

## Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Feast of the Circumcision – Year A

**RCL Readings** – Numbers 6:22-27; Psalm 8; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:15-21

**ACNA Readings** – Exodus 34:1-9; Psalm 8; Romans 1:1-7; Luke 2:15-21

**Introduction.** The Feast of the Circumcision of Christ is a Christian celebration in the liturgical calendar which is important as it reminds us of the Jewishness of Jesus. Circumcision is called *b'rit milah* בְּרִית מִלָּה in Hebrew and, according to Jewish tradition, is the day on which male children are given their name. The Roman Catholic Church calls this day the Feast of the Holy Name.

**Common Theme.** The account of the circumcision and naming of Jesus is given in only one verse in Luke 2:21. Matthew's Gospel is the only other gospel to describe the naming of Jesus, and in Matthew 2:25 it is described without any ceremony. Many of the readings this week centre around the importance of the Name of God and less about the meaning and act of circumcision itself.

**Numbers 6:22-27.** The Bible, excluding the psalms, does not provide many written prayers that are meant to be recited regularly. The few that are have become very important in the community. Here Moses is commanded to instruct Aaron in blessing the Israelites. This ancient blessing is known as the Aaronic Benediction or the Priestly Blessing and, in modern Judaism, can only be said by a Cohen, a descendent of Aaron. The blessing itself is not actually a priestly blessing as it originated directly from God, and the priest was simply the conduit or mouthpiece for the divine words. These words have been found in inscriptions on ancient jewellery, attesting to their importance in Israelite antiquity. The blessing invokes the Name of the Lord (YHWH) three times. This is not an early trinitarian formula but reflects the importance of special numbers in Hebraic thought: Abraham is visited by three angels; the Hebrew Bible is divided into three sections of which the Torah was given at Sinai in the third month; there were three daily sacrifices in the temple and are three prayers a day in the synagogue, to show a few examples. The blessing is addressed to the community and yet the Hebrew grammar is written and pronounced in the singular. The phrase "The Lord bless you" is in the singular, which actually a grammatical error when addressing a group! This deeply personal blessing is pronounced on every individual while they are part of a community. The blessing is sealed through the application of the name of God. Through this blessing, God's name is connected to light, grace, guardianship, and peace. These are hallmarks of his kingdom which bears his name. The name of God is declared on his people, and we continue to bear that name, carrying it with us into every aspect of our lives as a witness, as individuals, and as a community.

**Psalm 8.** David directs his praise to the excellent name of God, beginning this psalm using the unpronounceable name of God (יהוה). God has many names in the Bible, most of them reflecting his power and character, but this one is his personal, private<sup>1</sup> name. As there are no vowels in ancient

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<sup>1</sup> This is a modern Hebraism. In Hebrew, Israelis ask for my family name (*shem mishpacha*) and for my private name (*shem prati*), that is my personal name.

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Hebrew, it is impossible to really know how to verbally pronounce YHWH. And as God's name is particularly holy, the modern tradition has been to simply say, '*Ha-Shem*' (literally 'the Name') so as not to take the Lord's name in vain. In Christian tradition, we similarly do not pronounce the personal name of the Lord (though some may use the unlikely pronunciations Yahweh and Jehovah). In usual speech, we refer to God simply as God, which is not his name but straightforwardly what he is! We also call him Father, Redeemer, Friend, Saviour and Lord ... etc. As in the Jewish tradition, all these are aspects of his character but not his actual name. This psalm is appropriate for the circumcision of Jesus due to the reference to babies and nursing infants in the second verse. In Hebrew, children who are nursing are called *tinok* תינוק; it comes from the verb to suck, as that is usually what we find them doing most of the time at this age. Interestingly, one of the names of God is *El-Shaddai* which is typically translated as *God Almighty*. However, that is not a correct translation at all (*Mighty God* is *El Gibbor*). *El Shaddai* is quite literally *God is my breast*, which initially might seem a rather strange name to be calling the king of the universe! However, when we think about it, babies have only one natural recourse to gain all the sustenance they need to survive and grow and that is through the mother's breast. As children of God, we too have only one source of truth, goodness and blessing, and that is the Lord Himself. God willingly gives of himself all his goodness, his grace, mercy and compassion, which we receive as children (literally תינוקות) and through which we grow under his care. As David directs his praise of God in this psalm, he describes in wonder how God shares his glory with mankind. Why would God do such a thing to people who are made lower than angels? Truly this is the grace and love of God.

