

The naming and circumcision of Christ

1 1 12

Almighty God,
whose blessed Son was circumcised
in obedience to the law for our sake
and given the Name that is above every name:
give us grace to worship him in the freedom of the Spirit
and to proclaim him as the Saviour of the world.

Today's text is from Luke's gospel chapter 2 and verse 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.'

It's a balmy night sometime in spring in the renaissance city of Verona where from her balcony overlooking the Capulet's garden, Juliet, the daughter of the house, muses about the boy she has just met at a family party, a boy called Romeo, a son of the house of Montague and therefore a sworn enemy of all Capulets, definitely not someone with whom she should fall in love. But too late, she has! So with the enviably flexible logic of the young, Juliet reflects on the difference between the boy she loves and his name which she must surely hate:

'Tis but thy name that is my enemy; –

O, be some other name!

What's in a name! that which we call a rose

By any other name would smell as sweet;

So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd.

And sweet on him, Romeo is the boy who will colour and perfume the rest of her tragically short life.

Our name is a gift from our parents. Do you ever wonder why your parents chose your name given to you at birth? Born on 3rd September, I wonder why my parents chose Gareth rather than Gregory. But I'm glad they did because in Welsh, – my mother was a coalminer's daughter from the Rhondda – Gareth means 'gentle' and despite the times I lose my temper, I guess essentially she was right and I am.

But for Mary and Joseph, there was no reflection, no latitude about the name for their son; it was a given – Jesus. The angel Gabriel had said as much at the annunciation when he appeared to Joseph in a dream, that his fiancée, Mary, was pregnant with God's Son and they should call him Jesus. So as a name what does Jesus mean? Curiously, Jesus is a Greek form of a Hebrew name, Joshua. Written Ἰησοῦς in Greek, in Latin Iesus, the form used in English during the Middle Ages was from the Old French, Jesu, and it was not till the 16th century that Jesus became the norm in England. Joshua and Jesus both mean 'God saves' or if you prefer, 'Saviour'. As such, it is perfect choice of a name for the boy born in a manger, who would die upon the cross and who would rise again from the dead on the third day. Jesus is our Saviour and clearly, as badges in the early seventies used to indicate, Jesus saves.

On the 1st January, the eighth day after his birth which we mark on 25th December, Jesus, like all Jewish boys, was circumcised. Circumcision is the

removal of the foreskin by a mohel, a man trained in the art who uses a sharp knife or scalpel especially reserved for the purpose. Why circumcision? A Jewish boy is circumcised as an outward sign of an inner reality: that he is a child of the covenant which God swore between himself and Abraham. Let me quote the relevant verses from Genesis 17: **'You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised'** (v11 - 12). So Jesus a good Jewish boy, the child of good Jewish parents, was, as you would expect, circumcised.

And what about us as Christians? Curiously, actual circumcision was something that St Paul, himself a circumcised Jew, considered no longer necessary: instead of an indelible, visible mark on our flesh, Paul points us to an invisible, indelible mark on our hearts. In his letter to the Romans, he writes **'nor is true circumcision external . . . real circumcision is a matter of the heart - it is spiritual not literal.'** (2v28 - 29) Now whatever your views on circumcision - medically, whether circumcision be the healthy option; spiritually, whether the practice be obligatory or desirable (it is for all Jews, for many Muslims and for some Christians) - circumcision was a fact of life for the Children of God in the Old Testament and was a mark of the covenant between God and Man - **'I will be their God and they shall be my people.'** (Jeremiah 31 v33)

So today as we mark the naming and circumcision of Jesus, let us remember the significance of our individual names and reflect on the significance of this outward sign that once distinguished us as the Chosen People of God.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

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H: Sermon 25: Name

