

Names of God

Series (Parts 1 to 3). Holy Trinity Twickenham, July 2009.

Part 1: Yahweh (Exodus 3:13-15, John 8:54-59)

A few years ago I baptised a baby by the name of Tenelle Tishaun. Before the baptism I visited the mother and I said I'd never heard the names Tenelle or Tishaun before. And she said: 'Of course not, I've only just made them up.'

Some parents like to be original in their choice of names. Some people prefer to use an existing name. I remember when each of our children were born, we'd thumb through the Old Testament in search of a neglected gem. One of us would read out names, while the other would quietly shake their head: Zebulun? Shamgath? Bezalel? Ophni? Irpeel? In the end we came up with Joel and Daniel, who're biblical characters, and Joy, which is there in St Paul's list of Christian character-traits.

Names are interesting. Because a name's an intimate thing: it's how people know you. Sometimes people change their name by deed-poll, because they don't want to be known by their original name. Sometimes musicians and actors choose a name that gives a certain image. Harry Webb became Cliff Richard. Reginald Dwight became Elton John. Paul Hewson became Bono. Thomas Cruise Mapother IV shortened it to Tom Cruise. And it's not just actors and musicians who choose new names with a special meaning. Mother Theresa wasn't a mother and she wasn't called Theresa!

Names can say a lot about a person - who that person is, or at least how they see themselves and how others see them. And that's also true for God. In the Hebrew Bible, what we call the Old Testament, there are a number of different names for God. And they're important, because they reveal a lot about God's character.

In fact, in the culture of the Bible, names are particularly important. They don't only distinguish one person from another, they're often seen as expressing the essential nature and character of a person. And there's a sense that if you know God's name you have privileged access to God: if you know God's name, you know who to cry out to and ask for help and protection.

In the Bible, we're told God has a name. Not just a job description: 'God, ruler of the universe' God has a name, and that name is *Yahweh*. At least, we're fairly sure it's pronounced Yahweh. The Hebrew language doesn't have any vowels. And the name is spelt YHWH. Language experts say the most likely way of pronouncing it is Yahweh. In this country it used to be pronounced Jehovah, which comes from the Latin version of the same letters.

The personal name of God is Yahweh, and it's used more than 6,800 times in the Bible (in English Bibles it's usually written as 'LORD' in capitals). You get the impression that God's trying to make a point here: he has a name, and this name is significant. The root of the name Yahweh is 'to be', to be real and to be present. That's why Moses asks God what his name is and God replies 'I AM' (Exodus 3:14), that's the same root as the name Yahweh. And after God's told Moses his name, God says 'That is my name for ever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation'.

So the name Yahweh says: 'I'm real, I'm personal, and I'm present with my people to help and save them'. God has a name. He's not anonymous. He has revealed in history who he is. We have access to him, and we can know and trust him. We can't know God fully, of course we can't, because our human brains are limited. But we can know him truly. God's name is Yahweh: 'I'm real and present with my people'.

In Old Testament times the name Yahweh was considered so holy, it was only spoken aloud by the priests in the Temple in Jerusalem. And after the Romans destroyed the Temple in the year 70 AD, it was never spoken aloud at all. When people read the Bible and came to the name Yahweh, they'd say the word 'Adonai', which is Hebrew for Lord and Master, a sort of respectful title. Which is why we don't really know how to pronounce Yahweh. The pronunciation was lost with the destruction of the Temple.

But this gives us a bit of background to the words Jesus taught his disciples, in the Lord's Prayer: 'Hallowed be thy name'. Hallowed means to give it special respect. So Jesus says we need to pray that God's name will be hallowed, or honoured and respected. Why? Because the way we use the name of God says a lot about our view of God himself. To talk about God's 'name' is a way of talking about God.

So when we pray: 'Hallowed be thy name', we're praying God's name will be honoured and respected in our own day, in our own culture. And we're committing ourselves to honour and respect the name of God. Not just the name Yahweh, but also our English word God. And we're committing ourselves not to misuse the name of God, by using it casually or as a swear-word.

Incidentally, sometimes the name *Yahweh* is often used in the Bible alongside other names or titles of God, to draw attention to the characteristics of God. So when the people of Israel escape from slavery in Egypt, God reveals to the people that he's *Yahweh Rophe*, the God who brings healing and restoration. Abraham calls God *Yahweh Yireh*, God who provides for my needs.

Quite often these combined names are used by King David, who's described as a man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22, 1 Sam 13:13-14). David likes to refer to God as *Yahweh*.. something.

