

Naming

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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 faithfully bear his Name
to worship him in the freedom of the Spirit
and to proclaim him Saviour of the world.

Our text may be found in today's gospel from St Luke, chapter 2, 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.'

Happy New Year. It is good to be able to celebrate Christmas Day then, a week later, New Year's Day, both on a Sunday. I trust, if you did see the New Year in last night, that this morning you didn't have any trouble getting up for today's service.

In our Christian calendar, 1st January is a special day because today, the first day of the new year, we celebrate the naming and circumcision of Jesus. So what better for us to focus on in my sermon today than the name Jesus and the fact of his circumcision ?

The name, Jesus, is the English version of the Latin rendering of the Greek for the Hebrew name Jeshua, a shortened form of Joshua. The name Jesus means 'the Lord is salvation'. Most appropriate, don't you think, given the purpose of the incarnation is the salvation of mankind? There are many names given to Jesus: Messiah, the Christ, Son of God, Son of Man, Son of David, Rabbi/Teacher, Lord and Saviour, to name just a few. But in the name given to Mary's boy to be at the annunciation by the archangel Gabriel, then at his circumcision by his step father, Joseph, there is the essential truth of who Jesus is, of what Jesus is and what Jesus has come to do.

Circumcision is an outward sign of the covenant relationship between God and his Chosen People, the Jews. It is a mark on the body of all male, Jewish children that they are indeed, in fact, Jewish and I believe that Muslims do carry out the same practice. The fact that Luke records the circumcision of the baby Jesus at the age of just eight days is a timely reminder of the fact that Jesus was born a Jew and that Christianity, our faith, does have Jewish roots.

Fact is that as a child I was circumcised on the National Health because, at that time in the UK, it was believed to be the healthy option. Fact is that circumcision is no longer part and parcel of our belief as Christians. The lack of the need to circumcise is the fruit of the missionary outreach to the Gentiles for whom circumcision was an anathema, an abomination, an abuse of bodily perfection. It is remarkable how Paul, himself a trained, theologically literate student of the Rabbi Gamaliel, should be inspired to write in his Epistle to the Romans that what was truly important was not the outward circumcision of the body but the inner

circumcision of the heart. Here let me quote him: 'For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is the true circumcision something external and physical. Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart – it is spiritual and not literal.' (Romans 2 v 27/28) It is in our will and in our attitude, in our hearts and in our minds that we are truly followers of Christ and not in the form of our flesh. Goodbye circumcision – at least for us Christians.

So today, on the day we remember the fact of the naming and circumcision of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, it is important to reflect on the fact that his name tells us who and what Jesus is and that his circumcision reminds us that Jesus was Jewish but it is a practice we no longer need to practise.

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

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

1st January 2017

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