

## Sermon for Freshers' Evensong, Jesus College Oxford, 13<sup>th</sup> October 2013

Isaiah 44:1-8

Ps 45:1, 7-18

Matthew 16:13-20

In nomine...

Remembering names is important to me. You may have noticed. And that's not only because it's a fun and good thing to do, but also because I'm going through a slightly obsessive phase of my DPhil – which, remarkably enough, is about remembering. We all want to be remembered. You want me – and your new friends – to remember your names, the conversations you've had, the fun times you've already had together. Of course, there are probably some things that you *can't* remember in Freshers' Week - incessant information, in speeches, booklets, inductions - as well as those things which may or may not have happened after a few too many drinks... Indeed, there may even be one or two things that you don't *want* to remember from the last few days... Do remember my room is 14:2...

So, in an attempt to be memorable tonight, I thought I'd better try alliteration as an *aide memoire*. "College, Community, Courtesy" would be a good one, except that JCR Freshers already heard that from the Principal on Monday. I hope none of you have yet – or indeed will ever – disturb him in the front quad...

Moving on then from the letter C, I said to my husband the other day, "I'm thinking of preaching on humility, and humanity... but I need another 'H' . . ." "humungousness?" was his suggestion. Thank you for that, darling.

So back to remembering, and, specifically, remembering NAMES. Learning someone's name marks the beginning of a relationship, it provides a building block for community. So I've made sure that names feature in our readings tonight.

First, Isaiah 44:5: "Some will say, 'I belong to the LORD'; others will call themselves by the name of Jacob; still others will write on their hand, 'The LORD's,' and will take the name Israel." Our names can be a way of describing ourselves. We can choose which name we go by. And the good news for all of you is that, this week, you can now call yourselves "Jesusbites", which might make you feel like you belong to an Old Testament tribe, but, in fact, it means that you belong HERE.

Names mean we belong. Like the Principal and the Academic Director have said to you, you may not yet feel like you belong. But you do. The reading from Isaiah was about God's people defining themselves as precisely that – God's people. We can define ourselves in terms of the people we belong with, the people we are in relationship with.

In our second reading, the man Jesus had many names given to him, as a way of people trying to understand who he was. But the one who hits the nail on the head is the disciple Simon, who calls him "the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus' response? "You are blessed... and so I say to you that you are Peter..." Jesus renames Simon, Peter: literally, The Rock – or, Rocky: AND SEEING HOW Peter often behaves, Rocky might well be just what Jesus meant.

Which begs the question – what name might Jesus Christ give us? How might he relate to us, and how might we relate to him? Above all, he wants to call us Children. Beloved children.

Now of course that's not suggesting that you lot can get away with childish behaviour. You may already have picked up – Scaffolding Is Not a Climbing Frame, and No Parties Without Permission. But apparently bar-based, banterous singing of that traditional hymn “shoulder to shoulder, answering Krebsy's call” is OK. Principal: ask the Junior Dean. You are here to play your part in the community of Jesus College, and even in the society of the world at large. We like to think you are Adults.

But you can still be child-like. You may be taking on fresh responsibilities – for your own studies, your own day-to-day living – but you can still respond with fresh awe and wonder at the world around you. You can remember that you are – not humungous – but actually quite small in the larger scheme of things. Of course you have your own essential part to play in society, yet you are only one of many – unique: just like everyone else.

Jesus calls us children. Being childlike is about wisely knowing the limits of our independence. Having the maturity to be able to ask for help. Trusting in other people as well as ourselves. In short, Humility. The college, the world, is not centred on us. But we cannot do it without others - without teachers, friends, support staff. Humility is about being in relationship with the people and the world around us. Recognising that other human beings are just as important as us – a realization that can give us true freedom and depth indeed.

Humility and Humanity – as well as Humour – are all about the ground, the earth, the humus, the soil. About gritty realities rather than ivory towers or Oxford bubbles. About having solid foundations – in a religious sense – in knowing our truly humble human relationship with the divine.

Jesus calls us into relationship with him. He gives us names, he knows us, he invites us to define ourselves in relationship to him. For Christians, to be fully human is to be related to the truly divine, a relationship that echoes Jesus Christ's own divine humanity.

This term our sermon series is about Relationships. We are all in relationship with one another and the world around us. Everything touches: as Roger McGough's poem of the same name, puts it,

Everything touches, life interweaves  
Starlight and wood-smoke, ashes and leaves  
Birdsong and thunder, acid and rain  
Everything touches, unbroken chain.

You may have noticed that most of our preachers are related to the Jesus College family. And the truth is that we are a new family, now that you are part of a new generation of Jesubites. So we'll be exploring different kinds of relationship in our sermons this term; seeing how human relationships reflect God's love; bringing together our nearest and dearest in the context of this College Chapel.

You'll remember my alliterations... Let me pop in one last H – and it's an important one. My final H is Home. You are making your home here now for a while; you returners have in a sense returned home to College at the beginning of this new academic year. Your College Home, your College Family. And I'm not just talking about the Parenting Dinner. This is your educational home, this is your new social home, this is where your new learning and development will happen. And it's your spiritual home too, whether that spirit is nurtured by creative arts, the camaraderie of sport, or the life of the Chapel and the college's Christian family. A fresh home, with fresh relationships. A chance to think about how you define yourself in relationship to those around you. A chance to figure afresh how you see others.

This is home to all of us Jesubites. College, community, courtesy, childlikeness: Connect with one another, connect that ivory tower or bubble with the rest of the world, and – if you want – connect with God and let God connect with you.

Welcome to College. Welcome Home.