

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Numbers 6:22-27; Psalm 66 (67); Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:16-21

After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child

Luke 2:16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Luke 2:21 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.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The readings today honour both the liturgical season and the civil year. Our Gospel — a repeat of some of the Christmas story — is chosen on account the picture of Mary pondering and the last paragraph detailing the circumcision of Jesus on the eighth day, the octave of Christmas.

In traditional societies, circumcision is a puberty ritual, as the young boy moved from childhood to adult responsibilities (teenagers were invented in the early twentieth century). It is likely that the combination of Jewish identity markers (circumcision, dietary laws and Sabbath observance) was firmed up at the time of the great Exile in Babylon. It is possible that circumcision became a *birth* ritual at that time. By the first century AD, these identity markers has taken on enormous significance as utterly essential to being Jewish. The historical Jesus was born a Jew and lived and died as Jew. The recovery of this memory is an important part of current Jewish and Christian dialogue and reconciliation. As St Paul writes: *As regards the gospel they (the Jewish people) are enemies of God for your sake; but as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors; for the gifts and the calling of*

God are irrevocable. (Romans 11:28–29)



OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old, including the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring. Both the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money must be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.” (Genesis 17:10–14)

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the people of Israel, saying: If a woman conceives and bears a male child, she shall be ceremonially unclean seven days; as at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean. On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. (Leviticus 12:1–3)

KIND OF WRITING

Once again, the birth stories are combination of history and midrashic *haggadah*, a kind of ruminating biblicalising exploration. Primarily, Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2 offer the reader a profound understanding of the identity and mis-

Thought for the day

The Roman god “janus” was the “keeper” of beginnings, gates, transitions, time, doorways, passages, and endings. It is possible that January is named after him (certainly “janitors” were). This two-faced god is a good symbol of how we feel this time of year, as we look forwards and backwards. What were the great highs and lows for me personally? Have I learned anything about myself and my world? Are there thing I hope might be different in the year to come? On a faith level, how was last year? Is there learning I need to carry into the next year? As we look forward on all sorts of levels, it is naturally too, to turn to God and ask God’s blessing on ourselves, our families and our world.

Prayer

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3:14–21)

sion of Jesus, written in the light of Easter faith. There is indeed history — Jesus *was* circumcised following Jewish law — but at the same time there is a great deal of “theological narrative.” The same teachings could have been expressed conceptually. Luke’s choice of

narrative has proved highly successful.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

Then Jesus went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. (Luke 2:51)

Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” (Matthew 1:19–23)

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptised by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” (Luke 3:7–9)

ST PAUL

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, to all God’s beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 1:1–7)

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to

the flesh. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen. (Romans 9:1–5)

Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh! For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh—even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. (Philippians 3:2–6)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 16 “To hasten” is an almost purely Lucan word, expressing evangelical zeal: Luke 2:16; 19:5–6; Acts 20:16; 22:18; 2 Pet 3:12. Cf. *When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.* (Luke 19:5–6). Verse 16 summarises and succinctly sets the scene for the account to follow.

Verse 17 The shepherds are portrayed as witnesses, who heard the oracle and saw its fulfilment. Thus, the pattern of Christian witness is established even in the birth stories of Jesus.

Verse 18 The “all” may surprise — after all, only three people are present. But again, Luke presents the effects of Christian witness to be explored in the Acts of the Apostles. In that second volume, very many will come to believe in Jesus. For reactions within the birth stories, cf the following:

Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. (Luke 1:21)

He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” And all of them were amazed. (Luke 1:63)

And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. (Luke 2:33)

Verse 19 The portrait of Mary is sustained in this verse: pondering, treasur-

ing, reflecting. The meaning of “treasured” is captured in these other verses: *Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.*” (Matthew 9:17) *Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him.* (Mark 6:20)

Verse 20 In this Gospel of prayer, many characters praise and glorify God. The expression “seen and heard” must remind the reader of expressions found in the first Letter and Gospel of John, perhaps a further indication that Luke is the latest text to be written.

