

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Circumcision of Christ. The observance of this event in the life of Christ goes back at least to the early 6<sup>th</sup> century, and the collect for the day traces its roots back to the Gregorian Sacramentary (named after Pope Gregory the Great, 540-604). At that time, it was marked as a fast to urge moderation, as opposed to the pagan revelries associated with new year celebrations; but over time, this day has been marked as a feast day with a corresponding festal attitude.

No doubt this is an odd event for modern, protestant-ish Americans to be making a fuss about. Certainly there are elements of our society that consider the practice of circumcision to be outmoded and even somewhat barbaric. It is ironic, given the radical push against the obvious understanding of sexuality, that the same faction that condemns circumcision now advocates castration as a healthy procedure. Regardless, I am pretty certain that all of this talk about such a sensitive matter is making every man here rather uncomfortable. We consider such matters to be personal and private, so it is still awkward for us to discuss publicly.

The modern Church herself, after preaching sexual restraint for millennia, is hesitant to address the topic as well. We just do not like to talk about such things in the Sunday school classroom or from the pulpit. It is just not polite conversation. So although this feast has always focused upon the event of the circumcision, you will notice in the Gospel reading, that at the same time as the circumcision, Mary and Joseph named their son, "Jesus," according to the angel Gabriel's instructions to them. Now this of course is significant, and we will talk about this. But in 1979 worship book, the Episcopal church changed this feast day from "The Circumcision" to "The Holy Name" which departs substantially from Anglican practice from 1549 on. Also previously, there was a minor feast day set apart to celebrate the Holy Name of Jesus, but this was on August 7, the day after the Feast of the Transfiguration. Unfortunately, the new Anglican Book of Common Prayer follows the pattern of the 1979 book and not the earlier tradition. Perhaps the topic of the day is a delicate topic, but shouldn't our faith address every aspect of our being? The Word of God is not squeamish about such subjects. So are we justified in avoiding, in the name of modesty no less, topics that make us uncomfortable? "These are private parts, God; we don't need to address them right now. It's fine, we can think about this later when I'm more ready." But this avoidance is neither biblical or Anglican. We are embodied beings, we are sexual beings, we celebrate our physical existence and praise God that we are fearfully and wonderfully made, and God desires to redeem and purify all of our physicality in Jesus' Name.

But what is this feast day all about? There are many themes that intersect here – too many, in fact, to really discuss them fully, but let's attempt, at least, to get a sense of the meaning of this day. First, we will look at the institution and meaning of circumcision, and then address why Christ needed to be circumcised. Of course, Jesus is the pivot of history, and so we will then look at how this institution was transformed through Jesus into the New

Covenant sacrament of Baptism. Finally, let us ask the question, what is the significance of Jesus' Name, and what are the implications of all of this for us?

Let us begin therefore by stepping back into the Genesis narrative and specifically the history of Abraham. In Genesis 15, God promises to make Abram's descendants a great nation, and this would be done through a natural son of Abram. Verse 6 says, "And he (Abram) believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness." This initiation of a covenant is followed by the mysterious splitting of the animals in half through which the single torch of the Spirit of God passed which is a ratification of the covenant. Then in chapter 17, we find the establishment of the covenantal sign of circumcision and the changing of Abram's name to Abraham. Beginning at verse 10 we read,

10 This *is* my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; Every man child among you shall be circumcised. 11 And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you. 12 And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every man child in your generations, ... 13 He that is born in thy house, and he that is bought with thy money, must needs be circumcised: and my covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. 14 And the uncircumcised man child whose flesh of his foreskin is not circumcised, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant.

So Abraham was circumcised at 99 years old, but all of the male children born to him would be circumcised on the 8<sup>th</sup> day.

We see in this passage that circumcision is the sign of the covenant that God makes with Abraham's descendants, who of course are the Jewish people. So Jewish men bear the sign of the covenant in their outward bodies, and if they are not circumcised, then they must be cut off – cast out – from the congregation of the Jews. Notice that this is an outward sign which binds the Jewish men to covenantal stipulations; in essence the circumcised Jewish male is bound to follow all of the Law given by God to Moses. As we see with Abraham, and later with Jesus, and as we know from the practice of the Jewish people, circumcision is followed by a naming. The very identity of a person is determined (or changed) upon entering into a covenant. This is a change in the *being* of the person; who he essentially is. We see something similar in marriage ceremonies where a man and a woman become one sacramentally, and the woman takes the name of her husband indicating that she is no longer the same in her being.

So why this particular mark in the flesh of the Hebrews? Because this is to be a mark carried down *throughout the generations*. This is about passing the covenant down perpetually. The new identity, that of incorporation into the covenantal people of God, superintends at the point of conception of the next generation.

The cutting off of the flesh has a spiritual significance as well. It is symbolic of turning away from a life of wantonness and debauchery and lustful thoughts and self-exalting behavior—cutting oneself off from such things—and embracing a life of purity, holiness, and piety. St. Paul uses this same imagery throughout his epistles: the flesh represents fallen man, and as followers of Christ, we are to cut off the desires of the flesh. Of course the problem with this outward sign of circumcision is that it was merely an external mark. It did not transform the heart or the soul, even though those who received the sign were placed within the covenantal people of God.

