

Mike's message

Called by name.

Names are important. We all know the embarrassment of forgetting someone's name or, even worse, getting it wrong. One of the first things I check when I do a visit to plan a funeral is to check what name the person who has died was known by. Sometimes they are known by a shortened version of their first name, or their second - or sometimes a completely different name all together. Get it wrong and everyone at the funeral starts looking at each other. The person they knew just can't be called to mind by the wrong name. A name is who a person is. Names are that powerful.



Names are treasured. In my family history research I've recently realised that there's a regular pattern of naming children in each generation of Claridges throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. Every Claridge couple would name their first son after the child's Claridge grandfather, and first daughter after the grandmother. It even continues into the early 20th century when the names are used as second names. It's a remarkable sequence and maybe even have helped trace back another generation into the late 17th century. Names can tell us about our past.

In our Lent Course this year we're looking at just two chapters (26 and 27) of Matthew's Gospel, the chapters represent just four days leading up to the death and burial of Jesus. They are referred to as the Passion Narrative and versions occur in each of the four Gospels. Each one is distinctive from the rest of that Gospel in a number of features. Firstly, the events are firmly placed in time, that time being the Jewish Passover. Secondly, the events of those four days are related in real time, unlike the rest of the Gospel which is spread over a vague period of around three years.

The third aspect that makes the Passion Narratives distinct is the use of names. Elsewhere in the Gospels very few people, other than the disciples, are named. We read instead of 'a man came to Jesus...' or 'there was a woman who ...'. However in Matthew's Passion Narrative we encounter a role call of names; Caiaphas, Simon the Leper, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Barrabas, Simon of Cyrene, Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of James and Joseph, Zebedee and Joseph of Arimathea. The list in the Passion Narratives of the other three Gospels varies slightly but the effect is the same. The names root the account of the Passion in the personal stories of named individuals. A named 'passer by', Simon of Cyrene, is drawn into the agony of the road to the cross. A previously (in Matthew's Gospel) unnamed follower of Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea, is now drawn in to the events and ensures a dignified burial for Jesus. The scene is set for the events of Easter Day.

Then, in John's Gospel, in astonishment and fear at the sight of the empty tomb, a tearful Mary Magdalene encounters the risen Jesus. When he addresses her by name, 'Mary!', it's a reminder that he is calling each of us by name. Jesus calls us to be part of the drama of his risen life. He calls us because he loves us for who we are. He calls us by name.