Verse 21 This is again a summary looking back on the whole story. For us as much later Christians, the verses invite us to recognise the Jewish roots of Christianity. Even though circumcision was a matter of considerable later strife, this was not the case for Jesus himself. He did question many “traditions of the elders” but not this fundamental rite. Compare Luke 3:7–9 above.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The story tells us that the shepherds helped Mary to realise the significance of the child born to her. She treasured their words and pondered their meaning. Who have been the people who have helped you to understand the meaning of significant events in your life? Remember them gratefully.

2. We are told that Mary “pondered these things in her heart”. What part has prayerful reflection on life played for you? How has it been helpful to you in deepening your appreciation for the gift of life?

3. When the shepherds realised that they had been witnesses to a wonderful manifestation of God’s love for his people, they glorified and praised God. Recall ways in which you have been made aware of God’s love for you. How have you expressed your gratitude?

PRAYER

God, our Father, since you gave mankind a saviour through blessed Mary, virgin and mother, grant that we may feel the power of her intercession when she pleads for us with Jesus Christ, your Son, the author of life, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever.

God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law

Gal 4:4 But when the appropriate time had come, God sent out his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, 5 to redeem those who were under the law, so that we may be adopted as sons with full rights. 6 And because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, who calls “Abba! Father!” 7 So you are no longer a slave but a son, and if you are a son, then you are also an heir through God. (NET version)

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Our reading is suitable for both the liturgical feast and the start of the civil year. For the feast, it contains the words “born of a woman.” For the New Year, it reminds us clearly of who we are in Christ and how may call God, our creator and the mystery before home we are silent, Abba, Father.

Galatians is a crucial document for Paul and for Christianity. Within the the letter, there are narratives—relatively easy to grasp. By contrast, the core teaching—on faith, justification, works of the Law and grace—takes a bit of work but is finally immensely rewarding.

For Galatians, Romans and Philippians, the translation used is also crucial. In my opinion, the best version for reading Paul is the New English Translation (NET), available gratis on the web at <https://lumina.bible.org/bible/Galatians+1>. The language is not inclusive so as to keep the word play in the Greek.

For the person familiar with the whole letter and its stark rejection of circumcision, there is a contrast with today’s Gospel, affirming Jesus’ own circumcision.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

Paul had preached in Galatia, while en route to Greece. The converts were all Gentiles and they were given a Torah-free version of the Gospel. At some point, evangelisers arrived from Judea claiming the authority of the Jerusalem church. According to them, the omission of key Jewish observances was a mistake on Paul’s part. These practices included the dietary laws, sabbath observance and circumcision. The evangelisers gave the example of the Jerusalem community, where these identity markers were still in force. Following this intervention, a mes-

sage was sent to Paul to get his opinion. The result is the letter, perhaps Paul’s most searing text.

KIND OF WRITING

Galatians belongs to the category of deliberative rhetoric:

Letter opening	1:1-5
Introduction	1:6-10
Thesis	1:11-12
Proof 1	1:13-2:21
Proof 2	3:1-4:7
Proof 3	4:8-5:12
Proof 4	5:13-6:10
Conclusion	6:11-17
Postscript	6:18

Our reading is a summary and synthesis of Paul’s teaching from the point of view of the benefits to believers.

RELATED PASSAGES

Jesus said, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.” (Mark 14:36)

For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” (Romans 8:15)

Jesus said, “When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. (Matthew 6:7–13)

At that time Jesus said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. (Matthew 11:25–27)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 4 Paul has a grand narrative of salvation, with Jesus as the fulfilment of the previous covenant. Although the first Christian writer to come down to us, already it is clear that Jesus is the Son of God in a special way (see Rom 1:1-7 and Phil 2:6-11). “Born of a woman” points us to the genuine and ordinary humanity of Jesus. He is one with us in Adam. “Born under the Law” means he came to be under what Paul saw as the previous dispensation.

Verse 5 The purpose of Jesus’ birth, ministry, death and resurrection is summarised in its chief effect: we are adopted as children. Paul does use the language of redemption, but without the later Western redemptive theory found in Anselm and his many followers. Precisely because God had extended his grace to all humanity “without distinction”, there is now no need for the identify markers, setting God’s people over against all of humanity.

