

**Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.
(Isaiah 43:1)**

Choosing a name is no trivial task as all new parents know; a name may be chosen in order to honour a relative or friend; a name may be avoided because of its associations with someone we particularly disliked at school. But equally names acquire significance because of their association with a particular person and who they are. My middle brother dislikes his name Nigel, but by now he *is* Nigel and when I think of the word Nigel, I think of him not the name itself.

Today we have three names to think about – all three have animal associations, and all have become so familiar that we can be forgiven for forgetting about their original significance. The names are 'gazelle', 'shepherd' and 'lamb'.

So, who is gazelle and why is she called this? Gazelle in Greek is 'dorka' and in Hebrew Tabitha and from the story in Acts of the Apostles we learn that in the very early Christian church Tabitha was an extraordinary woman. Tabitha lived in Joppa, the modern coastal town of Jaffa in Israel, and she was clearly a skilled and generous seamstress because she made clothes for the widows in her community. The story of her resuscitation by Peter is of course of great significance, but I think Luke has also recorded it in Acts because of who Tabitha was as a person. The clue is that she is 'dorka' – the gazelle. In the Book of Proverbs and the Song of Songs, the gazelle is used to describe the beautiful lover whom others love and adore. So, might it be that Tabitha is not the birth name of our woman but the name she has acquired because of her role as a generous and loving disciple of Christ? Her new name is her *Christian* name.

Very unusually Luke describes her as a 'disciple' (using a feminine noun) and when we remember that in the first century only men could be disciples and teachers, then Tabitha must have indeed been an extraordinary woman. But besides teaching as a Christian disciple, her fame and that fact that she was much adored was because she was giving refuge to a community of widows. Often widows in the first century were amongst some of the poorest members of society being doubly 'invisible' as women who were unmarriageable. Yet, here they are living as a Christian community, a community which the beloved Tabitha has created and sustained.

So, now when we think of the name Tabitha we should associate it with community, love, generosity and pioneering bravery - because I can imagine that she wasn't without her critics amongst Jewish and Christian traditionalists.

In John's Gospel Jesus has multiple names, but the one which he gives particular significance to, is the 'Good Shepherd'. Unlike dorka the meaning of shepherd is much more obvious – in the Old Testament kings are designated 'shepherds of the people' and in Psalm 23, the psalmist says, 'The Lord is my shepherd'. So familiar are we with his name 'shepherd' that we might well forget a crucial detail and that is how shepherds round up their sheep: they do it *individually* by calling each sheep by name.

To me all sheep look the same – which at the beginning of each academic year was pretty much the same experience of how I saw all my new Year 7 pupils! But as the year progressed, I got to know each by name and what kind of person they were. They also got to know me and what I expected of them and how they should behave and in return how I should treat them. Jesus says, ‘My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.’ He knows us by name and we, in turn, know him by name. The relationship is formed. *Now*, we are in a position to know that as the ‘good shepherd’ he and the Father are one.

And finally, Jesus is the heavenly Lamb as described so vividly in the Book of Revelation.

‘Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and the Lamb!’
(Revelation 7:10)

The Lamb is a name rich in meaning and association in the Old Testament. The title ‘horned lamb’ is given to Samuel, David and Solomon where it symbolises their victory and strength. The blood of the lamb has echoes of the Passover lamb whose blood warded off the angel of death when the children of Israel escaped from Egypt.

So, in the Book of Revelation the name ‘lamb’ is not quite what we would expect in any ordinary sense. Jesus ‘the Lamb of God’ combines ideas of being led as well as being a leader.

Names are therefore highly significant. When a child is baptised or christened the priest asks the parents what name they wish to give their child. This recalls the words of the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 43:1-5) and Jesus, the Good Shepherd, that God has called us by name, and we are his. When Gill and I carry out a baptism in St Mary’s we give every person a luggage label to write a message to the child who has just be christened. The messages support that person *by name* on their journey in life and ultimately to the throne of the Lamb.

‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.’ So, by what name is God personally calling you to be on your journey with Jesus, the Good Shepherd, the Lamb?

Michael Wilcockson