

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Solemnity of Mary
January 1, 2017

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Holy Scripture has just told us when eight days were fulfilled the Child was called “Jesus.” Why should we make a big deal out of that? What is in a name anyway? The answer is that there are *many things* in a name. You and I are annoyed (and rightly so) when someone calls us by the wrong name. Somehow our name is so closely linked with our identity we do not want anyone being careless with it or mistaken about it. Our name is much more than a part of our security code for the convenience of credit card companies and the Internal Revenue Service! Our name is our *personality encoded in a word*. We therefore do not want people messing around with our name or being funny with it.

The ancient Jews did not think there was anything funny about the Name of God. They knew His Name was connected to His personality: to all the mystery, all the power and danger of divine holiness. The Jews were so respectful they were *afraid* to use the Holy Name. In their writings the Jews would leave a big blank space when it came time to mention God’s Name. They would mention His attributes, but not His Name. The Psalmist would say, “Our help is in *the Name* of the Lord.” In her *Magnificat* Our Lady said, “And holy is *His Name*.”

But everything changed at Christmas. God was given a personal name and we were told it is okay to use it. That name is JESUS and it was formally given the Holy Child on the eighth day of Christmas. The use of the personal name created familiarity in ways the ancient Jews could not understand. But God being born in a stable and dying on a cross are intimate things. They are things which happen to a person with a name. Jesus still had all the mystery, all the power, and all the holiness, of Almighty God. *But you could be there*. Of course God always was personal. Even prior to the created order there was the personal love of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Yet for ancient Israel the Almighty remained pure spirit. Christmas was the game changer. Now God was incarnate. The Second Person of the Holy Trinity could leave footprints in the sand at the beach. And He could be called by name.

If you are an older person you have experienced that special moment when someone you looked up to and called “Mr. Taylor” said “call me Charles.” Or “Miss Johnson” said “call me Karen.” And without effort or embarrassment the

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relationship entered a new stage. It was like that for God's holy people with the coming of Our Lord. But the change took time! It was only in the Middle Ages when preachers like Saint Bernard began to single out the Name of Jesus, not with less awe, but with real intimacy and love. Christians began to understand that the sweet Name of Jesus makes us feel at home even as it reminds us of our sins. After all, Jesus means "He Who saves." We need Jesus because we need saving. But no other religion has anything like this *intimacy*. Mohammed may be someone's prophet. Buddha may be someone's teacher. But Jesus, the Divine Son of God, invites you and me to be His *friend*.

When you are employed in the secular world by a huge corporation, you may never get to meet the chief executive officer, much less get on a first name basis with him! But in the largest organization of all (and the oldest by far in continuous existence in the world) you are required to not only meet the CEO but to get on with Him intimately right from the start.

Jesus Christ is our Lord and Saviour. And He invites us into a first name relationship. His will is to be that close to us. After the Resurrection and before Ascension Day was a period called "the great forty days." The original disciples experienced those days. But the Lord promised His Ascension was not a "going away" but a "coming closer" to each and all who would become His disciples. Jesus still stands in the Easter garden, still calls to us on the road to Emmaus, still sits with us at the table, and at the miracle breakfast on the beach. And you hear Him say as He did to Peter: "Do you love Me?" And when we say **yes**, He graciously tells us, "You can call Me by My Name. *It's Jesus.*"