

Born under the law

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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 in his divinity.

Our text today is taken from Paul's letter to the Galatians chapter 4 and verse 4:

'God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law. . .'

Since Christmas Eve fell on a Sunday this year, inevitably, the First Sunday of Christmas must fall on the last day of the year, the day before the first of January when we celebrate not only the start of the New Year – Anno Domini, the year of our Lord, 2018 – but also when we remember the circumcision of our Lord Jesus Christ when he was eight-days-old.

So why was Jesus circumcised ? Simply that is what Jews do to there eight-day-old baby boys. They don't need legal permission; it is part of their religious code of practice, rooted in the covenant relationship between God and Abraham. In Genesis chapter 17, we read, in verses 11 and 12, the following command: **'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 when he is eight days old.’ Abraham did as bid, establishing circumcision as a Jewish fact of life, a visible physical sign of the spiritual covenant that bound God to his Chosen People, the Jews. So Jesus, according to our text today ‘born of a woman, born under the law’, necessarily had the mark of the old covenant cut into his flesh.

So why as Christians, as young boys, were we not circumcised ? Because circumcision is a mark of the old covenant. St Paul in the second chapter of his Epistle to the church at Rome affirms that ‘a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart – it is spiritual and not literal.’ So for us as Christians, instead of being a physical fact, circumcision becomes a spiritual reality: our heart not our penis is the true sign that we are true part of God’s family, that what we do rather than what is done to us demonstrates what we truly are. As Christians, instead of circumcision, we now practise baptism. At this ceremony of naming, Instead of blood, water makes us clean in God’s sight; a ritual purification that leaves its mark on our spirit, not on our flesh.

But blood is shed to seal the new covenant between us and God. But it is not our blood but it is that of Jesus himself. By his death on the cross, from the wounds of the nails in his hands and his feet and from the wound of the spear in his side, Christ’s blood was shed for us. And, in the act of Holy Communion, in the broken bread and wine outpoured, we are remembering the cost of the new covenant in terms of Jesus’ death for us. Jesus was born that we might live, live our lives according to a new covenant with God our Father through the sacrifice on the

cross of his Son, Jesus Christ, and by being inspired, informed and empowered by the presence in our lives of God the Holy Spirit.

I trust that helps you understand why Jesus was circumcised and why, as part of our religious practice as Christians, we don't have to be.

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

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

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