

Teaching 1: “You Shall Name Him Jesus.”

“Shout and be glad, Daughter Zion. For I am coming, and I will live among you,” declares the LORD. “Many nations will be joined with the LORD in that day and will become my people. I will live among you and you will know that the LORD Almighty has sent me to you.” [Zechariah 2.10-11]

In that day you will say:

“I will praise you, LORD.

Although you were angry with me,
your anger has turned away
and you have comforted me.

Surely God is my salvation;

I will trust and not be afraid”

With joy you will draw water
from the wells of SALVATION.

[Isaiah 12.1-3]

As we prepare to remember the birth of a baby at Christmas, do we really grasp who that baby is, and all that his birth means for us - still, today?

God so longs for us to know who Jesus is - to know, and to invite him to be Lord of every area of our lives - that he spent thousands of years preparing his people to grasp the meaning of that birth.

This was vital, because we always need to be prepared, we always need help, to make sense of our experiences.

We’re surrounded by sights and sounds, tastes and smells and sensations, and in order to take any information from them, we first need to learn how to make sense of them.

When we taste or smell something, we can’t identify it, unless we have encountered it before.

When we hear words in another language, we don’t know what the speaker is saying - unless we have already learned that language.

When we see an x-ray or ultrasound picture, we don’t know the significance of what it shows - unless we have been trained to interpret it.

And we’ve probably all had the experience of being - or of hosting - a person from a foreign country who’s struggling to make sense of local customs.

We simply cannot make sense of experiences for which we are not appropriately prepared.

That’s why it was so important for God to go ahead of his people and prepare them to understand who Jesus is.

Through his relationship with his people Israel, we can see God’s desire for us to be in a close and loving relationship with him, and our inevitable failure to remain obedient to his commands. Just as in the Garden of Eden, so throughout history humans have rejected God’s rule, given into the temptation to do what we think is best rather than listen to his loving voice, and been left devastated by the consequences of our own and other people’s actions.

But through the Old Testament prophets, God was preparing his people to understand more about who he is and more about who he wants us to be; and he was preparing them to expect him to send them a Messiah, the one who would save them and set them free.

Listen to his prophet, Isaiah:

The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned.
For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.

[Isaiah 9.2,6]

And now listen to what God said through his Angel to Mary:

“Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favour with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”

[Luke 1. 30-33]

Echoes ... echoes of what he had been preparing his people to expect, for hundreds of years.

Listen, also, to what the Angel said to Joseph:

“Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

[Matthew 1.20-21]

Echoes again ... echoes of what God had said through his prophet, Isaiah:

“It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
to restore the tribes of Jacob
and bring back those of Israel I have kept.
I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,
that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.”

[Isaiah 49.6]

Throughout the Old Testament, God had prepared his people to look for the coming of his Messiah - the one who would save them.

And now, through his Angel, God was preparing Mary and Joseph to understand who this baby would be. Reminding them of his word, which never fails, which never returns to him empty but achieves the purpose for which he sent it.

“You shall name him Jesus,” said the Angel - the Greek form of the Hebrew Joshua, which means The Lord Saves.

Note: the Greek form. Through this baby, salvation would reach not only Israel but also the ends of the earth.

But still Mary and Joseph could not grasp the full meaning of this salvation. Like the others around them, and like us today, they needed further help to be able to understand who Jesus really is.

We know that in preparation for Jesus’ adult ministry, God sent John the Baptist, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

But Jesus himself said:

“I have testimony weightier than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to finish—the very works that I am doing—testify that the Father has sent me.” [John 5.36]

When we see the works that Jesus did - healing the blind, calming the storm, feeding the multitudes, forgiving sins - it is clear to anyone who has read the Old Testament that he is demonstrating who he is: God himself.

And Jesus went on to say:

“the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me... [and the] Scriptures ... testify about me.” [John 5.37-40]

God always gives us a choice about how we respond to Jesus - but he offers us all the help that we need, in order to make the right choice. Always God goes ahead of us, preparing us to make sense of what we read in scripture and of what we experience in our lives. For Jesus himself promised:

“When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father—he will testify about me.” [John 15.26]

“You shall name him Jesus,” said God to Mary and Joseph, because he will be the One who will bring salvation not only to my people Israel but to the ends of the earth. He will be the One whom I have been preparing my people to recognise, all these long years. Through his words and through his works, you will know my presence among you.