When David faces Goliath he says he comes in the name of *Yahweh Tsebaoth*, which means Lord of hosts. (That's the old English use of the word 'host' to mean a large number of people or things, as in: 'There are a whole host of reasons why I should do this or that'). So David calls God Lord of hosts. The idea is that God is sovereign over all created beings, over the whole host of angelic beings, the whole host of human beings and animals and plants in the natural world. In other words, David says he approaches Goliath in the name of the God who's supreme over every power in the material and spiritual universe.

In the Psalms, David writes of God as *Yahweh Roi* (the Lord my shepherd, Psalm 23:1), and *Yahweh Tsur* (the Lord my rock, PS 144:1). So you get these combined names, based on God's personal name of *Yahweh*.

But what matters most is this. God has a name, a personal name that he reveals to his people, and is used nearly 7,000 times in the Bible: *Yahweh*. And that tells us something important. That God isn't distant, remote or impersonal. He's up close and personal. He's the God who enters into a relationship with his people, and is present to help them and save them.

That's who he was in the time of Moses. That's who he was in the time of Jesus. That's still who he is today.

Part 2: Elohim (Genesis 1:1-6, Matthew 27:45-50)

During July, we're doing a series on the names of God in the Bible. Now, you might think: hang on, isn't God just called God? The answer is no: in the Bible God has names and titles which reveal important insights, into who God is and how he relates to his creation.

Last week we looked at the personal name of God in the Bible: *Yahweh*. It's a Hebrew word, and Hebrew is the language of the Old Testament. In the past it used to be translated 'Jehovah', but *Yahweh* is a more accurate version. The name *Yahweh*'s used more than 6,800 times in the OT alone. It's the personal name of God, and its meaning is something like: God is real, and he saves and helps his people. In English Bibles, this name *Yahweh* is translated as LORD (all in capitals).

This week we're looking at another name of God in the Bible. In fact, it's there in the very first verse of the Bible. Genesis 1 verse 1: 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.' The Hebrew word for God here is *Elohim*. In fact, *Elohim* appears 32 times just in this first chapter of the Bible.

It's the name associated with God's power in creation, his authority and sovereignty over the whole universe. It's the name that tells us God alone is responsible for the existence of the universe, that he alone is all-powerful and worthy of praise.

Of course, the moment you say that, somebody pops up and says: 'Aha, I believe in the scientific account of the origins of the universe'. Don't worry about it. There's no battle between science and faith on these things. Lots of today's leading scientists have a very real faith in God. And the way they bring their faith and their science together is this. They say that science tells them how the world was made, and how the world works. Faith gives them insights into why it was made, and why it works the way it does.

Thoughtful science and thoughtful faith belong together. In fact, modern physics in particular has pushed lots of people towards faith in God. Just one example of that: the idea of a Big Bang that started the universe. Back in 1929 the astronomer Edwin Hubble did some experiments where he found something astonishing. Our neighbouring galaxies are moving away from our galaxy. Everything in the universe is flying apart.

Now, this started a flurry of research by astronomers and physicists. And they found it's true. Everything in the universe really is flying apart. Most scientists now believe the universe began at a single moment, called the Big Bang, 14 billion years ago. The universe began as an infinitely dense point of pure energy, which exploded, and the way it exploded created stars and planets. The universe had a beginning.

There was a time before the universe existed, and there was a moment of creation, effectively out of nothing. And right there, in the very first sentence of the Bible, we're told the ultimate cause. All things came into existence through the power of *Elohim*.

Most people's God is too small. They treat God as a nice idea, or a good-luck charm, to pray to when things go wrong. Most people's god is a tame and tribal god. But Genesis 1 tells us that God is nothing less than the one who sparked the Big Bang, who called the vast reaches of space into existence. The creator of all matter and all life.

And that's partly why I love to find out about astronomy, about space and the planets. The distances and the dimensions involved are mind-bogglingly huge. But it reminds me of the greatness of God and stops me bringing God down to my own size.

In the Bible, you often find the two main names of God are brought together. He's *Yahweh Elohim*, the LORD God. And just those two words tell me something huge. That God is *Elohim*, the Creator, the source of the universe and all life. But he's also *Yahweh*, the one who's personal, who cares for his people and shares their lives. The one who knows me better than I know myself and loves me more than I can imagine.

May each of us discover the reality of *Yahweh Elohim* for ourselves.

Part 3: Part 3: Adonai (Psalm 16, John 20:24-28)

We've reached the third and final part of our series on the names of God. Just to recap where we've got to. In the Bible God isn't just called God. If you look at the original Hebrew, you'll see that God has a number of names or titles.

