

Christmas I 2017 Year B – Naming and Circumcision of Christ

Every year, as the Director of Music at my school in Hove, I used to take my Senior Choir off to sing Evensong in various cathedrals and churches. On one occasion, we visited Cambridge to sing at Jesus College, where my assistant organist had spent a post-graduate year. One of the things that we did (an indulgence on my part, I fear!) was to take the boys to look at Kings College Chapel, one of the finest of all mediaeval buildings. I'm sure that all here who have had contact with children will know what it is like when an awkward question is asked. I was extolling the beauty of the wonderful stained glass of the chapel which dates from the 1520s and 30s and remember picking out scenes of Our Lord's life from the windows, when the question came through the air, 'Mr. Maine, why is that man in the window holding a knife over a baby?' – it obviously wasn't Abraham and Isaac, but in fact a depiction of the Circumcision of the Lord!

The Church of England remembers this on January 1st, but the ideas surrounding the Festival seemed so intrinsic to the readings this morning, that I just wanted to reflect on why I believe that it is important to remember the Naming and Circumcision of Jesus.

As a festival, it has been observed by Christians since earliest times. Throughout the Reformation period, it survived in both of Cranmer's prayer books and thus into the Book of Common Prayer and is celebrated by the Orthodox and Lutheran Churches as well as the Anglican Communion. Curiously, the Roman Catholic Church dropped it during the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s and supplanted it with the Feast of the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God. This, I think, is a pity, not because Mary should not be honoured, but because the Naming and Circumcision of Jesus is so firmly biblically based. Today, the 31st - the eve of the Festival – is kept as Holy Family Sunday – a recent festival first promulgated by Leo XIII in 1893. It's a perfectly laudable commemoration – one of encouragement to families – and perhaps more important in an age when the concept of family seems under such pressure. However, it does, coupled with the Marian Feast, seem to be at the expense of Luke 2: 21.

In both our New Testament reading and Gospel, we are reminded of the origins of Jesus. Paul reminds us *that when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the Law*, whilst Luke writes in 2: 21 *that after eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb*. This important rite of passage is a reminder of our roots within Judaism as we remember that Jesus fulfils, through his parents, the ages-old sign of the covenant between God and his chosen people – a ceremony that Jesus will have undoubtedly attended many times during his lifetime. In remembering this act, I believe that for Christians it should counteract the shameful nature of anti-Semitism which afflicts parts of our own society in this day and age.

You will also remember that today's Gospel leads us on that journey made by the shepherds to Bethlehem. In Biblical times shepherds were in the lowest strata of human society, and yet they were honoured by the call of the angels, and the first outsiders to see

the infant Christ. Mary – we are told- treasured and pondered these actions and words of the shepherds in her heart. In the Gospel we then have the single verse describing Jesus' angelic naming, which Luke records thus *'he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.'*

In Matthew's narrative, Joseph, who is contemplating dismissing Mary quietly because she is pregnant, hears the following from the angel in a dream, *'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'*

So what is in this name above all names? Jesus is (as I am sure many will know) the Greek form of the name Joshua or Yeshua in Hebrew. It means, approximately 'God saves' or 'delivers.' You will remember that in the Old Testament, Joshua leads the Children of Israel into the Promised Land, - but this new Joshua is to bring about the promise of God's faithfulness in a completely different way. As Joseph is reminded, this child whom Mary bears will be (as Isaiah writes) **Emmanuel** – God with us.

The wonder is that we see God reaching out in time and space to a beloved humanity in our own nature. **Emmanuel** – God with us - is born in the same way as every human, albeit identified with the poorest of the poor. The shepherds – the outcasts - having seen the baby, return, glorifying and praising God. They grasp the import of what they have witnessed. Mary and Joseph then bring Jesus to fulfil the requirements of God's chosen people through his circumcision. But it doesn't stop there. With the visit of the wise men which we celebrate on the Feast of Epiphany, **Emmanuel** – God with us - is made manifest to the whole of humanity.

The great sense of rejoicing in our Old Testament reading today sums up the transformational nature of our faith in Jesus Christ – a constant journey in allowing the Holy Spirit to draw us further into an understanding of the great love borne for us by God. This Divine Love is revealed in the face of Jesus, who through his earthly life draws us to the knowledge that we too are called to participate in the divine journey. We are each called to be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of God.

My prayer for 2018, whatever it may bring, is that the name of Jesus will be in our hearts and thoughts and upon our lips, because in the name of Jesus is found the answer to all our hopes, our sorrows, fears and our joys. May we continue to bring about the fulfilment of the Kingdom of God in all that we are and all that we seek to do in the name of Jesus - **Emmanuel** - God with us. Amen.

Collect

Almighty God,
who wonderfully created us in your own image
and yet more wonderfully restored us
through your Son Jesus Christ:
grant that, as he came to share in our humanity,
so we may share the life of his divinity;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever.

Post Communion

Heavenly Father,
whose blessed Son shared at Nazareth the life of an earthly home:
help your Church to live as one family,
united in love and obedience,
and bring us all at last to our home in heaven;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Isaiah 61:10 – 62: 3

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as
a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.¹¹ For as the earth
brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause
righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations. For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not
rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch. ² The nations shall
see your vindication, and all the kings your glory;
and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give.
³ You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

Galatians 4: 4-7

⁴ But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵ in
order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. ⁶ And
because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' ⁷ So you
are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

Luke 2: 15-21

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now
to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' ¹⁶ So they
went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they
made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the
shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The
shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.
²¹ After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given
by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.