



THE MISSION OF SAINT MARY MAGDALENE

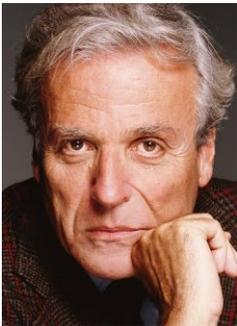
Father Alan's Blog

For the Second Sunday After Christmas - January 2, 2022

"On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived."

St. Luke 2:21 (NIV)

What follows are a few lines of dialogue from one of the many memorable scenes in the 1987 movie, "The Princess Bride" (the film adaptation of the 1973 novel of the same name by noted author and screenwriter:



William Goldman),

between the recently-resurrected (yet still physically weak) and lying-prostrate-on-a-bed hero, "Westley", and the menacingly standing, sword-drawn villain, "Prince Humperdinck".





Prince Humperdinck: *First things first, to the death.*



Westley: No. 'TO THE PAIN'.



Prince Humperdinck: *I don't think I'm quite familiar with that phrase...*



Westley: ...*'TO THE PAIN'* means the first thing you will lose will be your feet below the ankles. Then your hands at the wrists. Next your nose.



Prince Humperdinck: *And then my tongue, I suppose. I killed you too quickly the last time. A mistake I don't mean to duplicate tonight.*



Westley: *I wasn't finished. The next thing you will lose will be your left eye followed by your right.*



Prince Humperdinck: *And then my ears, I understand – let's get on with it.*



Westley: *WRONG. Your ears you keep, and I'll tell you why. So that every shriek of every child at seeing your hideousness will be yours to cherish. Every babe that weeps at your approach, every woman who cries out, 'Dear God! What is that thing,' will echo in your perfect ears. That is what 'TO THE PAIN' means. It means I leave you in anguish, wallowing in freakish misery forever.*



All joking aside, today I'd like to explore a rather forgotten scene from "The Christmas Story". (In case you doubt that it is forgotten, then consider this: whenever "The Christmas Story" from St. Luke, chapter 2 is read in churches, it almost always begins at verse 1:



"In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world."

and ends at verse 20:



"The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.")

Even so, during the Christmas Day Holy Communion service, the Gospel Lesson from St. Luke 2, as appointed by the 1962 Canadian

Book of Common Prayer (BCP) Lectionary, ends with verses 13-14:



“And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.’”

And, subsequently, the Gospel Lesson for today, being the “Second Sunday After Christmas” (from St. Luke 2:15-21), continues the story from that point. Yet, it ends with this seemingly perplexing twist:



“On the eighth day, WHEN IT WAS TIME TO CIRCUMCISE THE CHILD, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived.”

Truth be told, many churches tend to skip over this one verse, **as if it has nothing at all to do with the birth of Jesus**. But not so with the Anglican Catholic Church of Canada, or with the BCP, or with today’s message, for that matter – **for this is a message specifically about the circumcision of Jesus**. (No doubt, that statement alone has probably caught your attention. If it has, you’re certainly not alone. For

instance, Pastor Joel Schroeder, in his 2012 New Year's message to Mount Olive Lutheran Church & School in Overland, Kansas, referred to the circumcision of Jesus as a "startling topic".) Still, the "Circumcision of Jesus" IS a part of Holy Scripture and, therefore, deserves our utmost attention. For the simple fact is, St. Luke 2:21 contains a wealth of truths that we normally do not associate with Christmas. So, let's "unpack" it a bit and see what we can find.

FIRST

we read that it place "*on the eighth day*", which means that, counting the day of His birth, Jesus was circumcised *when He was only one week old*.

SECOND

the Rite of Circumcision goes all the way back to Genesis 17:10-12, where the Lord ordered Abraham and all his male descendants to be circumcised:

"Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised."

THIRD

that particular command of the Lord is still followed by practicing Jews today, with the act of circumcision being called a "bris" which means "covenant".

Fourth

it is impossible to overestimate the importance of circumcision to the Jews because it is:



the most fundamental precept of Judaism;



the ultimate symbol of Jewish identity;



and the very means by which a Jewish male enters into the covenant that God made with Abraham.

FIFTH

Jesus was circumcised – first and foremost – because he was born a Jew, as stated in St. Matthew 1:1 (that is, the very first verse of the New Testament):

“A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham.”

In a word, then, Jesus was the ultimate “Son of Abraham.”

