

All Saints Alive

READER'S REFLECTION

What's in a name? asks Geoff Oates

Dear Friends,

Every January the government's National Statistics Office publish a list of the most popular boys and girls names registered in the past year; and you can often spot which pop star or film star or sports star has caught the imagination of young parents. The 2007 report noted that 'Alfie' had rocketed up into the top 10, one suspects that Amy Winehouse's hit song of the same name had a lot to do with it – or maybe it was the remake of that old Michael Caine film with Jude Law in it. Thomas has been top three amongst the boys for the last 15 years: some people suspect a certain tank engine is responsible!!

You can find the list on the internet on:

http://www.statistics.gov.uk/specials/babies_names_girls.asp

http://www.statistics.gov.uk/specials/babies_names_boys.asp

We have all sorts of reasons for naming our children as we do, and it's certainly not all following fashion. Some like to carry on family traditions, hoping perhaps to bind our children into their family identity – our son Thomas follows a line of Thomas Oates's going back to his great, great, great grandfather. Americans are fond of giving the mother's maiden name as their child's second name. Some go quite the other way, trying to make their children's names as unique as they want their children to be – with results that might lead to a bit of teasing at school when they get older.

I feel a little sorry for the three siblings who recently graced a birth announcements column in a newspaper, and who will go

through life with the names Ptolomy, Atticus and Octavius.

Some names that were common amongst my classmates (baptismal roll of 1961) – Christopher, Andrew, Mark – barely make it into the top 100 now. But on the whole we're pretty conservative. The favourite names don't change much from year to year, and if you are prepared to accept 'Jack' as a variant of 'John', nine of the top fourteen boys names for 2007 are either traditional Biblical names or else names of early saints – Daniel, James, Samuel, George, Joseph... names our great grandparents would have felt comfortable with. This reflects a strong and very old tradition in England of giving our male children deliberately 'Christian' Christian names, perhaps in the hope that the boy might be inspired to show something of the saint's or prophet's virtues whose name he bore.

Incidentally, American friends of ours knew four brothers who were named Matthew, Mark, Luke and Bruce. I wonder what that tells us about the spiritual journey of their parents.

The top of the girl's list is a bit thin on Biblical names. Hannah sneaks in at 16. It's true that the Bible story is rather male dominated, so perhaps there are fewer role models, but it is surprising to see that the most familiar biblical girl's name, Mary, doesn't make the top 100 (and the variant, Maria, only sneaks in at 93, in spite of the stage revival of *The Sound of Music!*) But it is nice to see how Grace has risen steadily up the list over the past 5 years to reach number 1 in 2007. This reminds us that another long English

tradition is not quite lost; of giving our daughters the names of Christian virtues – such as Faith (no 74), Patience, Prudence and Constance, again perhaps in the hope that the qualities in the name might rub off on the young lady's character.

It would be nice to hope that the continued popularity of these names reflected an understated or even subconscious loyalty to old religious traditions and values, but I fear there little reason to believe this. It may be a different matter for last year's no 17 though, the best showing so far for Mohammed.

But I am particularly pleased that Joshua is a regular in the top 3 for boys year after year. I wonder how many young parents know what lies behind that name. The original Joshua was the successor of Moses, the first of the great Judges, or rulers of Israel in the days before Saul became their first King. Book 6 in the Old Testament tells you all about him, but he is not the only man in the Bible to bear that name.

Up in Nazareth, 14 centuries later, when Mary or Joseph wanted their eldest son to come to them, they didn't call out, 'come here, Jesus'. That is just our English version of the name. In their language, Aramaic, they called, 'come here Jeshua', though their pronunciation would have sounded more like 'Yuh-shOOa'. And the name Jeshua, or Joshua, as every good Jew knew, had a very profound meaning; 'God saves' or 'God will save' (ancient Hebrew doesn't really distinguish between the present and future tense). When the Angel Gabriel told Mary to name her first born son Jeshua, Jesus, he was already telling his parents, and the world, that this child had a big part to play in the work of God's salvation.

Because of the way we say our prayers and creeds, most of us say the world 'Jesus Christ' almost as if the 'Christ' bit is a kind of surname. This is a shame, because to the Greek-speaking Jews who first used the name, it wasn't a name at all, it was a description, or a title. Christ in Greek means 'the anointed one', the same idea that is expressed in the Hebrew word 'Messiah'.

And the 'anointed one' in the ancient Hebrew world meant only one thing: the one whom God had chosen to lead and defend his people, to bring justice to his people, and uphold the name of God among the nations.

Whenever I come upon the name Jesus Christ, in the creeds or the prayers, I've taught myself to leave a little mental comma between the two words, to help me remember what I am really saying. I believe in Jesus, Christ; in Jesus, the anointed one of God. I believe in God Will Save, the Chosen One of God.

Chosen now, not merely to bring justice and peace and security to one small tribe in the hilly hinterland of Palestine – but chosen and given power to bring peace and justice to all the world, to free all God's creation from its ancient enemies, sin and death.

So if you happen to have a Josh or a Joshua amongst your friends, ask him if he knows what's in his name?

But how much do YOU know about your name.....you might have quite a bit to live up to as well.