This is the crux of why Christ had to become incarnate. The outward sign was not sufficient to save humanity. In Abraham's case, it was a seal of the faith he expressed, but, as we know, Abraham was far from truly holy. Circumcision did not perfect him. So though it was it a mark of faith, it is more precisely a sign that the people bearing the sign belonged to God, and that God would not forsake the covenant made with His people. He was their God, and they would be His people. But circumcision did not change the heart of the people. They were still afflicted with a sinful nature.

But we know that God would indeed provide a lamb (as it were) that would actually take away the sins of the world. Yes, the Jews were a mess. All of us are fallen and lost without the Regeneration of our hearts in Jesus. How was a new humanity to be drawn out of the old humanity? Only through the Incarnation of God as man. Jesus was the solution to the problem. He was born within God's covenant people, and it was required for Him to fulfill the entirety of the Jewish law, meaning that He was to be circumcised like all Hebrew baby boys. The flesh cut from him was not the flesh of sin, but of the prefiguring of the sacrifice that He would make on our behalf. This was the first blood shed for us by our Savior.

Jesus is the completion of the old testament; He is the completion of the Mosaic law. The failure of the children of Abraham throughout the centuries finally was turned back. Man had again become the holy offspring of God, and in this man, Jesus Christ, the redeemed race would be propagated throughout the world. In His circumcision, Jesus became covenantally included into the people of God and covenantally bound as a human to God. In other words, Christ became the new covenantal head of humanity, for in Him, the redeemed race would be constituted.

Yet there was an important distinction between the new People of God, which would become the Church, and the original People of God, the Jews. Please allow me to read a few verses from St. Matthew beginning at the first chapter and the 18<sup>th</sup> verse.

18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. 19 Then Joseph her husband, being a just *man*, and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily. 20 But while he thought on

these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. 21 And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall *save his people from their sins*. [emphasis added]

Now the name Jesus means Savior – one who saves. Joshua is a similar name, and, as he was a military savior of the Jewish people, leading them into the land that God had promised, Jesus is our Spiritual savior, for He took away our sins and led us into a new promised land, where our very natures are cleansed from sin so that we can live, once again, in the presence of God – in complete fellowship with God. Christ's circumcision represents the beginning of the end of the Old Covenant because of its fulfillment, and in obeying the angel's instruction and naming the Christ Child "Jesus," Mary and Joseph declare the beginning of what Christ will do for humanity. He is the true savior of mankind, for He has changed our very nature, and the Spirit of God now takes up residence within us.

As Christians, we no longer receive circumcision as a covenantal sign, but we still have a covenantal sign applied to us in the sacrament of baptism. Baptism is the sacrament of initiation into the Church, the New People of God. In it we are sealed with the Spirit, and it is given as a sign of the cleansing from sin with which all who believe in our Lord Jesus are blessed. Baptism not only marks us as Christ's own people, but it is also a sign that those who are faithful to the covenant will be given the grace to continue in sanctification throughout their lives. Does this not imply that our very nature is renewed? Surely it does, which is why babies are named, thus given their identities, at their baptism; just as Jewish babies were named at their circumcision. In our name, we receive both our family name as member of an earthly family, and we receive the name of 'Christian' as members of the heavenly family of Christ.

Yet there are two great differences between circumcision and baptism. Circumcision was only an outward sign; there was no inward grace bestowed upon those who were circumcised. Additionally, circumcision was necessarily only for the *males* of the *Jewish* people. Baptism leaves no outward mark on a person except for the hope and the joy that faith in Jesus brings, and baptism is for everyone, Jew, Gentile, male, and female. All races and both male and female individuals are welcomed into the family of God. Baptism is the point at which the next generation of God's renewed people are conceived and re-born. It is the conception of the nature of God in our lives, just like our Lord Jesus was conceived within the Blessed Virgin Mary by the Spirit of God.

As the covenant people of God, we are called upon, just like the Hebrews of old were called upon, to live pure and holy lives. We might not represent in our bodies a physical cutting off of ourselves from the flesh, from lives of grasping and desire and selfishly motivated actions. But as the people of God renewed by the spirit inwardly, we must

embrace the call to holiness and righteousness. St. Paul in Romans 2:28-29 states:

For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.

Likewise, St. Paul begins Colossians 3 by saying,

*If ye then be risen with Christ*, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory.

*Mortify therefore your members* which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry: 6 for which things' sake the wrath of God cometh on the children of disobedience [emphasis added].

These two passages from the Bible make their way into today's collect where we prayed, "Grant us the *true circumcision of the Spirit* (Romans); that, our hearts, and all our members, being *mortified from all worldly and carnal lusts* (Colossians), we may in all things obey thy blessed will" [emphasis added]. Circumcision represented a new life for the one who received that sign on the eighth day. It was a death to the sinful life and a rebirth, a resurrected life. It is no accident that Christ is resurrected into His glorified life on the eighth day as well. Our inclusion into the people of God through the waters of Baptism empowers us by the same resurrection of Christ to be holy, to live righteously, to truly realize new lives in this fallen world. Rather than shying away from this pivotal event in the life of Jesus, we should earnestly and truly celebrate it because of what it means for us. We are signed in our baptism, sealed with the Holy Ghost, and raised to the life immortal. God grant us true circumcision of our Spirits that we may obey His blessed will in all things.

AMEN.