

Sermon for 1 January 2012
Feast of the Holy Name

+In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This morning we celebrate a principal feast of the Church, which is actually the conflation of two themes we find, however briefly, in this morning's Gospel. We call this day the Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus, but for those of you who remember a prayerbook prior to 1979, you will perhaps remember the old name of the holiday: the Feast of the Circumcision of Jesus.

Indeed, both happen in this morning's Gospel and both are of a piece:

And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

I suspect the rationale for the name change had something to do with our puritanical discomfort for something as seemingly indecent as discussion of circumcision in a church. Even so, it is hard for me to understand why we do not acknowledge both themes in our church calendar. So, for

this morning, let us rename the day to include both: The Feast of the Circumcision *and* of the Holy Name of Jesus.

My initial draft of this sermon covered both themes, but it ended up being far too long for those recovering from whatever festivities might have taken place last night, so, let's focus this morning on the bit that I can say with some confidence will get less attention in pulpits today: namely, the circumcision. From this seemingly passing acknowledgment in Luke's Gospel that Jesus was indeed circumcised we gain more insight into the person of Jesus than we might expect.

First, and most obviously, we see an affirmation of Jesus' Judaism. Not only was he circumcised, but it was done on the eighth day, the proper time for a faithful Jewish family to have the rite performed for their child. It is notable that this is found in Luke's Gospel, often hailed as the most gentile of the Gospels and written by the only New Testament writer who has at least traditionally been identified as a gentile himself. This apparently minor fact serves as a powerful rebuke against the purveyors of so-called Christian antisemitism, a

backward worldview that sadly some in the church even today hold. It seems to go without saying that our salvation is built atop a Covenant which came before us- a Covenant which God gave His people, just as truly as He gave us the New Covenant.

Secondly, the circumcision reminds us that Jesus is a man. By man I do not mean male (though presumably we also have to assume that bit considering that he was circumcised). I mean that we are reminded that Christ was a human being. If this seems obvious, it is because we live in the twenty-first century rather than in the first. Christ's humanity was just as hotly contested as His divinity in the early centuries of the Church. Many of you have heard me talk about the Apollinarians before, those who subscribed to a heresy which denied Christ's humanity. The Apollinarians didn't come round until the fourth century, but before them were various heretics (including some Gnostics) who denied the orthodox view of Christ's Incarnation as it would later be defined in the Nicene Creed. The circumcision of Christ reminds us that Jesus wasn't just some ghostly pretending to be a human, but that

He was and is a flesh-and-blood human being. And, as St. Irenaeus reminds us, this is extremely important, because unless Christ were truly a man he could not have saved mankind. The Cross would have been nothing more than play-acting if it weren't for the fact that the body it bore bridged humanity and divinity in a real and literal way.

Finally, we see in the circumcision a foreshadowing of Christ's mission and, in some sense, a commencement of the sacrifice of His life. Of course, the Incarnation itself was a sacrifice of the highest caliber- very God of very God becoming frail and limited by taking on the form of a slave. But in the circumcision we find bloodshed. Forgive my very old-fashioned theology (it is of a sort which would preclude my receiving tenure on many theology faculties, believe it or not), but the atonement which was to be effected on the Cross, the substitution of the perfect man for sinful men through the blood of the everlasting Covenant, begins with the Christ child in St. Joseph's arms (despite what medieval art depicts, it would not have been a temple priest or mohel, but Jesus' earthly father who performed the rite, in accordance with the Law). In the

arms of the man who would protect Him and His Blessed Mother from the wrath of Herod is the Christ Child given His first taste of the kind of pain which is borne through obedience and which is ultimately salvific.

And so, this day we greet the Christ Child again, but not only as the babe in the manger. We greet Him as an intermediary, an intercessor, a bridge: as the bridge between God's two great Covenants, as the bridge between Godhood and manhood, and as the bridge between the old life of sin and death and the new life of redemption and Resurrection through his Precious Blood.

Let us pray.

ALMIGHTY God, who madest thy blessed Son to be circumcised, and obedient to the law for man; Grant us the true circumcision of the Spirit; that, our hearts, and all our members, being mortified from all worldly and carnal lusts, we may in all things obey thy blessed will; through time same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.