

## Ely Cathedral Jan 1<sup>st</sup> 2012, Naming & Circumcision of Jesus

### Prayer

Today the church celebrates the naming & circumcision of Jesus, which happened, according to Jewish custom, 8 days after his birth.

Circumcision was, of course, the Jewish initiation rite for boys. It was a practice begun by Jews in the time of Abraham, as a sign of God's blessing on his chosen people. Interestingly we don't know very much about Jesus' body. There are no descriptions of what he looked like. Did he have a beard? Was he tall or short? Thick set or thin? A hairy man like Esau or a smooth man like Jacob? But one of the few things we do know about his body is told us in today's reading. He had a penis - & thus a foreskin - because otherwise he couldn't have been circumcised. And this is not unimportant, because it emphasises for us his humanity. Jesus was not just God in disguise - giving the impression of being human. But he was God in flesh & blood - fully human. And according to the 14<sup>th</sup> Century document 'The Golden Legend', Jesus' circumcision, this first moment when his blood is shed, points us towards his death on the cross.

But what I really want to talk about today is not circumcision, now replaced for Christians by Baptism, but naming.

Annie bought me, for Christmas, the latest book in Alexander McCall Smith's '44 Scotland Street' series. I am very glad to have it as I have been worrying about how poor Bertie, that unfortunate 6 year old with such a difficult mother, is getting on. If you haven't read it I won't spoil it for you, except to say that Matthew & Elspeth have had triplets. They are called Rognvald, Tobermory & Fergus. However, once they were home, Matthew made a big mistake. He thought the identification bracelets from the hospital were chaffing the babies' wrists - so he cut them off. And now they don't know which one is which! I suppose you could say that it doesn't matter at that stage, just a few days old. The names could be used interchangeably, until they developed more easily distinguishing characteristics. However, it clearly does matter. Elspeth is horrified by Matthew's thoughtless act. And now they don't know what to do - and neither do I, because I haven't read that far yet! Names are clearly very important. I wonder if you are happy with your own name? When I was a boy I was desperate to be called Derek, because he was the toughest kid in our class.

However, I think I am happy with Alan now, especially since I discovered it means not only 'peaceful ruler' but also 'handsome'! Annie & I spent a lot of time thinking about our children's names when they were born. What did they mean? Would they still sound OK in 20 or 30 years time? Did they go with Hargrave? I wanted to call one of our children Alison, after a wonderful Irish woman who told stories & sang songs on 'Listen with Mother'. But Annie said that 'Ali Hargrave' was too alliterative - and so my secret love for Alison was dashed. We also really liked Rebecca, until we discovered it means 'a snare' - though when I looked on the web yesterday, they now say it means 'to bind together', which is a lot nicer - so maybe we could have chosen it after all.

People often like to name their children after those they idolise. Our next door neighbour in Cambridge, Floyd, is a great football fanatic. So guess what his daughter is called - yes - Chelsea! In Spain people often give their children names of Saints, perhaps to seek their protection. Thus 'Jose Maria Olazabal', that great golfer, is named after the Virgin Mary. And 'Jesús Maria' - 'Jesus Mary' - is another popular Spanish boys' name.

Many of us also have nicknames. These often describe, for better or for worse, something about our character. 'Iron Lady', for example, tells you all you need to know.

As concentration camp victims know, few things are worse than not having a name, being given a number instead. Where we worked in N Argentina, missionaries from the Anglican Church had been trying for years to get identity documents for the much despised indigenous people. Without documents they were unable to travel, unable to vote or go to school - they simply didn't exist. But when this was first agreed in the 1970's, most of the indigenous people couldn't read or write. So when they went to register, the official asked their name. They replied: 'Alberto Suarez' or 'Gustavo Gutierrez'. But, with a nasty smirk to his colleagues, the official would type instead: 'Pescado Oloroso' or 'Pies Podridos'. So that for the rest of their lives, those poor people had to live with the humiliation of being officially called 'Smelly Fish' or 'Rotten Feet' - or worse! No wonder the Indigenous people also had secret names, known only to very close family members; names they did not reveal to anyone, for fear of giving them power over them. And the power of names is a very important theme throughout the Bible.