So far we've looked at the name *Yahweh*, which used to be translated *Jehovah*. We found that *Yahweh* is the personal name of God, which is used over 6,800 times in the Bible. We've looked at the name *Elohim*, which is the name of God in the very first chapter of the Bible, which talks about God as the all-powerful creator. *Elohim* is used 32 times in just that very first chapter of Genesis.

And each of these names tells us something important about God. *Yahweh* tells us God is personal and enters into covenant and relationship with people, *Elohim* tells us God's all-powerful. He's the source of life and existence.

Today we're looking at another of the names of God in the Bible, and that's the name *Adonai*. *Adonai* means Lord, and it's a term of special respect or deference. There's an episode in the book of Exodus where Moses talks with God. And when the Bible writer talks about God, he calls him *Yahweh*, but when Moses actually addresses God, he calls him *Adonai*. Moses is being respectful and deferential before God.

Incidentally, we said two weeks ago that *Yahweh* is written in English Bibles as LORD in capitals. When you see the word Lord just with a capital L, and the rest of the word not in capitals, that's that the Hebrew word *Adonai*. And this title for God is used more than 300 times in the Hebrew scriptures, our Old Testament.

Adonai communicates something about a relationship, which is what we also found with *Yahweh*. But there are a couple of important differences:

- 1) *Yahweh* is the unique personal name of God. It's not a word in general usage, it's not a name that anybody else has. But *Adonai* is the normal Hebrew word for Lord or master.
- 2) *Yahweh* and *Adonai* evoke different aspects of God's relationship with people. *Yahweh* is about closeness and faithfulness and love, while *Adonai* reminds us who's boss. It reminds us that God invites people into a relationship, but it's not a relationship of equals!

And that makes it a difficult word for lots of people today. We live in an era that values equality and human rights. People get nervous about ideas of submission or servanthood, about sovereignty and Lordship over people. These are politically-incorrect terms these days.

We've done away with slavery. In the marriage service, brides no longer promise to obey their husbands. In schools and in the workplace, models of learning are based on empowerment and respect, rather than submission to authority. People no longer give unquestioning respect to institutions that their grandparents used to defer to: parliament, the royal family, police, the church, the upper classes.

So it's more natural these days to talk in terms of God strengthening or empowering us, or helping us fulfill our potential. And there's a lot of truth in that. But that's not the whole story. In any generation, there's a risk of cultural blind-spots. In other words, we simply don't spot certain things because our society's stopped looking.

And that's true of this title of God, *Adonai*. The Bible has lots of language about submitting to God, and learning what it means to be a servant and having the attitude of a servant, to God and other people. When the prophet Isaiah has his vision of God, he's utterly humbled and made aware of his own inadequacies compared with God's glory and wonder. He recognizes God's majesty and authority.

But our society doesn't like that sort of language. In pastorally-sensitive churches, people avoid it in case people end up thinking God's like a bossy parent or remote authority figure. In Charismatic churches people talk about God as 'Daddy', and how approachable he is, in reaction to the old image of God as cold and remote. And these are a healthy reaction against wrong images of God from the past.

But the Bible's unashamed about the language of Lordship and submission. Why? Because without it we get a distorted image of who God is and who we are. Without it we end up wanting to be self-sufficient, or bringing God down to our own size. We end up seeing God as the One who blesses whatever decisions we make.

We end up with a God who goes along with whatever our society happens to choose: economically, politically, sexually, philosophically, theologically. God becomes little more than our own desires writ large. A God who'd never challenge anything I do, because a loving God wouldn't ever question my lifestyle choices, or the values me and my friends live by.

But that's not the God of the Bible. That's not *Adonai*, the Lord and Sovereign of the universe. That's a god made in my own image, a god who's safe and uncontroversial, a divine teddy-bear, who's only there to bring me comfort on my terms.

But the challenge of biblical Christianity is that the world has a Lord and Master. And it's as we learn submission to his will that we begin to discover our true identity, and our true potential.

In this series, we've talked about three of the most important names of God in the Bible. We've found that God is *Yahweh*, the personal God who longs to enter relationship with you and me. He's *Elohim*, the powerful creator of the universe. And he's *Adonai*, the Lord and Sovereign over all creation.

The challenge of the Christian faith is not how I can add a bit of spirituality to my busy life. It's about how I can begin to discern the purposes of *Yahweh Elohim Adonai* in history, and become a part of what he's doing. Finding the purpose of life is not a me-thing, it's a God-thing.