

**Holy Name – Homily**  
**Saturday, December 31, 2011**  
**Luke 2:15-21**

“After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.”

This evening we celebrate the feast of the Holy Name of Jesus. As the Gospel of Luke tells us, Jesus’ parent honored the Jewish Law and on the eight day after his birth they had their baby boy circumcised. At this ritual Joseph and Mary conferred upon the baby the name Jesus, which was the name the Angel Gabriel had told Mary at the Annunciation the child in her womb was to be called. Jesus in Hebrew means, “the one who saves.”

I am sure it comes as no surprise when I say to you that the name of Jesus has accrued a lot of baggage in two millennia. Much of that baggage is very good and sadly much of it is not. The good has accrued to his name in large part due to Jesus himself and the Good News of his life as recorded in the Gospels. The bad that has accrued is due mostly to the behavior of Jesus’ followers, some really poor Biblical interpretations, and the manner in which the Church has manipulated the good news over the centuries to its own needs and not the needs of God’s children.

There are many people in our culture who recoil at the name of Jesus because of the later. If one of the primary reasons why people don’t come to church is because they see the church as being irrelevant to their lives, than it is we. Jesus’ followers who have made it so, not Jesus himself.

I have often heard un-churched people say that they have no problem with Jesus, its Jesus’ followers, the Christians that they are wary of!

Like Shakespeare’s Juliet there are times when I think,

“O, be some other name!  
What's in a name?  
that which we call a rose By any other name would smell as sweet;”

[From William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, 1600:]

Would not the Good News of Jesus’ life smell just as sweet if we had another name for Jesus? Might we not be more able to overcome the negative impressions of Jesus that we Christians have given much of the world if we had another name for him?

Well I have enough Biblical wisdom to know that changing the name of Jesus is neither possible because of the specificity of the text, nor is it really feasible after two thousand years of usage. Plus, I would not want to risk irritating the Angel Gabriel by contracting his message. What I do believe is we can change our understanding of who this man is and in so doing positively alter how we present Jesus to others.

And we do this by considering Jesus' face.

There is contemporary Christmas carol titled, "Mary Did You Know"  
[Originally written by Mark Lowry and Buddy Greene]

You may be familiar with it, especially the Chet Atkins version.

"Mary, did you know that your Baby Boy will give sight to a blind man? Mary, did you know that your Baby Boy will calm the storm with His hand? Did you know that your Baby Boy has walked where angels trod? When you kiss your little Baby you kissed the face of God?"

Of course all mothers and fathers believe that they kiss the face of God when they kiss their children. And I certainly would not dispute that with anyone. There is in the newness and innocence of a baby's face a godly quality.

But what exactly does the face of God in Jesus look like, especially as an adult? What facial image, or images, comes to mind when we think of Jesus?

This is one of those areas – imagining the face of Jesus - where Christians have rendered more harm than good in proclaiming the good news.

There is currently an exhibit at the Detroit Institute of Arts called "Rembrandt and the Face of Jesus" that addresses the issue of what does the face of God look like. This exhibit previously was at the Louvre and the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

What "Rembrandt and the Face of Jesus" does is explore the face of Jesus as Rembrandt portrayed him, a portrayal that was a radical departure from how all other artists had portrayed the face of Jesus until that time.

For centuries the image of Jesus had been defined by a certain Publius Lentulus who wrote a letter to the Roman Senate during Jesus' lifetime. The letter contained what would become an authoritative description of Jesus. Lentulus wrote:

"His hair is the color of ripe hazelnut, parted at the top in the manner of the Nazarites, and falling straight to the ears but curling further below, with blonde highlights and fanning off his shoulders. He has a fair forehead and no wrinkles or marks on his face, his cheeks are tinged with pink . . . in sum, he is the most beautiful of all mortals."

I think I saw this guy in GQ recently.

In this description we find the genesis of the perfect Nordic looking Christ that has dominated Christian images of Jesus. We also find the genesis of the portrayal of the less than human perfect Jesus which emphasizes his divinity. This was the model for the face of Jesus, which artists used to depict a distant, otherworldly and unapproachable person. As imagined in the Lentulus letter and depicted by subsequent artists, Jesus became a superman, which became the predominant image of God.

Rembrandt changed that. He used the Sephardic Jewish population of Amsterdam as models for his depictions of Jesus. This is of course a much more accurate model for him as he was a Middle Eastern Jew.

In almost all of his paintings Rembrandt makes Jesus look more imperfect and more human than the Lentulus model. His hair is dark and often unkempt. His face is clearly marked by human emotions and life-experience. His eyes and mouth exhibit a range of expressions. His hands are the large, rough hands of a laborer. He looks more like any man you might run into on the streets of any village in first century Palestine.

Rembrandt's face of Jesus moved our encounter with him from that of gazing upon a distant Deity to a face-to-face encounter with another human being. Rembrandt humanized Jesus. He incarnated him as he was incarnated, as one of us. And in this face of Jesus we can see ourselves.

This is the authentic Jesus. Not one who is rendered as perfect, distant, judgmental, and powerful, but rather as a human who is like us because he became one of us. This is a man who knows what our human lives are like, a man who knew the complexities of human experience because he lived a human life and has the face to prove it.

But Jesus is also man who despite all that life did to him, remained compassionate, radiating the fullest love and grace of God in all he said and did.

That is the face of God we have been given in the Bethlehem manger and on the Cross of Calvary.

It is this name of Jesus, attached to this face that became incarnate for us and for our salvation. It is this name and this face that we celebrate this evening. It is this face and name that we are called to proclaim to the world for ever and for ever more.

Amen.