Sixth

the Circumcision of Jesus is also an important date in the Christian Church year. Due to the fact that Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ (or Christmas) on December 25th, the eighth day, or “Octave Day of Christmas”, occurs one week later. Which is why January 1st is called the “Feast of Circumcision” or the “Feast of the Holy Name”.

Seventh

the Early Church Fathers offered two reasons why Jesus was circumcised:

#1

To demonstrate Jesus' obedience to the Law of God.

As He Himself said in St. Matthew 5:17:

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have NOT come to ABOLISH them but to FULFILL them.”

Consequently, it was *absolutely necessary* our Lord Jesus be 100% obedient to ALL of God's commands, the first of which was *circumcision* – which is precisely what St. Paul meant in Galatians 4:4 when he affirmed that Jesus was:

“...born of a woman, born under the law”.

#2

To prove that Jesus was truly human.

One of the many heresies that plagued the Early Church was called “Docetism”, with the Docetics denying Jesus’ “true humanity” by teaching that Jesus only appeared to have a human body and that His “body” was only an apparition or a “phantasm”. *However, you cannot circumcise a ghost.* Therefore, Jesus’ circumcision literally proves that our Lord truly shared our flesh; thus, He was one of us – *in EVERY sense of the word.*



Now, all this talk about circumcision (even though it is Scriptural) may seem rather out of place at Christmastime, and, in a sense, it is; as even we in the Church have tended to “domesticate” the Christmas season by making it beautiful, safe, and, especially, enjoyable. To put it succinctly, therefore: **for many Christians, Christmas is intended to be a happy, fun-filled, family time complete with:**



sparkling lights;



decorated Christmas trees;



peppermint candy canes;



colourfully wrapped presents; and



heartwarming carol music.

However, the Nativity of Jesus was not like that at all:

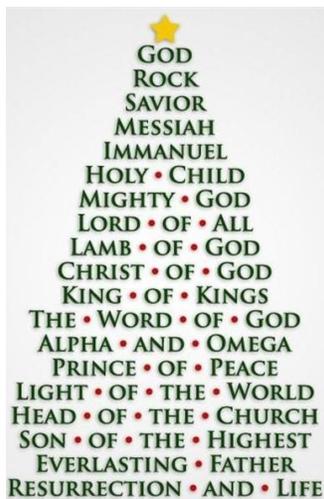


as there is nothing fun – or beautiful – about giving birth in a stable or laying your newborn child in a feeding trough.

The American preacher, John Piper, in his 2004 Christmas sermon, had some helpful words about this very topic:

“For Jesus, it was affliction from the beginning. His birth was scandalous (in that it was conceived before marriage). It was in an animal-feeding trough. It was threatened and hated by the political powers (especially King Herod). He barely escaped death as a child and had to become a refugee in Egypt. And so it went until he was accused of sedition against Caesar and crucified. So, the ‘great joy’ announced by the angels to the shepherds is a very embattled joy. It is a joy to be fought for and a joy always under attack. It is a joy that is always threatened by tribulation.”

Moreover, we cannot even begin to understand Jesus' circumcision apart from another single truth, as something else happened on that eighth day that was of major significance (similar to what occurs during "The Ministration of Holy Baptism" when a child "officially" receives his or her "Christian name"). Because immediately following His circumcision (according to St. Luke 2:21), Mary's infant boy-child received His name:

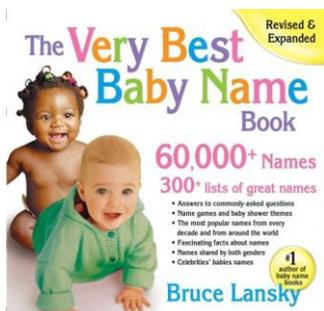


JESUS,

(the very name, by the way, that the angel Gabriel – as identified by St. Luke, in chapter 1, verse 26 of his Gospel – gave Him before He was even conceived by the Holy Spirit).



Nowadays, naming a child is big deal for parents. Expectant moms and dads:



buy baby name books;

BOYS	GIRLS
1 Oliver	1 Charlotte
2 William	2 Olivia
3 Jack	3 Amelia
4 Noah	4 Ava
5 Thomas	5 Mia
6 James	6 Sophia
7 Jackson / Jaxon	7 Chloe
8 Ethan	8 Emily
9 Lucas	9 Sophie
10 Lachlan	10 Grace

make lists of “potential names”; and



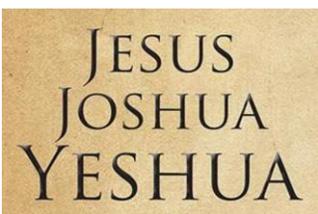
try out those names on family and friends (even checking to make sure that the baby’s initials don’t spell some strange word).