In the Old Testament, names often described something about the very nature of a person. Adam, for example, was not just the name of the 1<sup>st</sup> man, it was also the generic name for all human kind. Abraham's son is called Isaac - meaning laughter - because Sarah laughs at the idea that she might bear a son in her old age. Naomi, Ruth's mother in law, asks to be called Mara, meaning bitter, after her two sons tragically die. And then there is God's name. Or rather God's names - for God has many names. El, or the plural Elohim, is a general word for God used at the beginning of Genesis. And then later, when God chooses Abraham & his family for special blessing, he reveals a special name - Jahweh - not just any God but our God. Yet no name can fully describe or define God. When Moses asks God what he should call him in front of the Israelites, God famously replies: 'Tell them: "I AM has sent me to you"' Theologians have argued for centuries exactly what this means. Perhaps it means something like: the one who has being within himself, who does not depend on anyone or anything else for their existence. And those names of God are not just descriptions. They have power! No wonder God says we are not to take his name in vain, but keep it Holy, as we shall later pray together in the Lord's Prayer.

Thus in our OT reading from Numbers, Moses tells the priests what words to use to bless the people &, he says, in doing so: 'so they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.' Also in the OT, we see the prophecies about the one who is to come, the one who will be called: Messiah, the anointed one, who again has other names. As we read at Christmas, he is Emmanuel, God with us, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Almighty God, the Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. The Messiah has far too many names to reel off here. So let us think for a moment about just one, the name given at his circumcision - Jesus. Its Hebrew equivalent is Joshua, a common name in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine. It is derived from two words: Jahweh - the Hebrew name for God, and yasha, meaning 'to save'. Hence Jesus means: God saves. And just as Joshua led the Israelites to safety in the promised land, so, through the name of Jesus, all will be saved. Jesus is, as St Paul tells us in Philippians 2, the name above all names. And that name does not just describe who Jesus is or what he is like. It has power to save. John's gospel, chapter 3, says: 'Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned, because they have not believed in the name of God's one & only Son.'

Matthew chapter 18 tells us: 'Where 2 or 3 are gathered in my name, I am there among them.' And in John's gospel again, chapter 14, Jesus says to the disciples: 'Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it.' Which is why we end our prayers: In Jesus' name, Amen. Ah, you may well say, I have asked many things in Jesus' name which have not happened. Well, me too - sometimes things for which I longed & prayed with all my heart, but which did not happen. Sadly, however, 'unanswered prayer' will have to be the subject of another sermon! This one is about names.

Peter, in Acts chapter 4 says: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven, given to humankind, by which we must be saved." Jesus' name has power to save. Not by some magic incantation, but by the power of God at work in us through his son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. And Peter exhorts those who hear him: "Repent & be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins." It is as though, in baptism, God puts his name, his seal, within us; marks us out with his holy name; imprints the name of Jesus upon our hearts.

So, whatever befall in 2012 (& judging by all the un-finished business from 2011, the signs are not great), whatever befall in 2012, God has sealed us with his most Holy name. The name which confers blessing. The name which confers adoption into God's family. The name which confers salvation, now & forever.

If you are looking for a word from God, as we enter the uncertainty of 2012, perhaps these words, are for you.

Isaiah, Ch 43, says: 'But now, the LORD, who created you, who formed you, says this to you: "Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine."'

Whatever happens in 2012 and beyond, God has called you by name, to live under the seal of his Name, to bless and to save you, now and forever.

In the most Holy Name of the Living God, who comes to us as Jahweh, our Father; as Jesus, our Saviour; and as the Holy Spirit, the Comforter. Amen.