Sunday of Lent 2021 Year B

Today is the 4th Sunday of Lent, sometimes called Laetare Sunday, from the Latin word Laetare, meaning rejoice. It is used in the opening antiphon of the Mass 'Rejoice Jerusalem ...' and so the priest wears pink or rose-coloured vestments, a subtle change of tone from the solemn purple of Lent.

In the Gospel we have just heard we are told that whoever refuses to believe is condemned, not because he refuses to believe in God's only Son, but because he refuses to believe in the name of God's only Son.

That is a very strange way of putting it.

It is strange to our ears because we have lost the Hebrew understanding of the significance of the power of a name. A name was not just a label, it had a very special meaning - it described a person, where they came from, who they were and what they could do.

There was to the Hebrew mind a very intimate connection between the name of a person and the person themselves.

And if, for example, you knew the name of a person you had a certain hold or power over them.

Thus, for example, you have the Storey of Moses going up the mountain, encountering God in the burning bush and asking him for his name.

But God, you remember, wouldn't give his name to Moses.

In this refusal He is saying to Moses two things.

1. You cannot have power over Me
2. I am utterly beyond being named, that there is not one word that would capture the essence of all that God is.

The most that God would say to Moses was 'I am who I am' and this translated into the word 'Yahweh'.

Now such is the Hebrew reverence for the name of God that if they are reading the Old Testament, they won't even pronounce the word 'Yahweh', they will say 'the Lord' or 'the Lord God' instead.

That same reverence and respect you find enshrined in the Ten Commandments - we are told that we are not to take the name of the Lord God in vain.

If you swear by a person's name, you are invoking all the power and authority of who that person is, to attest that what you are saying is true.

We do this when we swear an oath.

If you then lie, you not only abuse the truth, but you also degrade the person whose name you invoke to support or conceal your lie.

So, a name had connotations of power and authority.

In the Gospels you have Devils being cast out in the name of Jesus.

We are instructed that All should bow at the name of Jesus.

A name was also a way of perpetuating life. A father might call his first-born son after his own name. It was a way of sharing part of himself with his son - the name could then go on from generation to generation, the name not only imparted life, it also, in a sense, had a life of its own.

So, a name had power, authority, and life.

A father, through the love of his son, shared in the most intimate way, through a name, his power and authority and love for him, and the son, because of the love between them, holds in reverence and respect all that the father shares with him, and then out of love shares of himself and all he has with those who bear his name.

The Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit is a powerful example of this dynamic.

We symbolise the Holy Spirit as a dove, but theologically it is more accurate to see him as the life, the love, and the power that eternally flows between the Father and the Son.

Now the life and love that the Father shares with his Son, the Son in turn shares with us, who bear His name - Christians.

After Baptism, when we became adopted sons and daughters of Christ, we received the gift of the Holy Spirit, a share of the power and the life and the love that flows between the Father and the Son.

We were Baptised in the name of the Trinity, and when we prepare ourselves for prayer, that 'Sign of the Cross' is in the name of the Trinity.

Our sins are forgiven in the name of the Trinity, as are all the Sacraments and the solemn Blessings we receive.

So, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit means also in the power and the authority and the love of all that the Trinity is.

It is the means of imparting their life to us, the means whereby we share in their life, through grace.

And that name and life the Christ shares with us, we, in turn, are obliged to share with others by fulfilling our own Missionary role in the Church.

So, not to believe in the name of God's only Son, is the same as saying that you refuse to believe in all his power and authority and love. It is to deny who He really is. It is a refusal to accept the life-giving qualities, that sharing His name imparts. It is in the most radical way to turn one's back on God himself - and cut off from his life, love, authority and power we do indeed condemn ourselves.