

Homily, St. Andrew's
Lent 2B, Sunday, March 1, 2015
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 (Romans 4:13-25)

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

What's in a name? What names have you had through your life and What did, or do, they mean to you? I've always been "Christine"... not Chris or Christy or... any other short form. The different names I've had in my life have been through adding a "title"... For a number of years, for instance, I was "Miss Christine," as a traditional way of addressing a dance teacher. In the many years since I mostly stopped teaching, there have been moments when I've found myself missing being "Miss Christine" because of what that name meant in my life.

I had my most interesting nickname for only a very short time. During a 3-month church internship in our Companion Diocese, on the Caribbean island of St. Vincent, a friend began calling me "Father Christine," and a few others picked up on it. It bugged me not so much because of the obvious gender issue but more because it was the title for a "priest" and I wasn't one (yet). Titles are more important there than here and while the gifting of the nickname "Father Christine" was teasing, it also had an underlying meaning that granted me an honour that I didn't actually deserve. I was worried that if any other church people heard me called by this name, they would be offended and/or I would get in trouble for mocking something that was held dear. As it turned out, nothing bad happened and I came home from that experience, back to seminary, having taken an important step of growth into the silly yet meaningful name that had been light-heartedly given me.

Today we hear something of the importance of names in the second major covenant God makes in scripture. This second covenant is made not with all of creation as we heard last week with the covenant spoken to Noah but rather it is made much more specifically with one person, one family - Abraham and Sarah. When God chose Noah as the one through whom creation would continue back in Genesis 6, the storyteller noted that "Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God." (6:9) God's choice of Abram is different, for instead of Abram's righteousness being a starting place, today we hear God's command in God's call: "walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you..." The words are reminiscent of Noah but the covenant is different. This covenant has come along in stages, beginning in chapter 12 when God first commanded Abram to leave his homeland and God promises to make of him a great nation, to bless him and make his name great. Abram obeyed the command but little did he know that this name by which he'd been first called wasn't the name that would be called great and would become the name from which nations would come.

There has been much water under the proverbial bridge since that first call back in chapter 12. Abram has travelled with his wife Sarai and nephew Lot to foreign lands, to Egypt and back, with a variety of adventures along the way, but no children. As concerned as Abram is at this rather significant problem for the fulfillment of a promise of descendants numbering like the stars, it is Sarai who works out an alternate solution with a surrogate in the Egyptian slave-

girl Hagar. But God hadn't forgotten the promise and today confirms it with words of formal covenant-making: "As for me," God says, "this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring."

The name change from Abram to Abraham represents the difference between "exalted father" and "father of a multitude." As such, as one commentator notes, it "marks a new stage in his identification with the divine purpose. [Abraham] must now live up to his new name, which focuses not on his personal relationship with God but on his relationship to the nations. The name looks outward, centered on the lives of others. Abraham's election involves mission." (NIB, 459) I wonder if this is always the direction a new names takes us... away from considering only ourselves and helping us to focus outwardly on mission and service to others. It's certainly the case with titles... for me as "Father Christine" and for others with titles like "doctor" as one who cares for the sick; "Mom" or "Dad" as one who is responsible for a new, small person; even the intimate nicknames between spouses or good friends who know the depth of relationship, and responsibility that comes with the special name. New names can sometimes come to us after much hard work or struggle and new names can be a starting place for a role or a calling that we need to live into. Abraham had already demonstrated his faithfulness and his intent to walk with God, and then God calls him to it in a greater way, beginning with a new name.

Like the first covenant through Noah, this promise is unconditional and everlasting though there is more to the human-side than with the earlier covenant. In verses 8 to 14 that we skip today, God continues with instructions for Abraham, beginning with: "As for you, you shall keep my covenant..." and goes on to describe circumcision as the sign that Abraham and his descendants accept and agree and will remain faithful to the covenant. The earlier covenant with Noah was all about God... God's promise, God's sign, God's responsibility. This covenant is still unconditional but this time God requires greater participation from Abraham and Sarah... from the human-side of it. And so the sign of this covenant is not about God alone but rather it is something that the people must do as a sign of faithfulness. It doesn't make the covenant conditional but rather hands over to the people the option of participating in the covenant or not. God will not, cannot, be unfaithful, but the people can be. And so God commands Abraham and his descendants to remember the covenant by cutting it into their very flesh. Ironically, the consequence for not keeping it is described as being cut off from the people. This covenant sign means that walking with God involves body as much as mind, soul and spirit.

The covenant promises and responsibilities don't end with God or Abraham, but rather God goes on: "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her." Sarah is fully included in God's covenant promise, not simply as an extension of Abraham, but with her own critical role to play. Abraham is to be the father of many nations and Sarah is to be just as much the forebear of Israel and

many nations, through her body, as much as Abraham carries a sign of the covenant in his. It is a rather stunning moment in the history of our faith.

With this covenant, God chooses one family: Abraham and Sarah, like Noah's family before them, to be the human gateway through which God's purposes would find fulfillment. It is a promise leading eventually to nationhood, though the road to get there goes through famine and exile to Egypt, through military leaders and judges until finally it comes to fulfillment under King David with new and deeper promises along the way. The new promises don't overturn the ones already made but rather bring greater specificity, deeper connection between God and the people and address the contemporary real-world circumstances that change over time.

God's loyalty, God's faithfulness, to this, indeed to all, the covenants is questioned in hard times of trouble and sorrow and struggle. But the faithful throughout time have gone back to God's promises and found in them a source of strength and hope. This is what Paul addresses in his letter to the Romans when he returns to God's covenant with Abraham, making him the ancestor of a multitude of nations. The covenant had fallen on hard times with the power of Babylon and Persia, Greece and then Rome, but Paul returns to it to declare God's righteousness in living up to the covenant through Jesus' death and resurrection. These new developments in the life of God and God's people is a demonstration of God's faithfulness to the promises long ago announced to Israel. The covenant with Abraham had not ended, it had just been awaiting greater, deeper, fulfillment. And so we hear from Paul, hundreds of years later, of God's faithfulness, and of Abraham's, in living up to the name with which God blessed him in making an everlasting promise.

What blessing and promise do you find in the names you've had through your life? What calling is in your name... the one on your birth certificate or a name you've been blessed with on your journey through life? Whatever it may be, may you remember that what it means to be you is to be a blessing to others, in ways large and small. And may you know such blessing in return.