

SERMON 823

The Confession of Saint Peter
First Week after the Epiphany
Wednesday, January 15, 2014
928th Week as Priest
754th Week at St Dunstan's
19th Week at Epiphany-Tallassee

NAMES

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I've always been fascinated by names. Of course, there is a strong tradition in the Holy Scriptures of naming. In the seven-day creation story in Genesis, God brings all things into being by naming them. In the Adam and Eve story in Genesis, God gives the job of naming all the creatures to Adam.

But the practice of naming and renaming continues. Abram and Sarai are given new names when God makes the covenant with them: now they are called Abraham and Sarah. Jacob wrestles with the man, or angel, or is it God himself? at the River Jabbok, and he is given a new name: now he is called Israel.

Moses dares even to ask God his name in his fullness-of-time moment with the burning bush on the holy mountain. I AM WHO I AM, says YHWH, or I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE. But Moses never dared to use that holiest of names again, and even today we should be most careful in how we speak of the LORD God. People are much too

flippant and careless in their use of God's name, and I must tell you that it irritates me no end.

Saul of Tarsus is given the new name Paul after his encounter with the Risen Lord on the road to Damascus. Many others, along the path of Salvation History, have had their names given or changed, and it always signals an important moment.

Today's Gospel lesson is no exception. Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" That, to my mind, is a lot like asking, "What name do they have for me?" They suggest Elijah, or Isaiah, or Jeremiah, or another of the prophets. "But who do you say that I am?" asks Jesus. Simon bar-Jonah answers, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." These are more like titles than they are names, aren't they? Then Jesus changes Simon's name from Simon, son of Jonah, to Simon Peter, or Cephas, or Petras. Here the reference is to Simon who will be the Rock upon which the Church will be built. Cephas and Petras both mean "the Rock."

It's a good name, although it's a good name that Simon Peter has trouble living up to. Only after the Day of Pentecost does Simon Peter seem like he deserves to be called "the Rock."

All of this leads up to the question about our own names. They were given carefully by our parents, I'm sure. They were names that may have belonged to other family members in previous generations. Or they had particular significance of another kind. We have a lot of live up to, don't we? AMEN.