

Sunday 2nd February 2025 - Know My Name - The Aim Of The Name

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] Morning everyone. Good to see you today. And as Ian said, if you don't know me, my name is Matt, a vicar here at St John's. And I know as we started 2025, it's been really nice to see a good number of new people join us on recent Sundays.

But I also appreciate if that's you and you're on the newer side of things, you may have been wondering if it's just me who does these talks up here. Because I've done a few weeks on the trot now. What the good news is, don't panic, because it's not just me.

All right. We've got a good spread of people indeed over the next couple of months. We've got including we've got Hayley and Kim and Dave and Helen and Ian will be up here to in the weeks to come.

So plenty to look forward to with what each of those folks will be sharing as well. So that's a bunch of different names to come, which is fitting perhaps because we're doing this series on a Sunday called Know My Name, in which we're exploring the importance and the significance of names, names for God and places that we see and come across in the Bible, people in the Bible, names we might have for ourselves or for others, names we give to experiences or memories or feelings. across the board, really. And I guess as we've been saying over recent weeks, names matter. You know, they provide meaning and identity in all sorts of ways.

[1 : 26] And so with that in mind, what I'd like us to explore this morning is the way in which the very practice of naming things can be helpful for the way we relate to God and hopefully experience the wholesome love that God has for us in our lives.

Indeed, what's interesting is that from very early on in the Bible, God is seen as encouraging us humans to name things.

So you get this little section, which we'll look at in a sec, from Genesis chapter 2, which is the second creation story that we're told about. But in this particular story, we're told this, that now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky.

He brought them to the man to see what he would name them. And whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals.

It's quite a sweet little scene, I think, this one, almost sort of Dr. Doolittle-like, almost. A story in which God, the creator, almost seems excited at the chance to parade all the animals and the birds before the man so that he, the man, not God, has the privilege of naming them.

[2 : 59] You can imagine God sort of thinking, right, come on then, let's do this together. Saying to the man, what are you going to call this one, for example, as this one parades up? Can't wait to hear what ideas you've got on this, these names I'm asking you to call them.

And the man's there sort of thinking, I don't know, where do you start with that? It's like, dog or something, you know, just a nice, simple one, he thinks. And God's like, okay, that's a start, I suppose.

But really, we can go to town with all these names, okay? You can be as imaginative as you want, thinks God. I'm giving you the permission to name all these animals. So God sort of says, okay, what about this little guy here?

What about this little one, this little insect with wings? Incredible little creature. What are you going to call this one? Go to town, you know, use your imagination. And the man's sort of thinking, okay, it's got wings.

Yeah. So it goes up in the air. Yeah. So it can fly? I don't know. Do you know? And God sort of smacks his head. It's going to be a long day, this naming process.

[3 : 59] Evidently, though, the man gets it together a little bit, though, because he gets on to naming sort of orangutans and hippopotamus and duckbill platypus, all that kind of stuff. It's a nice little picture, and it's obviously a picture story.

But it does, at the very least, suggest an awareness from God of how important it is and how empowering he knows it will be for us as humans to be able to identify and recognize and name things.

Not just animals, but all sorts of things for ourselves. So, for example, if we think about naming the way we might function in social settings, you know, being able to name the fact that we're, say, an extrovert or an introvert, that can be really helpful in understanding what energizes us and whether we're best recharged by being with lots of people or by spending time on our own.

It's not a label to live by or be defined by, but naming our general preference in this way, it can be helpful, not just socially, but spiritually, I'd suggest, as well.

So for me, as a pretty extreme introvert, I know that I'm recharged with God by taking time out on my own. It's not that I don't value people or gatherings like this, and I need both my own space and time with people to stay rounded.

[5 : 33] But I know I'm usually most energized spiritually by that solo or quiet or one-on-one time with people. You may be the same as that.

You may be the complete opposite. And I guess we'll all be a blend of the two to some degree. Indeed, if we look in the Gospels and we think about Jesus, we can probably detect elements of both introversion and extroversion in the character of Jesus.

So someone who seems to enjoy social gatherings and describes heaven as a big banquet, while also on other occasions being someone who spent significant time on his own in order to be refreshed.

