

Living up to an inherited name

A sermon on John 17:6-19 by Nathan Nettleton, 13 May 2018

© LaughingBird.net

Message

Jesus's priestly identity and mission have been passed on to us and are to be seen in our prayer and our lives.

Sermon

It can be tough living with a name you've inherited from someone else. Their reputation can follow you round in all sorts of inconvenient ways. There are plenty of people who grew up with famous parents who could tell you all about how disastrous it can be.

It doesn't have to be widespread fame either. If you go to a school where your older brother or sister was dux of the school or villain of the school a year or two before, it can be a hard task forging your own identity. You can ask Margie about it later – she was the younger sister of a star student. I had a friend who was Gary Ablett's cousin, and he always chose to be known by his mother's maiden name so as to avoid being known as an Ablett.

But there can be times when inheriting someone else's name and reputation can be a bonus too. All sorts of doors will be opened or all sorts of indiscretions overlooked for the son or daughter of so and so.

Sometimes for better and sometimes for worse, a well connected name counts in this world.

The reading we heard earlier from John's gospel contained part of a prayer which Jesus prayed at the last supper, the night before he was executed. It is a prayer that is often described as Jesus's high priestly prayer.

It is called his high priestly prayer for two reasons. If you heard my sermon at the Ascension service on Thursday night, then you will be interested to know that one of the reasons is that this prayer appears to be deliberately modelled on a prayer prayed by the high priest in the Day of Atonement liturgy from the ancient first temple.

The second reason is that in this prayer, Jesus is fulfilling a central function of a priest, praying for the people. In this case, as we heard, he is particularly praying for those people who have chosen to follow him: that would be us. And one of the things we hear Jesus praying for in this prayer, is that we will inherit his name, that we will continue to be identified by others as being associated with him.

We hear this coming through in several places. Jesus prayed that we might be protected in the same name that God had given him. In other words, that God might give us the same identity that he first gave to Jesus, and that this identity might help protect us – as though God had written his name on us so that any one who would attack us would know that they'll have God to deal with if they do.

Now that sounds like a wonderful promise if you focus on the aspect of God's protection that it speaks of. But if you stop to think about the rest of what it means to go about in the world wearing the identity of someone who was executed as a political prisoner, it may seem a little more daunting. Perhaps the protection is needed because of the increased level of danger!

Indeed this was picked up later in the reading. Jesus again implies that we will be identified with him when he speaks of sending us into the world just as he himself was sent into the world. It makes sense that this prayer comes at this point in the story and that we hear it on this week of the year, because this Sunday begins the last week of the Paschal season. We've been celebrating the resurrection of Jesus and the time he spent back among his followers after rising from the dead, but this week marks the change over. Jesus is handing the mission and ministry over to us and withdrawing from the front line. He gives his last instructions, promises the gift of the Holy Spirit to equip us for the task, and then hands over the baton to the fledgling church.

So I want to reflect for a few minutes on something of what it means for us to inherit Jesus's identity, and the mission that comes with it. We could easily spend a long time over this, but we won't. But if you were to think about the various names and titles that have been used to describe Jesus and you then asked what it would mean to inherit that identity, you could write a book or three.

I want to focus briefly on three things, all of them things that are related to the description of Jesus as our high priest, because although it is not a description that appeared in this reading, it is, as I said, a description that is often used when describing it, and it is one which the Bible elsewhere clearly connects to us. All believers are called to share in the priesthood of Jesus.

One of the functions of a priest is to be a reconciler. You can hear that in this prayer because Jesus is clearly trying to bring God and the believers closer together and to bring the people closer to one another. "Protect them in this name you have given me, so that they might be one, just as you and I are one." Jesus is endeavouring to reconcile us to one another, to ensure peace among people. Indeed one of his other names that we could reflect on is the Prince of Peace.

In Australia at the present time, the rhetoric of reconciliation has come and gone in our public discourse, but the practice of reconciliation is as needed as ever. And just because discussions of social and racial reconciliation do not use churchy language, it doesn't mean that it is a different thing.

It doesn't take too much imagination to see Jesus speaking up for the first nations people of this land. You don't have to read much of what Jesus had to say about the relationships between the rich and the dispossessed, the powerful and the vulnerable, to know where he'd be standing in the debates on the relationship between indigenous and colonising peoples in Australia.

Little things can count for a lot in the process of reconciliation. We saw how powerful a little word like "sorry" can be when one prime minister kept refusing to say it, and then the next one said it publicly and powerfully. Little things can be powerful symbols, and symbols are what change the way we think.

Our acknowledgement of the traditional custodians of this land each Sunday in our worship is not going to sort out Australia's race relations, but it is a symbol that helps keep our own hearts and minds on track so that when we are outside of here it can spill over into the ways we live and relate when we run into situations where more than symbols are on the line. If we

inherit Jesus's priestly role as reconcilers, it will show in both our symbols and our hard core deeds.

A second aspect of the priestly identity of Jesus that we inherit is the one we see in action most clearly in this reading – the pray-er, the interceder. One of the main images in the New Testament of what Jesus is doing now is continuing to pray for us. Just as he was doing in the prayer we heard, Jesus continues to represent us to God, praying for our well-being, our protection, our strengthening and equipping for the tasks to which he has called us.

So if we inherit that identity, we too will be people who spend time pleading with God for the peace and well-being of the world and its peoples. I'm not going to try to unpack a theology of how prayer works here, but if nothing else, it certainly shapes the world view and mind set of those who pray.

This too we express in our worship each week, as we offer prayers for the care of the earth, for people in conflict, for those in fear or in suffering, and for God's people in all the earth. In those prayers, both on Sundays and in our daily prayer, we begin to live up to the identity we have inherited from our great high priest, and as our prayers begin to grow into that identity, so to our actions begin to grow into our prayers. As Athol Gill used to say, there's no use praying for something if you wouldn't be willing to let God use you to bring about the answer.

The final aspect of the priestly identity of Jesus that I want to mention is very much bound up with the previous two. It is perhaps best expressed in the name used of Jesus in the stories of his birth, Emmanuel – God with us. If we are to grow into our inherited identity as priests, we represent God to other people. In our lives and in our prayers we seek to bring God closer to all those who need to discover the love and mercy and fullness of life that God desires for them.

This is most clearly expressed in our shared life, because it is as we gather to be the church, to hear the word and to share around this table, that we become the body of Christ in the world – the most tangible sign of Jesus's resurrection presence reaching out in love to a world in need. We express this every week in the closing part of our worship when we commit ourselves to being what we are sent out to be, a community of grace sharing our life with and for the world.

Well, I said that this topic could blow out to be a book or three, but I think I've said more than enough for tonight. The name we inherit from Jesus is both our security and our mission. We begin to grow into it right here, and we carry that identity with us as we go out into every area of our normal everyday lives. Jesus, our risen Lord, continues to pray for us, and with our faith in him we both join his prayer, and grow into the identity conveyed in his prayer.