

What's in a name? Many years ago, to be specific, in 1962, I was teaching an honor's freshman English course. One of my students in that class was Alice, a woman with whom I am still in touch. Alice was devouring everything she could find to read, and she was always testing **me**. One day she came into my office and abruptly asked, "Who are you?" I immediately answered, "I am me." Seemingly angry, she almost yelled at me, "That's the most egotistical thing I've ever heard in my life!" Alice had been reading an article about how Americans equate themselves with their jobs or their relationships, as in "I'm a teacher," "I'm a nurse," or "I'm a husband," "I'm a mother." Obviously I hadn't answered with the kind of name I was supposed to give.

What's in a name? Did you notice the emphasis on naming the child in our Gospel reading?

When they came on the eighth day to circumcise the child,  
they were going to call him Zechariah after his father,  
but his mother said in reply,  
"No. He will be called John."  
But they answered her,  
"There is no one among your relatives who has this name."  
So they made signs, asking his father what he wished him to be called.  
He asked for a tablet and wrote, "John is his name,"  
and all were amazed.

As John grew up and began preaching, people began to puzzle over who or what John was.

John's appearance and his habits were unusual. He dressed like the prophet Elijah in clothing made of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist as described in the book of II Kings. He was a hermit or ascetic in the tradition of the Nazarite, one who was dedicated by his parents or who dedicated himself to God, living ascetically and sparingly.

He was fearless and seems to us harsh in calling the people to repentance:

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?  
Produce good fruits as evidence of your repentance . . . ." [And he

was specific as they asked him what they were to do:] “Whoever has two tunics should share with the person who has none. And whoever has food should do likewise.” [To the tax collectors, he said,] “Stop collecting more than what is prescribed” (Luke 3:7b-8a,11,13b).

As a result and not surprisingly, “. . . people were filled with expectation, and all were asking in their hearts whether John might be the Messiah” (Luke 3:15).

And this is the testimony of John. When the Jews from Jerusalem sent priests and Levites [to him] to ask him, “Who are you?” he admitted and did not deny it, but admitted, “I am not the Messiah.” So they asked him, “What are you then? Are you Elijah?” And he said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” He answered, “No.” So they said to him, “Who are you, so we can give an answer to those who sent us? What do you have to say for yourself?” He said: “I am ‘the voice of one crying out in the desert, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’” as Isaiah the prophet said” (John 1:19-23).

This quotation from Isaiah has nothing of harshness in it; it is from a section of Isaiah, called “The Book of Consolation”; for in this section the prophet proclaims a Second Exodus, when the Jews will be allowed to return to their homeland from captivity in Babylon.

What’s in a name? When we can give a name to someone, we believe that we know something of that person. It is clear that John was a difficult man to find one name for. Concerning John, Jesus said:

. . . what did you go out to see? Someone dressed in fine clothing? Those who wear fine clothing are in royal palaces. Then why did you go out? To see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written:

‘Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you;  
he will prepare your way before you.’

Amen, I say to you, among those born of women there has been none greater than John the Baptist . . . . . All the prophets and the law\* prophesied up to the time of John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah, the one who is to come (Matthew 11:8-11a,13-14).

Thus the Church says that John the Baptist is the last of the prophets and the one who inaugurates the Gospel.

What's in a name? I want to take you back to the Gospel reading for today. Notice that the people expected John to be a little Zechariah. In Jewish tradition a firstborn or only son was the father in the next generation. From before John was born, however, Zechariah knew that his son would be different from himself. From his birth, his mother also knew that this child would be like none of his relatives. Obviously they didn't try to make him into a little Zechariah.

What's in a name? I wonder how many of us limit our children and limit ourselves by the names we give them and the names we choose for ourselves. God makes each one of us a one-of-a-kind. We have unique gifts and abilities, and God calls each one of us to use and to share what he has lent to us for the good of others and for the glory of God.