**Galatians 4:4-7.** This is a passage of Scripture that has been misinterpreted through a common misunderstanding regarding Gentiles and the Torah. Greek, unfortunately, translates the Hebrew word *Torah* with *Law (nomos)*, giving it a nuance it does not deserve. *Torah* is derived from the verb *to teach or instruct* and thus means the teaching or instructions of God, which are good things! Law has the connotations of harsh rules and judgement. I hope you can see the difference. Paul declares that the Messiah is born under the 'Law/Torah' to redeem those under the 'Law/Torah'. The question then is, who is under the Torah? The answer is quite simple; in the first century, it was the Jewish people. Gentiles were never directly under the Law as the Torah was given to Israel at Mount Sinai and not imposed on the Gentile world. This is probably the most common misunderstanding I encounter with pilgrims in Jerusalem. Gentiles were never "under the law". "Under the Law" was the Hebraic terminology to signify under the guardianship of the Torah. The Messiah has come to redeem the Jewish people and now mediates the New Covenant with the House of Israel (as declared in Jeremiah 31). Gentiles, who were outside the covenants of God are now grafted into this New Covenant through the Messiah and do not have obligations to the Torah. Both Jews and Gentiles have all been slaves to sin, but that is not the same thing as having the obligations of the Torah upon you. This was heavily debated by the believers in Jerusalem in Acts 15 but solved; James ruled that the Torah doesn't apply to Gentile followers of Jesus. Instead of receiving the obligations of Torah, Gentile believers find themselves in the same position as Jewish believers in Jesus, not under the Torah but with Torah written on our hearts (Jer 31:32-34). Paul here describes the grafting in of the Gentile believers as being adopted into the family of

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God, giving us the joy of being called sons of God and able to call on the name of the Lord with the gentle word Abba.

**Luke 2:15-21.** Luke had previously described the shepherds as being out in the fields guarding their flocks at night. This has led many preachers to declare that this could not have been wintertime as it would have been too cold for outdoor animal husbandry and thus Jesus was clearly not born at Christmas. However, anyone who actually is involved in sheep farming knows that sheep are never housed indoors even during snow. The flocks are simply too big. I was in England recently and personally witnessed flocks outside in the fields grazing in -3 C (27 F) degrees snow and rain. The current temperature in Israel at night is a cool 12 C (54 F) degrees but certainly not low enough to require bringing animals inside. Sheep are hardy things, and so are shepherds. In antiquity, shepherds were the lords of clans and held in high esteem. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were wealthy and respected shepherds. Following urbanization, the shepherding profession was relegated to the poorer classes as the elite established homes in cities, thus the first witnesses to the good news of the birth of the Messiah were the poor and overlooked. All who hear the shepherds share their angelic visitation are amazed. The text is unclear who and how many are the “all” in Bethlehem. It could refer simply to the immediate family of Joseph and Mary who have their own experiences of angelic visitors. Interestingly everyone who had thus far met the infant Jesus engaged with angels.

The Gospels note that Jesus is born into a pious devout Jewish family. So when the eighth day arrived, as described in the book of Leviticus 12:3, they circumcised him according to custom and gave him the name of Jesus. We often have to be reminded what the name Jesus means, God saves. In Hebrew, it's a bit easier as the name is Yeshua and is easily identified as coming from the verb *hoshia* which means *to deliver* or *to save*. The name of Yeshua is essentially a shortened form of the name of the biblical figure of Joshua. Yeshua was a fairly common name in the first century with the name appearing on many inscriptions around ancient Judea. The Septuagint, written several hundred years before Jesus, had translated the word Joshua יְהוֹשֻׁעַ into Ἰησοῦς *Iesous* from which we derive the English word *Jesus*. Jesus is not named after the Greek god Zeus which looks like this in Greek, Ζεύς, which as you can see is very different from Ἰησοῦς. The circumcision and naming of Jesus squarely put him in his Jewish context and not in the Greek world.

### **ACNA Readings**

**Exodus 34:1-9.** This portion of Exodus recounts the creation of the second tablets of the Ten Commandments. The first ones were destroyed by Moses in rage at seeing the Israelite worship the golden calf. For these new tablets, Moses will chisel new stones but the Lord himself will write the commandments. Heaven and Earth will both be involved in this new creation. As the Lord appeared before Moses, he announced his name and in so doing also declared his character. Exodus 34:5-7 are

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known in Jewish tradition as the 13 attributes of God. During the modern synagogue service, this passage is read allowed as part of the liturgy declaring the character of God.

**Romans 1:1-7.** Paul is likely writing to a Gentile audience that is worshipping with Jewish believers in Rome. The Gospel is referred to in Romans as “the Gospel of God” and not, as we might expect, as the Gospel of Jesus. This good news of Jesus was promised through the Prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures and proven to be true through the resurrection. The Gospel of God, Paul declares, is now accessible to Gentiles who are called to obedience through faith (clearly faith and works – obedience – are linked together and should never be separated). This was for his name’s sake. The name of God and the name of Jesus are linked with the promised good news and the salvation that comes through the resurrection. God’s name is connected to his promises in the Hebrew Scriptures. And God is no liar. He has spoken truly. The message of the New Testament is a witness to the truth of God, to the Gospel of God and to the great name of God.

**About the author.** The Rev. Aaron Eime is a deacon at Christ Church Jerusalem and a teacher for CMJ Israel. Aaron studied in the master’s program at Hebrew University with a focus on early Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Bible. He also studied psychology and sociology at Queensland University in Australia. Aaron is a dedicated Bible teacher exploring the Hebraic roots of the Christian faith. He reads Aramaic and ancient Greek and is fluent in German and Hebrew. He has taught internationally, including in Europe, North America, Hong Kong, and China. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and three children.