

*the word became flesh*  
 a sermon preached on the  
*feast of the naming & circumcision*  
 1 January 2017  
 at  
*st john's*  
 ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL  
 by *dr muriel porter*

The lections: Numbers 6:22-27; Psalm 8; Galatians 4: 4-7; Luke 2:15-21

“The Word became flesh and lived among us<sup>1</sup>...” The Word became flesh – that is the central truth of Christmas, that God lived among us in the flesh. Eight days later, we see the full force of that truth in the feast we celebrate today – the feast of the naming and circumcision of Jesus.

Most of the time we tend to skip straight over the second half of the feast’s title. Male circumcision is a rather confronting practice, and I certainly don’t intend to dwell on its mechanics. It is not something most men want to think about, and nor do most women. It is all very private.

But it is a pity to ignore it altogether, because it is actually quite significant. Here is the newborn that we worship in the manger – that gorgeous, smiling little cherub – being cut with a sharp knife without anaesthetic, bleeding, and certainly bawling his eyes out in the pain and indignity of it all. This can leave us in no doubt that the holy child is truly – truly – human.

It is a helpful corrective to the use of sloppy terminology in some Christmas carols that can suggest that somehow Jesus is God *looking* like a human – God dressed up as a human. That is a very ancient heresy, and was the source of a great deal of theological debate in the early church as the church fathers struggled to come to terms with the enormity of the great Christmas truth, that God became flesh. Today’s feast helps us grasp the reality of that truth.

More, it situates the baby Jesus within a human family, and in a social and religious context.<sup>2</sup> Circumcision was the lot of every Jewish baby boy, and in all but a few cases, still is. It is more than a sign of racial identity: it is the very physical sign of the covenant between God and the Jewish people. In the book of Genesis, God gives this sign to Abraham, the father of the Hebrews, declaring that “my covenant [shall] be in your flesh an everlasting covenant”.<sup>3</sup> It is the mark of the old covenant, or old testament. (In that patriarchal world, girls were not given a physical sign of their inclusion in the covenantal promise, though without doubt they were included. Given what we have learnt in recent times of the horrific physical damage done by female circumcision practised in some parts of the world, their exclusion was clearly a blessing!)

The child Jesus is earthed – he is without any doubt, incarnate: in the flesh. St Paul stresses this in his letter to the church in Galatia: “God sent the Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law”.<sup>4</sup>

His naming in this ritual was also highly significant. Like his circumcision, his name ‘Jesus’ was God-given, brought by the angel to Mary at the annunciation and also to Joseph in

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<sup>1</sup> John 1:14

<sup>2</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1991, p.56

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 17:13

<sup>4</sup> Galatians 4:4,5

his dream.<sup>5</sup> The name Jesus was significant, although it was not unique. It was quite common in Israel at the time, a further indication that Jesus was no extra-terrestrial visitor, but fully “flesh of our flesh”. It means, as the angel said, “God saves” or “delivers”. And it actually connects with that other, very different biblical name for Jesus – Emmanuel, meaning ‘God with us’. As English theologian Paula Gooder has put it, “God’s simple presence [with us] is enough to save and redeem”.<sup>6</sup>

Names are always important in the Bible, as are changes to names. In the creation story, Adam is told to name the animals, symbolizing the power he was given over them.<sup>7</sup> At the same time God gave Abraham the physical sign of the covenant, God changed his name from the original Abram to Abraham, meaning the “father of many nations”, with his wife also given a new name – from Sarai to Sarah.<sup>8</sup>

Jesus changes his disciple Simon’s name to Peter, the rock on which he would build his church.<sup>9</sup> St Paul, the great missionary to the Gentiles, had been the Pharisee Saul of Tarsus, the persecutor of the followers of Jesus until his Damascus Road conversion experience. Changing his name to Paul signified that extraordinary change of heart and life.

Our names are also part and parcel of our belonging to the new covenant in Jesus Christ. Most of us were formally given our “Christian” names in our baptism; in earlier times, a baby was not named at all by anyone until the godparents were asked to name the child publicly at the point of baptism, to stress this baptismal significance. And the child, or adult’s, name is not the only name used: the baptism is done “in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit”. In this new covenant, as Paul wrote to the church in Galatia, we are adopted as God’s children and heirs no less.<sup>10</sup>

Baptism is a universal entry into the new covenant. It does not confer racial or family identity, let alone status or gender identity. As St Paul said earlier in his letter to the Galatian church, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus”.<sup>11</sup>

Baptism leaves no obvious physical mark on our bodies as a constant unmistakable reminder that we belong to the new covenant. But our name, if it was given in baptism, can be an ongoing sign. So too the great baptismal symbol of water. The story goes that whenever the 16<sup>th</sup> century German reformer Martin Luther felt discouraged or afraid, he’d splash water on himself and declare, “I am baptised!”<sup>12</sup>

The font at the entrance to our church is a regular invitation each time we come here to dip our fingers into its brimming water and make the sign of the cross – the sign also used on our foreheads in our baptism – as a reminder that we too *are* baptised.

So, here is a suggestion for a New Year’s resolution: in 2017, like Luther, to splash ourselves with water whenever we need to remind ourselves of our baptismal calling, and consciously to inhabit our baptismal names as an ongoing sign that in Christ we are God’s children.

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<sup>5</sup> Luke 1:31; Matthew 1:21

<sup>6</sup> Paula Gooder, *Journey to the Manger: Exploring the Birth of Jesus*, Canterbury Press, Norwich, 2015, p.91.

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 2:19

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 17: 5, 15

<sup>9</sup> John 1:42; Matthew 16:18

<sup>10</sup> Galatians 4:4-7

<sup>11</sup> Galatians 3:28

<sup>12</sup> <http://worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/remembering-baptism-living-wet/>