

What's in a Name

Richard Dawson

Sunday 20 July 2014

Isaiah 43¹⁻⁷ / Psalm 8

Isaiah perceives God calling Israel back to Himself **by Name**.

Isaiah 43

¹ But now thus says the LORD,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.

Why does God do this? What's in a Name? We'll quite a lot frankly. Names honour us, they give us a place, they help us to know that we are recognised and accepted. Just ask yourself, would you rather be referred to as 'You' or be called by your proper name? Names and identities are often intertwined. Professor Adam Alter has observed the power names have to shape destiny. The technical name is "nominative determinism," which literally means "name-driven outcome." Alter points to the following examples: The current Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales is Justice Igor Judge. His colleague, Lord Justice Laws, is a judge in the Court of Appeals. In the realm of athletic pursuits, Anna Smashnova is a professional Israeli tennis player. Layne Beachley is a seven-time world champion surfer. Derek Kickett was an Australian Rules footballer. Stephen Rowbotham was an Olympic rower for Britain.

Usain Bolt currently reigns as the fastest man in the world over the 100 meter and 200 meter distances.

Now these may seem rather weak examples but the fact is that our names and the names that people give us do affect us and so effect our identities and the Bible seems very aware of this. Proverbs 22¹ says

¹ **A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favour is better than silver or gold.**

Our name confers not just identification but it confers an element of personhood. We become persons when our proper names are used.

At the beginning of Isaiah's vision of the restoration and redemption of Israel he calls out to a devastated and lost people and he says, 'Don't be afraid. I'm the One who created you, who knows you through and through; I'm the One who gave you a **NAME!** Therefore, you are mine.' That little phrase – 'called you by Name' is a fascinating one because it indicates God's closeness to Israel and His determination to remain close. Name's confer identity. We know and others know who we are through our names. And we know this is the case when our names get stolen.

I have two friends who recently had issues on the web. I received an email from the first about 18 months ago saying he was stuck in London where all his belongings had been stolen and he was stranded without any money. Could I send him some? I had my suspicions so I sent him back an email to which I got no reply.

Within about 2 hours he sent me an email saying that his online google identity had be stolen and not to respond to anything sent on his old email. But it didn't stop there. It turned out that his whole identity and all his contacts and emails had been hijacked along with many documents he had created. Needless to say he was both angry and devastated because he had to rebuild all of that work.

I have another friend who recently had her facebook identity hijacked and though she didn't lose any information it was very confusing for her friends who continued to get friend requests for a few weeks when they thought they were already friends on facebook.

Now apart from the absolute hassle of having to redo lots of online work and tell all your friends what has happened this kind of thing strikes at the heart of one of the most important pieces of personal property we own – namely, **our name and our identity.**

Our identity is important for a number of reasons. It's important because it gives us a place in the social context in which we live. More than this, however, our identity provides **us** with a sense of who we are. It helps **us** to establish a sense of self-worth. It also contributes significantly to our sense of direction in life and to our motivation.

The interesting thing is that though our identities are central to who we are and what we do we hardly ever think about how much they contribute to our situation and yet we are so influenced by who we think we are. Think, for example of your first day at High

School. Who can remember this? [Yes I thought so] For most of us that first day is such a big deal, perhaps because everything is so new but more so, I suspect, because we are really quite unsure about our status as High School students – ‘High School student’ has not yet become a part of our identity and so questions keep rolling around in our heads. Do we really belong here? Will we really fit in here? **Is this really who we are? Are we really High School students?**

The same, I suspect, happens when we first go to university. For the first while we feel as if we don't really belong.

Do you see how identity is so central here? Now of course, a year later most of us don't even think about being a High Schooler – it's just who we are and we may even be thinking about how to get out of this place and find a new identity!!

The Bible understands that the question of individual identity is vital for our own well-being because it tends to determine the path in life that we will take. If we see ourselves **as** something we will pursue that with a vigour and a commitment that far outweighs something we can't see. On the other hand if we have no vision of ourselves, no sense of what we were made for then our determination and ability to pursue even a course we know is right is greatly reduced.

