

The Naming and Circumcision of Jesus
01-01-2023
St Cuthbert's Anglican Church – Tweed Heads

Number 6:22-27 God tells Moses to bless the Israelites

Psalm 8 O Lord our Governor: how Glorious is your name in all the Earth!

Galatians 4:4-7 Jesus' allows us to receive adoption as God's Children

Luke 2:15-21 Angels tell shepherds of Jesus, Jesus is Named

Introduction

The 1st of January each year is set aside in our Church Calendar as a "Festival" or "Holy Day" to recall "The Naming and Circumcision of Jesus".

The Church calendar is not a rigid structure, but rather a framework to guide us, as we travel through the seasons, and as we recall the major biblical stories of God's love and grace for us throughout the year. This Calendar can sometimes be a tad difficult to follow, as sometimes, like today, we have fixed dates to celebrate events, and sometimes we vary dates to fit in with particular days. ie Easter is always on a Sunday.

On the first Sunday in January, we usually celebrate the Epiphany, the coming of the Magi or Wise Men, as it is set down to be celebrated on the 6th of January, or the Sunday before then.

But today we recall "The Naming and Circumcision of Jesus", and as such, I would like to focus on our final verse from today's Gospel reading:-

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.

Circumcision

Let's look first at the circumcision of Jesus on the eighth day.

Jesus was born a Jew. Mary and Joseph were Jews. One of the things that marked Jews, and separated them from the nations around them was that Jewish males were circumcised.

This practice was part of the covenant between God and the Jews, initiated with the Patriarch Abraham, and recorded in chapter 17 of Genesis, the first book of the Bible. It was something they just did, very importantly, but very routinely, to acknowledge God's covenant with them as a nation.

We have a very different concepts of nationhood and belonging today, but I suppose the way the Jews circumcised their male children, is a little like how we, as Christians, baptize our children today.

Jesus' parents didn't try to skip out any of the normal things required because they had a sense Jesus was special. In fact, it would have been a very joyous occasion for them, acknowledging their new son as one of God's chosen people.

They carried out this practice because it was a part of the law, and the fact that Jesus was circumcised in accordance with the law, was an indication that Jesus was not above the law, or beyond the law, but rather that Jesus came as the fulfilment of God's law.

Naming

Let's now look at the naming of Jesus.

So, what's in a name? You might think it's not that important, but what if you didn't have a name?

In Episode 7 of the Star Wars movies, there is a Stormtrooper who is having an identity crisis. When he joins up with Poe Dameron, a pilot he should be fighting from the rebellion, Poe asks him what his name is. The Stormtrooper replies, "FN-2187". Poe says that's not a name, I'm going to call you "Finn". From then on "Finn", has a name, and he begins to develop as a character.

We all have names. Some of us love our names. Some, like me, sometimes get a bit sick of explaining them. Others don't really like their names, and this is epitomized in the famous Johnny Cash song, "A Boy Named Sue".

However you feel about your name, you have one, and it is the way by which you are known and identified by the world.

In our current conventions in the western world around names, we are usually given first names and a surname. Our first names used to be known as our

Christian names. This no doubt harks back to the 1662 Prayer Book, where parents are asked by the Priest to, "Name this Child". The name given is then used to baptize the infant.

So, our names are important markers of who we are.

In biblical times names held much more significance, and a greater emphasis was given to people's names. Names were seen to embody who people were. It is interesting that in Luke's Gospel, we hear how both John the Baptist and Jesus are given names that are outside what is expected by their families.

From chapter one of Luke's Gospel we hear of Mary's encounter with Gabriel as to how Jesus should be named:-

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' ²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.'

Jesus is a Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua, which means "The Lord Saves". Just as in the Old Testament Joshua led the people into the promised land, in the New Testament, Jesus leads us to eternal life.

Names have power within them. We hear how the first disciples invoked Jesus' name to heal and to bless. We are also called to invoke the name of Jesus in our lives and in our prayers.

Just as Jesus' circumcision and naming was an event which acknowledged the covenant God had made with his chosen people, the Jewish nation, when we are baptized it is an event which acknowledges that, as followers of Jesus, we are God's children and Heirs of God.

As in our Galatians reading today we hear:-

⁴ But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵ in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. ⁶ And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' ⁷ So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

Conclusion

So today, we hear about the baby Jesus. We hear about how Jesus was named and went through the rituals of his time.

May we not just go through the rituals, but may we grasp the significance of what it is to be children of God.

May we be encouraged to embrace our own names as the names we are known before God.

And may we be strengthened and encouraged to live into the names we were given and affirmed at our baptism.

Amen.