But recognizing our personal preference and naming what energizes us, that can be helpful in knowing what might serve us best when we're feeling perhaps in our faith, in need of a bit of oomph, should we say, or we're craving some clarity for a particular decision or whatever.

What else? Well, I know there are folks here today who have been massively helped by having a name for their particular form of neurodiversity, such as ADHD or autism, in understanding the way we're wired.

[7 : 02] Yes, that will help with how we see ourselves or relate to others. But again, it can also be an eye-opener for how we might best relate to God as well.

So if we are diagnosed, say, with ADHD, being given a name for the way we're wired, being given a name for the way we might perhaps struggle to stay focused on some tasks, but then be incredibly creative with others and so on or the other, that can free us from feeling guilty for struggling with certain forms of prayer or worship or church life, while simultaneously helping us to know what kind of church stuff or spiritual practices might suit us better as a result of the way that we're wired.

Or then similarly, thinking a bit more broadly perhaps in terms of understanding a general personality type, and there are all sorts of tools out there to try and work out the kind of people we are.

I guess the Enneagram, if you've heard of that one, that's probably one of the best, which gives us not just a name for our personality type, but also how to relate best to others depending on their personality type.

So the Enneagram is nine broad but interconnected personality types, summed up with these nine different names. It's not hierarchical, there's no preference really, one's not better than the other, but each of us largely it's reckoned will be one of these nine.

[8 : 40] Of them all, I'm probably a number one known as a reformer, someone who it's reckoned is largely conscientious and ethical, who strives to improve things, but at the same time is afraid perhaps of making mistakes because of a tendency towards perfectionism as well.

So once at their best, they can be well organised and wise and have high standards, at their worst, they get resentful and impatient and critical.

And if I'm honest, as I read through the sort of more detail of what a number one is, I recognise myself in that quite a lot, quite a lot. It's largely me. But it's helpful for me and for others to know the kind of personality I am.

Not as a label, but more as a way of naming my strengths and my weaknesses. And that knowledge, you know, well it informs my self-awareness and it helps me to know where I perhaps need most help from God to sort of sharpen up my shadow sides.

But it also helps me in knowing which settings I might be able best to give to God, you know, when I'm in my sort of comfort zone, if you like.

[10:04] As I say, each of us, probably one of these nine. And it'd be interesting to know what you might be on this. And there are all sorts of free Enneagram tests to try online, if this interests you.

The Enneagram Institute is probably the best paid one. And from a faith perspective, people like Richard Rohr have done loads of work on this. There's all sorts of resources.

If you just Google Richard Rohr, R-O-H-R and Enneagram, you'll come up with loads of stuff which might be helpful for this. It really, there was a good episode of the Mid-Faith Crisis podcast on the Enneagram a few weeks back as well.

So dig that kind of stuff out if you wish. But I think in all this, trying to work out how we're wired, who we are, what names we might give to different aspects of our personalities.

I think just as God brought the animals and birds to the man to see what he would name them, so too I suspect God is keen for us to be able to name the way we're wired in order to better understand ourselves, to better understand each other, and perhaps most of all to understand the best way that we might relate to God.

[11:19] What else might be important, though, about naming things? Well, I say connected to this is the benefit that comes from being able to give names, not just to our preferences, our personality type or our neurodiversity, but to our emotional life as well.

Indeed, I say one such emotion that we'll all feel from time to time that there's immense benefit in being able to name is the emotion of grief.

In fact, in my experience, one of the ways God's Spirit helps us to process grief is by enabling us to name it as such, to name the emotions and feelings that come with loss as grief, to say, I am grieving at this time.

See, grief, as we know, is most usually associated with the death of a loved one. You know, those feelings of bewilderment and numbness, often of physical aching, longing, you know, the grief that accompanies death is intense.

It's intense for us. But death is not the only context in which we experience grief in this life, because more broadly, I guess we could define grief like this as an emotional response to a connection being lost.

[12:50] So, for example, we might grieve when losing a job or entering retirement because we've lost the connection we had with a sense of vocation or achievement, with work colleagues or with a daily routine.

Equally, we can grieve the breakup of a relationship and the loss of that emotional connection with someone. We can grieve at the loss of connection that happens as friendships fade and become more distant.

