



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

The Cathedral Eucharist on the Feast of the Naming
and Circumcision of Jesus

readings: [Numbers 6.22-end](#), [Galatians 4.4-7](#), [Luke 2.15-21](#)

1st January 2023

On this Sunday when we celebrate the feast day of the Naming and Circumcision of Jesus it's the final verse of the Gospel reading from St Luke that points us in the right direction.

From one perspective it's all over. For the Shepherds, their lives were changed. They had tested out what the angels had sung to them, they had worshipped at the manger, and they had spread the good news of the Messiah, creating amazement. It's not hard to think that for those few days after the first Christmas they were the centre of attention. But now the angels have gone, ordinary life has returned. It's cold and dark once again. Back to the routine. For the shepherds, it was back to the fields hoping that not too many sheep had gone astray.

From another perspective it's only just begun. There're all those people out there who have heard the good news from the shepherds, and what would that mean? If we were reading St Luke's story for the first time, it's Mary who gives us the sense that something profound is stirring, that it's only the beginning as she takes part in the naming and circumcision of her son. Mary is the one who looks to the future, treasuring all that she had been told and pondering everything in her heart.

Think for a moment about names. We all know the significance of a name and think carefully about how we name our children. Names help us to be identified. One of the reasons why I have three initials is that with a name like Robinson my parents felt that three initials would avoid being misidentified with many others who shared a common surname!

We still think about the meaning of names, and we still expect a name will shape a person as they grow up. We still have contact with our Judeo-Christian roots where a name describes a person's character and is seen to be one of those factors that shapes a life.

Remember the burning bush! When Moses asked God what God's name was in his vision, he wanted to know whether the one who was being revealed in the fire was trustworthy, not made with human hands and unique amongst the gods of the day. 'I am who I am', says God: not named after another human being, nor part of creation, but one who is eternal, who is self-existent, not dependent upon the imagination of human beings, the pilgrim God who will travel with his people. 'I will be who I will be', the living God who will reveal himself to his people as they experience God's purpose by what he does in the future – through the escape from Egypt, redemption from slavery, freedom, and salvation.

In Isaiah, God says to his people in exile: 'fear not for I have redeemed you I have called you by name you are mine'. By calling his people Israel, after Jacob had wrestled with God at the Brook of Jabbock, God draws attention to human struggle, and the name Israel, literally 'struggle', came to shape God's people, always wrestling to grasp God's work of salvation.

But naming is not only about identity and character, but it's also about belonging. God and his people belong together. No more so than when Jesus the Son of God, the one belonging to God from eternity, at Christmas comes to bear the name 'God saves', Saviour, salvation. Jesus, Yeshua, was a common name in the kingdom of Israel, but here is the one who both bears the name and is the new reality. The one with the name Jesus who is the God-man becomes the new Israel, the one who will enter the struggle against human wickedness and emerge triumphant over death.

It's a fulfilment of the verses from the Book of Numbers. It's one of the oldest prayers we have in the Old Testament, sometimes called the Aaronic blessing. When the people were blessed by the priests of Israel, usually at the end of the morning service in the Temple, they received God's name. God's name is put on them, no less than three times. In other words, they receive nothing less than God's presence, God's protection, God's grace, and God's peace – nothing less than human flourishing and wholeness in response to God's presence and character in their lives. In Jesus, God puts his name on the Israelite nation.

Salvation, life in all its fullness comes through the blessing of God. For St Paul it's like becoming a child of God, adopted into God's family the church with all its rights and privileges that come to us through baptism. We make the transition from being slaves to sin to being children in a new relationship with God. This is the salvation that Jesus God's son brought. This is the fullness of life that God promised from of old, wholeness and flourishing, achieving God's purpose for all human beings.

Only God can save us: this is the deep theme of the scriptures. In Jesus, God took on human flesh so that we might become like God. God became body, mind, soul, and spirit; God assumed the whole of human nature so that not one part of our humanity lay untransformed as Jesus lived his life under the Jewish Law, as he took part in covenant between Israel and their God. It is only by God becoming a human being in the fullest possible way that there would be a new covenant and a new commandment, a new people shaped by the name of Jesus – the body of Christ those which God's new people are intended to flourish and to find fullness of life.

This Sunday we stand just inside the threshold of a new year. After nearly a year of war in Ukraine, we are anxious for the people of Ukraine in the next year; with the severe trials of the pandemic behind us we might anticipate the new year with excitement and some relief; after recent political troubles we might be wary of what is to come especially with the unpredictability of our politics at present; amidst the economic upsets of the past few months and the cost of living increase crisis, we may well see the new year in terms of fear or at best as a challenge. If you're like me it's a mixture of emotions and they can change every few days.

They'll be things we can control in our lives and things we cannot, and this is both the power and the weakness of new years' resolutions. But to paraphrase one twentieth century prayer: 'God grant us serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and wisdom to know the difference'.

Amidst the uncertainties of all we face, the one thing we can be certain of is that the God who gave his name to his Son Jesus travels with us into the year that has begun. And the title of this festival day, the Naming and the Circumcision of Jesus, gives us the direction of travel.

The name of Jesus and its power stands at both the beginning and the end of Jesus' life. As Jesus hung on the cross the sign above him said 'This is Jesus'. The name of Jesus shapes his human life. God saves us not only through incarnation but through death and resurrection. Jesus' birth and his journey through death into new life go together. We can never separate the two. The same love of God that brought his only begotten Son into the world through the virgin birth held his only begotten Son in death which the same love defeated. Incarnation, death, and resurrection are all part same movement of God's love returning to its source

From the beginning the church saw Jesus' circumcision as the first shedding of Christ's blood. Circumcision was the decisive moment that pointed the way forward from his birth to his self-offering of life on the cross. It was on the cross that Christ's blood was shed as he absorbed the wickedness and pain of the world, taking upon him all the world's hatred and anger, and through love bearing it without retaliation and transforming it all into love, joy, and peace. In baptism we suffer with Christ in his death, we are raised with him into the promise of eternal life that one day will be fulfilled as we pass through death itself into life of the resurrection. In baptism we are joined to God's love returning to its source.

The naming and the circumcision stand together as we celebrate Christmas and as we take the same steps as the shepherds took back into the ordinariness of everyday life after the Christmas celebrations.

I wish you all a continuing happy Christmas and a very happy and fulfilled new year! Amen.

The Very Revd Dr Peter Robinson

Dean of Derby