

# The Name of Jesus

## Sabbatical Sermon no. 3

Do you ever feel your life is out of balance? That something crucial is missing? Or that your life is full, but seems to have lost its shape and meaning.

We'll listen carefully, because this is for you. Something else gleaned from our special history here.

I live at no. 7 Old Town, and when they were building that Vicarage in the late 60's they found remains of Saxon village houses, part of the original Old Town I guess that had grown up around the monastery here and mill house down the lane.

The monks here would have followed the Rule of St Benedict, still followed by many monks and nuns today. At its heart lies an emphasis on the flourishing of the whole human person, Body, Mind and Spirit. Think of a wooden stool, with three legs. If one leg is too short, the stool is wobbly. If one leg is missing there is no way it can stand. Well Benedict said that's a bit like us as people. If we think of ourselves just as physical beings, or units of production then we are dehumanised. As human beings we have the amazing capacity to think, to question, to reflect and explore ideas. But nor are we just 'brains on legs'. If education is just about cramming children's heads with information it would be a pretty shallow thing. Because we are Body, Mind and Spirit. The emotional, feeling, spiritual side of our nature is crucial to being fully human too. To know oneself to be valued and affirmed. To love and be loved. To hope for something in this life and beyond. To have faith or trust in something or someone and to know peace, security and tranquillity of heart. These are our basic spiritual needs. When I discovered that God was real, and that he loved me, I found the key to meeting those spiritual needs that each of us have. Without something of that connection with God as we know him in Jesus, that third leg of the stool is missing and human life becomes very wobbly indeed.

As you may know on my sabbatical I was trying to consciously live this three-fold way of St Benedict. I tried to make sure that every day included work for the body, work for the mind, and work for the Spirit. Every day needed to include at least an hour each of physical work or exercise, of mental work or study and also spiritual work, time set aside for God in prayer and meditation.

The physical for me was easy. I like walking and cycling and working in the garden, so that was no problem. The study I loved too, looking at the history we're exploring in this series. But spiritual work, sometimes that was harder. On a good day for gardening, you just want to get on. On a good day of study you don't feel like stopping for an hour of prayer. Sometimes you can pray out walking, or even when studying, but it's no good just relying on that. It's easy to think we'll leave prayer till we've got some spare time, but somehow we never have that kind of spare time! And anyway what will I do? What if the prayer time is unproductive? What if I get bored? What if I don't connect with God and just feel a big emptiness and void? The spiritual leg of the stool easily becomes detached and we become literally

unbalanced as human beings. When we feel too busy to pray, we're really too busy NOT to pray, and need that discipline more than ever. I often found that once the prayer and space for God had been found in a day, other things fell properly into place.

But *how* do we pray?

We've talked already in this sermon series about life in the church here between 1491 and 1616. We've looked at the theme of Rivalry in town and church, and at the place of senses and sensuality in worship. We heard the medieval church described as ,

“A natural place to meet with friends and a supernatural place to meet with God”  
Owen Chadwick

Today's title is 'The Name of Jesus' which was the focus of a powerful spiritual movement in the time of the Vicar, Thomas Balsall's time. It focussed on Jesus earthly life and on mediation, singing and prayer around the name of Jesus. The New Testament often encourages Christians to pray in Jesus' name and our ancestors rediscovered the comfort of that prayer and of knowing that the crucified Jesus was really with them when their life too was so fragile and suffering never far away. When I read about this devotion to the Name of Jesus, the chancel suddenly came to life for me in a new way. All the carvings around Balsall's tomb are scenes from the life of Christ. The carvings around the door to the left of the altar rail show the infant Christ being carried by St Christopher and Jesus rising from the tomb. Every face of Christ was hacked off at the reformation, considered for that short time to be idolatrous. But a little medieval glass survived, again with scenes from Jesus' life, as well as a beautiful face of Christ still nestling untouched in a seat canopy. Unnoticed by today's visitors, and by yesterday's religious police! A new altar was also built in the church called the Jesus Altar, just over there, by the door leading to the ringing chamber, where a special Jesus Mass was celebrated week by week, usually on a Friday. Balsall, who designed all this, had built a showcase in the chancel to reveal and celebrate the life of his Saviour. And a further clue reveals even more. All around his tomb, easily overlooked, are the letters IHS. Perhaps you've seen them elsewhere in church. They are the capital Greek letters for JES, the first letters of Jesus' name. To find them all around Balsall's tomb proves that he was in himself a devotee of the Name of Jesus. Meditation on his name would have been a key part of his spiritual life. And perhaps it can be in our lives today.

I've stayed in monasteries and convents that still chant the name of Jesus over and over as part of their devotional life. In ordinary churches the nearest we get to it are perhaps the modern choruses focussing on Jesus name. We have one today after communion to sing quietly together. I used to think they were too sentimental, but I've changed. They can be a way for heart to speak to heart, for our emotional centre to connect with Jesus, and whats more, they are a direct descendent of a catholic medieval cult activity popular in this very church! Another new-fangled practice that

has much deeper roots in our history than we might think. Using the name Jesus is an easy way into heart-filled contemplative prayer, just repeating the word Jesus softly over and over. Or a way of bringing concerns to God without needing many words, for instance praying, 'Jesus-Iraq, Jesus-Iraq'. Heart speaks to heart in Jesus' name, today as long ago. Its just one way to do our spiritual exercise each day.

So lets be quiet for a moment in the presence of Jesus. He loves you body, mind and spirit.

Think of those three elements in a balanced life: physical, mental and spiritual work. Which is most absent for you? What could you begin to do about it?

In Jesus' name.

Amen.