

Today's feast celebrates so many things, all connected and wound up in one great celebration.

Of course, we begin a new calendar year today. It is exactly one week since Christmas Day : in church-speak, we call it the Octave Day. Octaves are sort of echo of a feast, a chance for further celebration and reflection. An, of course, it was on the octave that a Jewish boy was circumcised and given a name. Thus today's feast celebrates both Jesus' Jewishness, something we tend to forget or gloss over, and also his name "Jesus" which means, "The Lord Saves". Often, too, after a big feast follows a celebration of a secondary person connected with that feast. (So, on 14th September, for example, we celebrate the Triumph of the Cross, and on 15th, the next day, the sorrows of Mary.) In a similar way, on this day, the octave of Jesus' birth, we honour his Mother Mary, the 'Mother of God' because Jesus is God. Finally, recalling that Mary's Son is given the title "Prince of Peace", Pope Paul VI declared 1st January "World Day of Peace", so that we start each new year praying for peace in a world still ravaged by wars and violence.

I cannot cover all these themes – not if you want to be out in time for lunch – so I will restrict myself to just two.

First, Mary, Mother of God. No-one knows when Mary received this title, but we do know that in the early fifth century it was challenged by the Archbishop of Constantinople named Nestorius. He was not so much thinking about Mary; rather, he had what seems to us an odd idea of Jesus. He believed that Jesus was both God and Man, but he believed that these two natures of Jesus were not only distinct but separate. Of course, we believe that they are distinct but united in the one person, Jesus. Nestorius' critics said that, in other words, he really believed that Jesus was two persons, a divine person and a human person – and this seemed to be confirmed by his objection to the ancient title, Mother of God, given to Mary. For Nestorius, Mary was only the Mother of the human part of Jesus.

Does all this argument matter to us? Well, in one sense, yes. Nestorius' teaching separates God from humanity. It comes ultimately from a refusal to believe that God could really deign to unite himself to a human nature. But that is right at the heart of the Christian faith. God's closeness to us is

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important to us. If Jesus was two persons, we are not saved. It is as drastic as that.

So today, when we honour Mary as “Mother of God”, we are affirming that Jesus who was born of Mary is one person, at once human and divine. As St Athanasius famously wrote, “he became man that we might become gods.” And many of the other church fathers wrote the same. Mary Mother of God is important to us because Jesus, the ONE Jesus, is important to us.

Second, a quick word about the Holy Name of Jesus. In the Bible, names are extremely important. Adam is given the responsibility of naming all the creatures on earth because he is given power over all of them. So, when Jacob wrestles with the angel, he will not let the angel go until he tells him his name, but the angel responds, “Why do you ask my name, since it is Wonderful?” In this way the angel both reveals who he is and at the same time refuses to give a name: he is Wonderful, because it is God himself who is wrestling with Jacob. And yet he does not reveal his name: he remains shrouded in mystery: for to reveal his name gives the other power over one.

When Moses is sent by God, seen in the Burning Bush, to lead his people out of Egypt, he also asks God’s name. God’s reply is again both an answer and a refusal: “I am who I am.” The sacred name “Yahweh” is at the same time a refusal to reveal a name, for God is not a being, that is, one being among many beings, but is Being itself. “I am who I am”: it is a name, and yet no name. Among the Jews however, it is a name too sacred to pronounce, so that when it occurs in Scripture, “Adonai”, that is, “Lord”, is read in place of the sacred name. We observe the same custom in the Catholic Church today: we do not pronounce the Sacred Tetragrammaton, as it is sometimes called, when reading from scripture or singing hymns or psalms.

But in Jesus, God placed himself in human hands: in the gentle hands of Mary and Joseph, but also the cruel hands of his executioners. Being thus placed in

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the power of men, a true name is revealed for Him: not a name that is a refusal to name, but a name which reveals the face of God turned towards humanity, the name “Jesus”, which means in Hebrew, “God saves.” Jesus is revealed as our Saviour; he himself is the ultimate revelation of God who comes to save.

Quite early in Christianity we find examples of devotion to the Holy Name of Jesus in the form of Monograms and other signs used by Christians both to identify themselves and as a sort of prayer. The well-known symbol of the fish is one such: the word for fish in Greek spells out the initial letters of the words Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour in that language. You would be aware too, probably, of the IHS monogram, which are the first three letters of “Jesus” in Greek.

Devotion to the Holy Name of Jesus, which was announced by the angel Gabriel and given to the babe at his circumcision is a reminder that the face of God is now turned towards us, and turned towards us precisely as our Saviour.

St Joseph's Aged Care, Camberwell

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