And God’s presence continues today, through the gift of his Holy Spirit.

As we prepare to remember the birth of Jesus at Christmas, how can we grasp who that baby really is, and all that his birth means for us today?

Let’s pray for the gift of God’s Holy Spirit to testify to us about Jesus, and to draw us ever closer to him, as we read the scriptures and seek his presence through prayer and praise.

Teaching 2: “Do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus.”

he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!
Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

[Philippians 2.8-11]

When Paul wrote these words to the Philippians, he was fully aware of what God had said through the prophet Isaiah:

I am God, and there is no other.
By myself I have sworn,
my mouth has uttered in all integrity
a word that will not be revoked:
Before me every knee will bow;
by me every tongue will swear.

[From Isaiah 45.22-3]

In his words to the Philippians, Paul was deliberately equating Jesus with God himself. He was declaring that the name of Jesus carries the authority of God himself.

“You shall name him Jesus,” the Angel had said to Mary and Joseph. And the early Christians, throughout their ministries, did just that - because they had experienced for themselves the power of God at work in them and through them, when they spoke and acted in the name of Jesus. They knew, as Paul put it, God’s “incomparably great power for us who believe.” (Ephesians 1.19.

“That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.”[Ephesians 1.19]

That mighty power of God is made available, through Jesus, not just two thousand years ago to those early Christians, but still today, to us who believe. We are his body, here on earth, and when we are filled with his Holy Spirit we can pray and speak and act in his name.

“Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus.” [Colossians 3:17]
said Paul.

In an age of slaves and servants, people would have been very familiar with the concept of speaking or acting in the name of another. If a servant was sent to greet someone in the name of his master, it meant that he had been sent to speak and act with the authority his master; to do what the master himself would do if he were there; to bring

about his master's will in that situation. Speaking on his own behalf, the servant's words carried no authority. But when he spoke in the name of his master, he spoke with whatever authority his master carried.

So it would be really important for both the servant, and those to whom he had been sent, to understand who his master was; just what power and authority he had. It was vital that the servant should name the person who had sent him.

"You shall name him Jesus."

Do we really understand who sends us - what power and authority he has?

Jesus Christ "was proved to be the Son of God when he was raised from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit." [Romans 1.4]

When we name Jesus as our Lord and Master - when we choose to speak and act on his behalf, seeking his will in all that we say and do - then we speak and act with the power and authority of God himself.

And we have the authority to receive what Jesus has paid for: forgiveness and new life.

"You shall name him Jesus."

The early Christians knew the incomparably great power that is available to us when we speak and act in the name of Jesus - but they also knew how vitally important it is to others that we name him in all that we do.

Remember that we always need help, we always need to be prepared, to make sense of what we hear or see.

So, in Acts 3, we see Peter commanding a lame begger at the temple gate, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong." But Peter didn't just speak and act in the name of Jesus - he also went on to explain to the astonished people what had happened: "By faith in the name of Jesus," he told them, "this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see."

By naming Jesus as the One who had healed this man, Peter prepared the way for Jesus to enter into the lives of those who saw or heard about this miracle. And, indeed, we're told that hundreds of people responded, that day, to the awesome power and love of Jesus - all because Peter chose not only to serve Jesus, but also to name him as Lord.

You shall name him Jesus.

God went ahead of his people, preparing them through the events and prophecies of the Old Testament, for the arrival of their Saviour.

He sent his angels to Mary, Joseph and the shepherds, to tell them that their Saviour had been born.

He revealed a star to the wise men, calling them to worship the King.

He sent John the Baptist to go before Jesus, preparing the way for his people to receive the good news.

At Jesus' baptism, God identified him again: "This is my Son, whom I love." (Matthew 3.17)

And through the gift of his Holy Spirit, he continues to convict people of the truth about who Jesus is.

When we name Jesus as our Lord, we can know his incomparably great power for us who believe, and we can prepare the way for others to come to know him, too.

"In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed."
[Daniel 7.13-14]

You shall name him Jesus.