But Mary and Joseph did not have to agonize over what to name their son because the angel Gabriel had already given them His name. As we read in St. Matthew 1:21b:



“Call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.”

The name “Jesus” means “SAVIOUR.” (Incidentally, the Hebrew version of Jesus is “Joshua” or, more specifically, “Yeshua”.)



Jesus = Joshua = Yeshua = SAVIOUR.

Hence, Jesus' name tells us:



Who He is;



Why He came; and



What He would accomplish during His earthly life.

All of which begs the question:



Is there a connection between Jesus' circumcision and His name?

Let me answer that by asking another question:



What, exactly, did it cost Jesus Christ to be the "Saviour of the World"?

Answer:

Jesus paid for our sins at the cost of His own precious blood.

And here is the vital connection:



Jesus, AT ONLY ONE WEEK OF AGE, had already entered into the pain and the bloodiness of human existence.

Just eight days old and Jesus' blood was already being shed – and those few drops of blood pointed to the bloody way that Jesus' life would end. In short:



the infant's cradle was literally tinged with a crimson reflection from the Redeemer's cross.

Mark this down:



There is a direct line



from Jesus' birth,



to His circumcision,



to the Cross of Calvary.

In other words, Jesus' circumcision foreshadows the blood that He would shed for the sins of the entire history of the human world.



So, I need to ask:

How far was God willing to go to save each one of us?



He was willing to leave the splendour of heaven;



He was willing to become just like us;



He was willing to be carried in the virgin womb of a scandalized teenage girl;



He was willing to be born in a stable and wrapped in rags; and



He was willing to shed His blood for all humanity for all time.

And so, even now:

How far is God STILL willing to go for each one of us?



We can't even imagine the answer to that question, *as there is no pit so deep that the love of God is not deeper still.*

For during Christmastide, we do not celebrate the birth of some aloof God who stands afar off. No. Rather, we celebrate the birth of:



"Immanuel" - "God with Us".

So, to rephrase the question a bit:

How far is God still willing to go WITH each one of us?

Whatever pit we find ourselves in, God is willing to enter that pit and meet us there. And that is precisely what God did on that cold, star-lit night over 2,000 years ago:

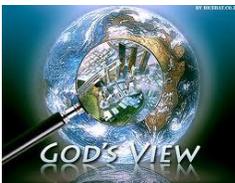


He left the glories of heaven



for the filth and the stench of a stable.

Because God does not stay in heaven and wish us well:



God is not just some passive observer;



God came all the way to Earth;



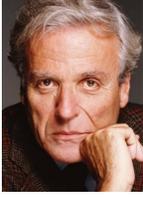
God shared in our flesh and our blood; and



God joined us in our pain and our sadness.

And that is the point.

And God did not merely come TO EARTH, either. No. So, with all due respect to:



William Goldman; and



Westley,

who merely (and somewhat glibly) spoke of:

“shriek(s)...hideousness...weep(ing)...anguish (and) freakish misery”,

God, as His Incarnated Son, Jesus Christ, truly came “TO THE PAIN”.

And for proof of that, we need look no further than Isaiah 53:2-5 – a prophecy that was written **a full 725 years before** Jesus was even born in the Bethlehem stable:

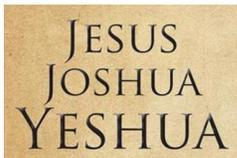
*“He grew up before him like a tender shoot,
and like a root out of dry ground.
He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
HE WAS DESPISED AND REJECTED BY MANKIND,
A MAN OF SUFFERING, AND FAMILIAR WITH PAIN.
LIKE ONE FROM WHOM PEOPLE HIDE THEIR FACES
HE WAS DESPISED, AND WE HELD HIM IN LOW ESTEEM.
Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.”*

For God loved us so much that He willingly entered the sorrow, and the sadness, and the suffering of **true human existence** here on earth.



And those afflictions began when, on the eighth day, His infant blood was shed.

And then – **and only then** – did they name Him:



Jesus. Joshua. Yeshua. SAVIOUR.

And, from thenceforth, the shadow of the cross followed Him everywhere He journeyed throughout His sinless life here on earth.

That is really why He came.

That is really why He was born.

And that is really what Christmas is really all about.



Dearest Reader in Christ:

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