We can grieve when a child leaves home. Might not all be grief, I grant you with that, you might be waiting for it, but we can grieve when a child leaves home and that loss of domestic connection as well.

We can grieve being alone and the loss of connection that we maybe had of dreams for companionship. We can grieve the lack of mobility or opportunity that ill health or age can bring because in many ways we lose that wider connection with the world.

A loss of connection can happen in all sorts of ways, in all kinds of situations, particularly in times of change. And yet recognizing and being able to name the emotional pain that comes with this loss of connection as grief, well, that can be hugely helpful because it enables us to accept and process our pain.

[14:14] It gives us permission, if you like, to think this is normal. This is very much part of what life and death and loss and pain is about and even expected to be about.

If we can say not just that we're sad but that we're grieving, that helps, I think, because grief is a particular form of sadness that needs an extra level, an extra dose of kindness and comfort and time, whether in self-care or from the care offered to us by others.

That's why I suggest we read this, that Jesus wept when news of Lazarus' death came through to him. He was grieving, no doubt, at his own loss of connection, however temporary, with his friend

Lazarus, but grieving most of all, it seems, in empathy and compassion for the loss of connection, the grief being experienced by Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha in particular.

Indeed, Jesus tears when he's described as weeping. I guess his tears were a visible sign of his understanding of their grief, a way of naming their pain alongside the words that he used.

His tears identified that pain as well. What's more, I'd suggest being able to name our feelings in general, but such as grief.

[15 : 48] Well, that in itself can be part of the healing process for us. Indeed, here's a quote from a guy called Fred Rogers, Mr. Rogers, as he was better known, the American children's TV host, who was played by Tom Hanks the other year in the film *A Beautiful Day in the Neighbourhood*, and it's a film well worth watching if you haven't seen it.

Tom Hanks played Fred Rogers, and that's Fred Rogers in real life. You can see the resemblance there. But he had this to say about the importance of naming our feelings, feelings such as grief.

He said this. He said, Anything that's human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable. When we can talk about our feelings, they become less overwhelming, less upsetting, and less scary.

The people we trust with that important talk can help us know that we are not alone. I like that. A lot of wisdom in there.

You know, acknowledging grief, for example. You know, naming it for what it is. Naming whatever the loss of connection might be. Not only does that help give ourselves permission for how we're feeling, but it can remove some of the power or hold it can have over us by inviting others whom we trust, most of all God, into the midst of our feelings.

[17 : 25] And when we lay out how we're feeling before God, we name our grief. Well, that's where healing can come, because I think it means that what's mentionable can be more manageable.

And in one more way, in which being able to give names to aspects of our emotional life can be helpful, is to do with a benefit that comes from giving names to the more negative, the more unhelpful ways in which we sometimes see ourselves.

For example, a common encouragement from therapists and counsellors is for us to do this, to name our inner critic.

What's meant by this? Well, our inner critic is that voice in our heads which seeks to bring us down, you know, that tells us how lacking or even useless we are.

And that voice which tells us as you walk into any kind of setting, you know, who are you trying to kid? You don't fit in here. What are you doing here? You're a fake. Don't even bother with this.

[18 : 32] That voice that tells us that we won't fit in no matter how hard we try. Maybe that voice which gives us that imposter syndrome that convinces us that we don't deserve to belong.

And I think we've all got elements of this inner critic. A voice whose volume can range from occasional self-doubt to consistent self-loathing.

Did I wonder what your inner critic tends to say to you? What are you most vulnerable with hearing in your mind? And how frequently does that inner critic say that to you?

Trouble is, however loud or often it speaks, this inner critic is not good. In fact, it's always destructive. It crushes our confidence and stops us from flourishing.

It stops us from fully becoming the people God has made us to be. And yet naming our inner critic is important because it is just that.

[19 : 41] It's a way of calling this inner criticism out out in order to help us know that actually it's not us speaking here. And this may sound weird, but some psychologists recommend literally giving that inner negative voice, that inner critic, a name of our choosing to underline the extent to which it's not us.

So when that voice of, you know, disdain or derision tells us that we're ugly or stupid or awkward or whatever, we can address it by name directly and calling out.

