

I had always wanted to be a pilot, fly military jets. By the end of junior high school, I had read every book on the library shelves about military aviation history, aviation biography, about flight. I was fascinated by the pilots like Luke Bishop, the Balloon Buster, Billy Mitchell and later the Mitchell bomber and Jimmy Doolittle, Richard Bong, the Ace of Aces. Jets like the F86 Sabre Jet, the X-15 rocket plane. So it isn't too surprising that the movie Top Gun with Tom Cruise catches my eye every late night rerun.

But it really isn't the fantastic flying and jets zooming off aircraft carriers that keeps me watching. It's the nicknames: those names that get stenciled on the side of the cockpit. Names like Maverick, Viper, Ice, Slider, Goose. They seem like such a great match for each pilot or backseater, fully descriptive of the individual. They seem to capture the very essence of their character. At times, they might only capture the essence that the aviator wants to project, who they want to be. The Top Gun plot becomes most interesting when Ice starts to melt or Maverick tries to be a team player. The difference between their persona and their actions moves the story beyond some great, even if unrealistic, flight scenes. It is as they try to change, are forced to change, that the movie becomes most interesting. The movie uses the jets as mere props to tell a story that is all about names and transformation and even redemption.

I wonder about those names. Who is so insightful that they can pick a name that sticks? The nickname must reflect the person, must accurately highlight some aspect of their character or it will never stick. Could you come up with such a nickname for yourself? What about for a spouse, or a parent? Look at the person next to you, go ahead, take a look. What single name could you give them that tells the world about some essential aspect of their character?

Giving nicknames isn't a new idea, new with fast planes and the military. Jesus took a look at Simon and gave him a new name: Peter. Doesn't sound nearly as exciting as Viper or Wolfman. Peter doesn't evoke images like Maverick or Hollywood, it

doesn't seem to capture anything. Today it is just another name. Yet Peter or Cephas, the Greek and Aramaic versions, did have a significant meaning to those who heard it. Jesus had just labeled Simon as “Rock”: something solid, a great and solid mass, something one can build upon. A rock today is still a rock tomorrow, a rock has a sense of unchanging permanence about it. Like Top Gun, the real, the interesting story of Peter is all about his being, or not being, a Rock. Peter wasn't always solid, even when he thought he was; Peter did change and change again. And Peter did become something solid, did become a foundation upon which the very church itself was built.

If Jesus looked around at us this morning, what names would he give us?

There is another naming in today's passage besides that of Peter. John the Baptist witnessed the Spirit of God descend upon Jesus at his baptism. Heard the voice from within heaven state: “This is my beloved son.” The next day, seeing Jesus, John declares “There is the Lamb of God.” Lamb of God would evoke familiar images of the Passover Lamb whose blood protected the first born of Israel their last night of captivity in Egypt. The sacrificial lamb covers up sin, but this Lamb of God takes our sins away. The Passover Lamb is an image of protection, of cleansing; but it is also an image that is passive, of sacrifice and death.

But this is not the only image, the only meaning we should see in this name. John the Evangelist, the gospel writer, returns to the Lamb in Revelation. The lamb that is full of wrath against evil. The Lamb as the leader of a mighty army; but then leaves that army standing still as the Lamb moves forward and singlehandedly defeats evil. The Lamb that is worthy of our unending adoration and worship. This Lamb of God is not a passive, cuddly, lovable but ultimately doomed, animal. This Lamb of God is active, alive and victorious; this Lamb is God.

The plot twists, the drama, is the story of Jesus. But it is not because of Jesus being transformed and growing. It is not because there is a difference between the Jesus John proclaims as the Lamb of God and who Jesus will become. The plot twist occurs

within us. It is not Jesus who changes but us. It is our understanding of the Lamb that changes. The drama is in our understanding that we can never do so much to displease God that God loses hope for us; God never turns away from us in despair and anger nor refuses to love us. True drama is realizing that the Lamb of God has been and is victorious in this world. Even though there are still battles to be fought against evil, ultimate victory is assured. Drama is when we gather and worship the Lamb of God who redeems us, who calls us together in his name, who always loves us.

A viper moves faster than thought; its victims are dinner before they realize they are being hunted. In Top Gun, Viper the pilot and leader did not suddenly and unmercifully strike at Maverick as he suffered the loss of his crewmate. This Viper was patient, understanding, insightful as he helped lead Maverick back to flying, perhaps back to flying better than he had ever flown before. Viper offered him a new lease on life, a chance for redemption.

Today, Jesus still gives us names like Rock, or Christian. These names reflect who we can become with the help of God. They offer us a new lease on life.

There is another aspect of names. Sometimes the names become so impressive that they hide the person. I remember briefing Dr Edward Teller, the Noble prize winner known as the Father of the Hydrogen Bomb. I had studied theories named after him! He desired to know more about the project that I was in charge of; I really didn't know what to tell him. Just looking at his academic credentials, his theoretical research in physic, intimidated me.

The day came to brief Dr Teller; I was the last one on the agenda before lunch. After the last briefing chart, Dr Teller asked a question. I was speechless, stunned! This was either the most insightful and probing question that cut to the very core of the project, the type of question only a truly brilliant mind could conceive, or Dr Teller hadn't understood a word that I had said! I paused for a moment, thinking how I could answer with equal insight, even though I really thought that he was clueless!

Fortunately, the general saved me by stating that they really had to move on to lunch with the local community leaders.

As we think of the Lamb of God, the Son of God, the names and qualities that John uses to describe Jesus, we are in danger of hiding the person of Jesus, even the personhood of God. We do not worship an ethereal concept, something that is so exalted that we will always wonder if they are paying attention, understanding the prayers of our hearts. Yes, God is beyond our understanding. Yet God desires to demonstrate love for us, to patiently teach and develop each of us, to have a relationship with us. God loved ancient Israel so much that God led them out of Egypt and across the Red Sea. God met Moses on the mountain. Only then did God provide the Ten Commandments.

Jesus came as a human being; as an expression of God's love; to meet with each of us not on a remote mountain top but in our daily lives, wherever we might be. Jesus, as the Lamb of God, did offer himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the world, for our sins. As the Lamb, Jesus hates evil, is victorious, is worthy of our worship.

Yet, a Lamb does not shout at us, does not scream at us to repent or else. Rather, the Lamb quietly gives us a new name, a name of who we can become. And the Lamb then stands beside us to help us to become that person.

It took Peter three years of daily contact with Jesus to slowly evolve into the Rock that Jesus named him. It took the death and resurrection of the Lamb of God before Peter understood the love of God. This is not an abstract idea of love but rather the deep interpersonal love of Jesus for Peter. It took Peter a long time to understand what being the Lamb of God meant.

It might take us a long time to evolve into the person that Jesus has named us to be. Along with Peter, it might take us a long time to understand fully what Jesus being the Lamb of God truly means for us. But like Peter, let us not be intimidated by the title. Like Peter, let us come to know Jesus, know God, as the one who loves us. Like Peter,

Jesus comes to us, to help and nurture us.

Names. We have new names and we are new beings. Let us celebrate as we worship the victorious, living and loving Lamb of God.