
What Does It Mean to Pray in the Name of Jesus?

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Proper 18 – Year A

“For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them.” –Matthew 18.20

In the name of Jesus. How many ways have you heard the name of Jesus used recently?

“Jesus! Honey, you spilled the drink!”

“Lord Jesus have mercy on me!”

“For the love of Jesus, please be quiet!”

“Jesus, look at the size of that hurricane!”

“Jesus, Good God, look at the traffic!”

“Sweet Jesus, we just want to come to you in praise.”

“In the name of Jesus, be healed!”

“Jesus Christ, would you look at that?”

The list is endless. The ways in which we use the name of Jesus Christ are endless, too. Hey! And no list can be complete with mentioning the special prayer that Ricky Bobby prayed in the movie, *Talladega Nights* (2006). The video clip is funnier than I can imitate it, but it goes something like this:

At the crazy and disorganized family meal, Ricky Bobby—a race car driver—says grace:

“Dear tiny infant Jesus... or as our brothers to the South call you, JEE-sus, we just want to thank you...” Then he begins to thank Jesus for all sorts of things that I can’t mention from the pulpit! But Carley Bobby, his wife, interrupts him and says, “Hey, um... you know sweetie, Jesus did grow up. You don’t always have to call him baby. It’s a bit odd and off puttin’ to pray to a baby.”

Ricky Bobby: “Well look, I like the Christmas Jesus best, and I’m sayin’ grace. When you say grace, you can say it to grown up Jesus, or teenage Jesus, or bearded Jesus, or whatever you want.”

And she says, “You know what I want? I want you to do this grace good, so that God will let us win tomorrow.” And so Ricky Bobby continues the grace, making sure to thank Baby Jesus for all the money he has won, and making sure to mention his commercial sponsors in the grace! (As you recall, it goes on from there!)

What does it mean to pray in the name of Jesus? What does it mean to gather in the name of Jesus? Does it mean we can ask for anything we want and get it?

Is the name of Jesus just a magic name, like a talisman with supernatural powers? Or is the name of Jesus like a secret password to God's computer and internet account, enabling you to access anything you like? Like "Open, Sesame!"

I suppose that special words have always enamored people. The familiar magic phrase, "hocus pocus" actually has its origin from people making fun of the Medieval Church Mass, which was always spoken in Latin. At the moment in the Mass when the bread was turned into the Body of Christ, the priest said what must have been magic words: "Hoc Est Meus Corpus," which means "This is my Body."

Well, people made fun of those words, like Ricky Bobby I guess. They parodied those words so that they became, "Hocus Pocus." You could turn bread into body with those words, and you could make a rabbit come out of a hat.

Most of us pray seriously, though. We do not intend disrespect or parody. When we turn to prayer, we are deciding to enter some sort of sacred time and space, even if it does not look that way to some around us.

And we often turn to prayer when the times are the roughest: when someone we love is ill, or dying. When the weather has turned fierce, when a hurricane is bearing down upon us. When we have lost a job, or a marriage.

It is quite understandable that we will say anything when we are praying for help in those circumstances. If there is the possibility that a magic word will help our prayer, then we will use it. If there is power in the name of Jesus, then we will use it. Whether it is the baby Jesus, the infant Jesus, teenager, young adult, bearded, or old man Jesus!

And you know what? The full life of Jesus, the entire life of Jesus, is exactly the point. There is power in praying in the name of Jesus. And there is power when we gather together in the name of Jesus.

But it is not the mere vocalization of the word "Jesus" that provides the power. It is the memory and recollection of the entire life of Jesus. The short name of Jesus is meant to represent the entirety of the life and ministry of Jesus — all that he did, all that he said, all that he experienced. To gather, to pray, in the name of Jesus is to re-member the entire life of Jesus.

Thus, to pray in the name of Jesus is to bring all the truth of Jesus's life and ministry to bear on the issue you are bringing to God in prayer. And, sometimes sadly for us, there were many moments of Jesus' life that were not happy or joyful.

When we pray in the name of Jesus we are not just re-membering the sweet story of Jesus as a baby, like Ricky Bobby did. But we are recalling his ministry, too, his hard sayings. And we are gathering into our prayer, not just the resurrection story of Jesus, but also the crucifixion story.

That fullness of Jesus is exactly the power we are seeking. The name of Jesus means a lot – probably more than any *one* of us can imagine. The name of Jesus means not just the joy and beauty of Jesus, but also the Cross of Jesus.

*At the name of Jesus,
Every knee shall bow
...Humbled for a season,
To receive a name,
From the lips of sinners,
Unto whom he came,
Gratefully he bore it,
Spotless to the last,
Brought it back victorious,
When from death he passed.*

(Hymn 435 in The Hymnal 1982, words by Caroline Maria Noel)

When we use the name of Jesus, we are admitting that we might be humbled, too, for a season. We might go through the valley of the shadow of death, too. We might have to take up our Cross, too.

Ah, the Cross! To gather, and to pray, in the name of Jesus means to pray in the name of the Cross. But consider this Cross. It is the place of pain and suffering, yes; but the Cross of Jesus has become, for us Christians, a sign—a powerful sign—of surprise and changed expectations. What looks like death becomes life.

Consider the actual physical construction of the Cross, each beam having two points. Sometimes, the consequences of your issue come out one way – but sometimes the other. That is the cross. Up or Down. Right or Left.

It is not just one thing. It is not just what I, individually, want. That is why when *two or three* gather in the name of Jesus, there is a far greater chance that we are remembering more of Jesus than if only one of us is gathering in Jesus' name. The name of Jesus gets stronger, and more accurate, more complete, when there are more people there adding to the remembered portrait of Jesus. That's why true Eucharist, true communion, true community, always requires more than one person present.

“When two or three are gathered together in my name,” said Jesus, “then I am there with them.” When two or three gather in the name of Jesus, amazing things happen, miracles happen. God takes our offerings and changes them.

So, praying in the Name of Jesus does not mean that we get our way. Praying in the name of Jesus means that we get *Jesus's* way, and we go that way together, in community. It's a risky prayer!

The way of Jesus is full. Up and down. Right and left. Vertical and horizontal. The way of Jesus is the full way.

Yes, there have certainly been silly things done, mistakenly, in the so-called name of Jesus. And, tragically, there have also been evil things done in the so-called name of Jesus. But there have been far more good and nourishing things done in the name of Jesus. Great things! Hospitals, schools, charitable acts of mercy and kindness. Generous contributions to the victims of hurricanes and floods!

When we gather together—two or three, or five thousand—in the name of Jesus, we gather in the name of hope that is greater than despair, in the name of life that is greater than death, in the name of love that is greater than disaster.

AMEN.