So it is important then to solve the question of our identity very early on – to have a very real and strong sense of who we are **and the key to doing this is to decide whose opinion about our identity we will take the most notice of.**

You see another indication of how central identity is to our well-being is that whenever someone wants to influence us either for good or for ill they will tackle the question of our identity. Positively parents will tell us things like – ‘Yes, you’re great at maths, you’re a good cricket player, you’re better than that, you’re going to be fine in this situation.’ Now these may sound as if they’re just about what we can do but in fact what they’re really aimed at doing is creating an identity which we can believe and head towards. **If we believe we are something – we will most often engage in the activities which confirm that.** Each of these examples speaks to a child’s identity. When we smile at our children it tells them they are people who bring happiness to others; when we speak clearly and gently to our children it tells them they are people worthy of respect and careful communication; when we listen to them it tells them they are worth listening to; when we speak of them kindly it tells them that they are precious to us and when we celebrate their victories it tells them they are people whom others want to invest and whom others are interested in.

On the other hand others will use this question of identity to attack us and it’s a very simple trick. If you want to abuse another person you simply invoke their identity...“You b_____! You little beep beep beep! You’re nothing but a !!!! etc etc. Identity goes to the heart of who we are or, at least, who we think we are and so it becomes vital for us to decide whose opinions we’re going to believe in this matter. Remember the old saying ‘Give a dog a bad name and hang him.’ In other words, define a person’s identity and they won’t be able to escape it.

The Bible as a book can quite easily be seen to revolve around just two questions – both concerning identity. They are, “Who are you God?” and secondly and of almost equal importance, “Who am I” or perhaps “Who are we?” And it can easily be argued that our peace, our ‘Shalom’ is found in the answer to both of these questions.

I want next week to enter more deeply into what the Bible says about our identity but today I simply want to ask you the question – whose voice is determining your identity today? Who are you listening to? Who is answering that question for you?

I believe that a huge amount of our mental illness and anxiety occurs because we let the wrong people answer that question. We let people who don’t know us, don’t care for us, don’t like us and don’t want us to answer that question. We let names we were called in school dive deep within us and determine who we are... We let people who are angry with us have a right to determine our identity. We let prejudice and ignorance define our identity, challenge our attractiveness, destroy our sense of self-worth and basically screw up the God given identity we all have. And that’s just the nasty people.

You see well-meaning people can also bring a false vision of who we are into our lives. People who think they know what we should be; people who fear for us and would rather we choose some safe future than the future God has mapped out for us; people who love us for what we can give them and so determine our identity based on their needs.

I once knew a woman who married a wonderful young man. Fran and I visited them in the first months of their marriage and they were deeply in love and made for one another. A year later they were separated and went on to divorce. Apparently his mother had resented his moving out and had promised on their wedding night to have him back with her within the year. And she did. She had a future for him that ruined his future and the future of another lovely person.

Who can we trust to give us our identity? Friends, though God may use human agents occasionally to help us with this – God is the only one whom we should trust with this task. You see He knows our name and he has a name for us which is deeply fulfilling for us. It is His name which is the one we should seek and we should do so for three very simple reasons.

Psalm 8 delivers these.

Firstly, God has made us. Secondly God truly loves us and thirdly, the future is in no one but God's hands.

God has made us. This is one of our most fundamental understandings of who God is. He is Creator and, as such, He is our Creator. Psalm 8 affirms God as Creator when it says...

³When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that **you have established**;
(Psalm 8)

The great assumption behind this Psalm is that God has created it all. Everything is a product of God's creative activity. And it's as if

the Psalmist looks at the magnificence of the heavens, the moon and the stars and says – ‘Look at all this – and here’s little us – why are we so important to you?’ But who else should know us better than the One who formed us. Who else should understand us better than the One who formed us? Who else should we trust than the One who was before us and will ever be over us? God knows us through and through and so we can trust Him with our lives.

Secondly God loves us. This is the central theme of Psalm 8 – ‘Here we are, tiny, insignificant, lowly yet... You love us and crown us with glory and honour. How come?!!!’ What are we that we have been given dominion over this world – stewardship of the creatures of this world and understanding to know God and to make Him known? Yet who else would we trust but the One who has done this for us and, even more so, loved us to the Cross? Who else should we take our identity from than the One who risked everything for our sakes? Who else can provide us with a worthy and worthwhile identity than this one? God loves us more than we can ever imagine – let’s allow that love to shape us and not the words and imaginations of those who are not so trustworthy.

Finally, we should trust God with our identity because God owns the future.

²Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger. (Ps 8)

God chooses to use the weakest creatures – babes and infants – to defeat the enemy and the avenger. The future is assured – not because we are weak but because God is strong. God has the future sorted and, indeed, has our future sorted if we will accept it. And accepting it means accepting the identity God has for us – taking the name God has for us. This identity enables us to walk into the future much more confident – not because we know necessarily where we’re going but because we know who we are. It allows us to make good decisions – decisions which lead to a much better future.

Your identity is vital – let God lead you to it.