Sermon 02.01.22 CC Naming & Circumcision

Naming a child carries so many dangers. Should it be a continuance of a family name, a name popular for the time being (fascinatingly all the Brians I know are my age or above). Should it be a recognised name- as in Switzerland where only the names written in the book are allowed, or should it be like in Sri Lanka, where many Buddhists ask the monks to determine the initial sound of the name- G H Sh etc. I’ve baptised some corkers I can tell you- but that’s for another occasion.

Jesus- the Gospel tells us, was given the name prescribed by the angel who had announced his birth to Mary. A very ordinary name indeed. It is the same name as Joshua, and its root lies in the meaning to rescue or to save. And eight days after the birth, in accordance with custom, the circumcision and naming were completed, the Gospel tells us.

Whether in naming Jesus, or naming our own children, we can have no idea what lies in their path of life, whether their name might be appropriate, or ironic, for the life choices they make, the journey they travel.

I’m certain that the parents of Desmond Tutu, who died on Boxing Day, could not possibly have been able to predict his path of life- from his early days in the ‘Native Location’ in Klerksdorp to his universal recognition as a man of integrity, faith and compassion.

Tutu trained as a teacher, like his father, and subject to South Africa’s apartheid laws of racial segregation, he taught in black ‘normal’ schools until neither his conscience nor the law would allow him to continue. His inherited faith and natural instincts rebelled against this evil of apartheid. He’d been so struck by an English monk and priest, raising his hat to every woman he met in the township, including Desmond’s own mother, that he realised the faith learned from Jesus Christ must be the motivator for his life and for all people. The priest was of course Trevor Huddleston, after whom Desmond and Leah named their first son. So Desmond left teaching and was ordained priest in the Anglican church. IN 1962 he came to London for further studies at Kings College before returning to South Africa, still bitterly riven by apartheid and fear, with open civil war simmering beneath the surface and whether as Dean of Johannesburg, Bishop of Lesotho, or Johannesburg or Archbishop of Cape Town, Tutu was almost always the first black incumbent in each role he occupied. Yet he never sought black domination- his writings, his sermons, his actions time and again make this clear, he was an includer of all God’s children, utterly opposed to any form of segregation, prejudice or exclusion. He fought for female priests in the south African Anglican church, he inspired the rainbow constitution of Mandela’s South Africa, championing gay rights, and internationally the rights of the Palestinians to exist alongside Israel as equal partners. Because he understood – as the title of one of his books makes clear ‘God is not a Christian’ – God the creator of all, is the father of all and all are his children, to be included in the feast of life.

But of course his heart would always be in South Africa, among the people he served and led, among those with whom he agreed and those with whom he totally disagreed. Desmond Tutu became the very face of the anti-apartheid struggle for the world outside South Africa- attracting enormous crowds in every cathedral, university, conference or meeting he attended. Not surprisingly Nelson Mandela- this ‘criminal’ under South African law, spent his first night of freedom in the Archbishop’s Palace in Cape Town, with the boy turned Archbishop from Klerksdorp Native Location. And then came perhaps, Desmond’s greatest challenge, to chair the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which he had proposed as the only way to move on in justice and peace, a truly christian contribution. It became a process which almost destroyed him, listening to the sordid details of thousands of confessions of appalling violence inflicted, then bearing the promise of forgiveness, in guaranteed freedom from criminal prosecution, and then restitution, with appropriate acts of restorative justice. A worldwide milestone in dealing with decades of the abuse of power, falsehood and violence- from which every criminal justice system can learn, including our own.

And how does all this fit with the naming of Christ? Because, while Desmond is a colonial name, typical of the period and means a man from South Munster in Ireland, Tutu’s middle name- so rarely spoken, is Mpilo, a Xhosa name, meaning life. What a life- of which Mr and Mrs Tutu senior, would never have dreamt possible. But a name which, in Desmond’s incarnation so gloriously reveals what life can be, how life can be given and shared with so many. To be in Desmond’s presence was unforgettable, this physically diminutive man filled every available space with unbridled positivity, laughter, joy, integrity. A man who brought life, who lived so fully by the spirit of God’s son, who showed that no man, woman or child is a slave, but a child of God, and if a child of God then also an heir of all that God promises, as our epistle points out.

The saints in heaven must be wondering just what has hit them- for here is one whose very name and life proclaims God’s promise to Moses:

The Lord bless you and keep you

The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

IN Desmond Mpilo Tutu we name this great blessing, this costly grace, this hard won peace of Christ. May he rest in peace and may we and all God’s children, come to rise with him in glory.