

Netflix has clearly set the proverbial cat among the pigeons with Harry and Meghan- the series. It is fascinating that they have chosen to use their names, rather than titles, for the programmes.

When briefly in Berlin last week, I read a newspaper article describing another royal scene, the Burial of the last heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, Otto von Habsburg. After an enormous requiem mass in St Stephen's Cathedral, Vienna, Otto's body ( minus his heart) was taken for burial, alongside his forbears, in the Cappuchin monastery. The doors were firmly sealed and a court official bangs on the door three times. Who seeks entry? asks the Abbot, and the official reads out a long list of titles – The Emperor of Austria, King of Hungary, Prince of

Bohemia, Duke of Salzburg, etc etc, to which the Abbot replies 'No, we don't know him'. Then the official knocks again and tries a different list, Otto, member of the European Parliament, Doctor of Philosophy, Chairman of endless committees.

Again, 'No, says the Abbot, we don't know him'.

The court official tries a third time- bang, bang, bang on the door. Who seeks entry?, asks the Abbot, Otto, a sinner. Yes, come in, we know him.

Names matter in a way titles don't- names are signs. Which is exactly what today's bible readings teach us. Ahaz, the king of Judah, is being torn in two by his royal peers, who are trying to get him to sign up to an alliance. King Ahaz is told by the prophet Isaiah, to ask God for a sign, but he refuses, not out of piety, but because he doesn't want to

hear what God might say. He's determined to do his own thing- which he does at massive cost. He loses his throne. And the prophet , as we heard, has told him – do your own thing, Ahaz, and by the time a young woman conceives and bears a son and that son is old enough to eat curd and choose good, it will be curtains for you. Fascinatingly there is no title for whom this unnamed young woman might be- it might be Queen Ahaz, Mrs Isaiah, or any imagined woman, but the prophet certainly wasn't referring to Mary, - no, this is 800 years before the birth of Mary's son. He's making a point- listen to God, who calls you by name and then walk with God as he will walk with you.

Paul too, writing to the Romans, introduces himself by name and introduces his faith, for the two are

bound together- what you see is what you get, or more accurately perhaps, what you read in the letter to the Romans is the real deal- the man Paul all the way through- Paul, in his own words, a slave, bound to this Jesus, as a slave to his master. That's an uncomfortable concept for us in 2022, but as an image, in the Roman world it is describing a sense of total identity, so that Paul's own personhood is wrapped up, finds true fulfilment in Jesus of Nazareth.

And then in the Gospel, we hear another name, not a title, Joseph, with all the hinterland of that earlier, coat-of-many-colours-Joseph, who also turned misfortune into opportunity, has a dream, so like his forbear and namesake. The angel tells Joseph not to be afraid, not to shame Mary, his betrothed, not to

divorce her, but to protect her for she carries God's presence within her womb- she walks with God and God with her, as Joseph too is now being challenged to do. Furthermore, Joseph, whose genealogy- his name history- links this unborn child to the royal house of David, is told to name the child Jesus.

Why?- because the name means 'one who saves'- and , as if that isn't enough of a hint, Matthew quotes from the Isaiah we've already heard read , 'his name shall be Emmanuel'- God with us.

Jesus, Emmanuel, names but also signs – they signal something about God, this man of Nazareth and us, walking together. In interpreting the birth and these ancient meanings as applicable to this soon to be born child, the scriptures are telling us of the peculiar role this babe will play through his life and

death and resurrection, namely, one who heals division and creates reconciliation, - one who bids us not to be anxious about physical needs, asks us to turn the other cheek and walk the second mile, not to lay up treasures on earth, but first to seek out God's presence, where God is active in our broken world.

For these names assure us that wherever this Jesus of Nazareth is, there God is. God is with us- is the message of both the beginning and the end of Matthew's story of the Good News. At the beginning Emmanuel- God with us and at the end of the book, 'I am with you always, to the end of the age'. This Jesus, who will save his people, this Emmanuel, God with us, walks with God by walking amongst us, and who talking and walking, living and

dying, challenges us to walk likewise, for like him,  
we are called by name. Even so, come, Lord Jesus.

BL

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