So you can pick any name you want. You can call it any name. So you might say, oh, hello, Belinda. There you are again. I wondered where you'd been. I wondered when you'd pipe up negatives about me.

You come to bring me down again. Have you, Belinda? Well, not today. You're not. Not today, Belinda. Nope. I'm not going to listen to your voice today.

Sounds a bit weird. You can pick any name you want. I tried to pick Belinda because I don't think there's any Belindas here this morning. It's a bit of a similar notion, I guess, to the idea of having

depression as what's called the black dog.

[20 : 59] I think it was Samuel Johnson down the road in Litchfield who first coined the phrase and Winston Churchill made it famous. It's this metaphor for having depression and sadness follow you around like a lumbering black dog who's difficult to shake off.

But whether we name our inner critic Belinda or whatever or our depression as black dog, it seems the act of naming it is important because it helps us realize that it's not actually our voice.

It's not our identity. It's not our name. It doesn't need to define us and it's therefore something external to us which we can ask God to help us keep at bay.

And this idea of asking God to keep that external voice at bay, I think it's interesting because I wonder if there are parallels with the idea of naming our inner critic with the way in which Jesus responded to the voices tempting him to doubt or compromise his calling.

For example, we're told just after his baptism that Jesus went into the desert, into the wilderness where for 40 days he was tempted by the devil.

[22 : 25] These temptations as they were to conjure up bread because he was hungry, to choose to worship the devil in exchange for power, to put God to the test by throwing himself off the temple.

On each occasion, Jesus addresses and answers this critical voice directly. We're told Jesus quotes different Bible verses as a means of rejecting these temptations by holding on to God's truth.

But then in Matthew's gospel in particular, we read this that eventually Jesus said to him, away from me, Satan. What does Satan mean?

Well, it means accuser. It means someone who seeks to bring us down, someone who seeks to criticize us, someone who seeks to crush our identity as people made in the image of a loving God. Now, we can debate the extent to which Satan is an image or personification of general evil or a real fallen angelic being as Jesus seems to suggest.

[23 : 40] But it's the act of naming this evil as Satan. That seems to be crucial to Jesus being able to overcome the temptation, to overcome the accusation, we might say the inner critic even, that it brings.

Because once again, if it's mentionable, it becomes more manageable. Get behind me, Satan, says Jesus, on another occasion.

You know, you can do one in other words. Because I'm not going to listen to your lies. And more positively, as we're told in James, it says, resist the devil, resist the Satan, the accuser, and he will flee from you.

You know, we talk and we sing about the name of Jesus being the name above all names. and I firmly believe that to be true.

But I wonder if part of how that belief in the name of Jesus works is that whenever we name something for what it is, you know, such as grief or abuse or neglect or racism or fascism or inequality or loneliness or the accuser or our inner critic, you know, in naming these negative emotions or systems or realities, where they somehow come under the name of Jesus in a way that strips them of their power.

[25 : 15] You know, they become subordinate to the overarching love and justice and hope and healing of Jesus. In fact, it's almost as if by prayerfully speaking the name of Jesus over these things that God through his spirit is somehow more able to work at breaking whatever hold they might have over us and our world.

And so I wonder for you today, what is it perhaps that you could do with naming, with giving a name to reality in your life?

Realities perhaps like grief or loneliness, could be apathy, that could be something to name, could be self-doubt, could be anxiety or addiction, could be that imposter syndrome, could be the black dog of depression, could be that inner critic who constantly nags at us telling us we're no good, could even be naming that accuser who tries to derail our lives.

You'll know if there's something that needs naming, I suspect. But as we ask for God's courage to name the things which afflict or erroneously define us, we do so knowing that we can speak the name of Jesus over and above them all because the name of Jesus, indeed Jesus himself, is the one who brings healing and hope to our lives and to our world.

And so in all of this, I guess my prayer in this importance, this gift, if you like, of naming things, is that it would help each of us to grow in knowledge of ourselves, yeah, in knowledge of us, you

know, how we relate to each other, yeah, but most of all, I think it's this gift of growing in our knowledge of God, you know, the God of love who we can know through the beautiful, wonderful, powerful name of Jesus.
[27 : 40] Amen.