Verse 6 Each Christian has his/her own experience of being adopted by God. This new reality is expressed externally by calling God “Abba, Father”; it is experienced from within by the gift of the Holy Spirit. Cf. Rom 5:1-5 and all of Romans 8. For Paul, it was crucial that Abraham was considered justified *before* he was circumcised. Likewise, it was crucial that the Galatians enjoyed the gift of the Spirit *before* the other evangelisers imposed on them the Law.

Verse 7 Who is the true Israelite? Who is the true heir to Abraham? Paul offers a complex argument in Gal 4:21-31 — puzzling to us — but the bottom line is that people of faith, enjoying the gift of the Spirit, are the true heirs of the promise, regardless of genetic inheritance or racial background.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Can I recall the moment the reality of being a child of God really struck me?
2. If I am no longer a slave but an heir, what follows for how I live my life?

PRAYER

Abba, God, you are to us a father and a mother and you have made us all you children by the gift of the Holy Spirit. May the same Holy Spirit keep us ever true to our new identify in Christ. Help us you as our Abba and to live in the freedom of your children. Amen.

So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them

Num 6:22 The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: 23 Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them,

24 The LORD bless you and keep you; 25 the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; 26 the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

Num 6:27 So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This blessing — central then and now to Jewish worship — is a very fitting text for the start of the year.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Generally, the blessing is regarded as traditional and ancient. Curiously, the oldest surviving text of Hebrew is this very blessing (see across the page). As such the blessing may have influenced the writing of Psalm 67 (below). It may well be pre-Exilic.

KIND OF WRITING

The blessing is metrical, with three lines (consisting of three words, five words, and seven words respectively, in Hebrew), and it uses the second person singular mode of address. Each of the three clauses, in a different way, gives expression to God's commitment to Israel—a commitment which promises earthly security, prosperity, and general well-being.

RELATED READINGS

Moses and Aaron entered the tent of meeting, and then came out and blessed the people; and the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people. (Leviticus 9:23)

They bowed down in worship a second time, to receive the blessing from the Most High. And now bless the God of all, who everywhere works great wonders, who fosters our growth from birth, and deals with us according to his mercy. (Sirach 50:21–22)

At that time the LORD set apart the tribe of Levi to carry the ark of the LORD's covenant, to stand before the LORD to serve him, and to formulate blessings in

his name, as they do to this very day. (Deuteronomy 10:8)

Then the priests, the sons of Levi, shall come forward, for the LORD your God has chosen them to minister to him and to pronounce blessings in the name of the LORD, and by their decision all cases of dispute and assault shall be settled. (Deuteronomy 21:5)

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, that your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations. Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you. Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth. Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you. The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, has blessed us. May God continue to bless us; let all the ends of the earth revere him. (Ps 67)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 22 The introductory verse is from the redactor, given that all of Numbers is supposedly from Moses' pen.

Verse 23 The mention of Aaron indicates we are dealing with the priestly stratum of the text. This special blessing is bestowed only by Aaron and his sons.

Verse 24 Blessing and keeping are close in meaning: the Lord blesses us by sustaining us.

Verse 25 The imagery of shining is found elsewhere: Pss 4:7; 31:17; 44:4; 67:2; 80:4, 8, 20; 89:16; 119:135; cf. Dan 9:17.

Verse 26 The hiding of God's face as a mark of displeasure is found elsewhere: Deut 31:18; Pss 30:8; 44:25; 104:29. The positive version is confined to here. But compare: Pss 4:7; 33:18; 34:16. Peace (*shalom*) has a wide range of meanings. Cf. *And I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and no one shall make you afraid; I will remove dangerous animals from the land, and no sword shall go through your land.* (Leviticus 26:6) *Their houses are safe and without fear; and no rod of punishment from God is upon them.* (Job 21:9)

Verse 27 The name itself is regarded as powerful (cf. "*nomen omen*").

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Time of prayer for the blessing of God for the New Year. Blessing on our natural families, on the family of the faith and on the whole human race.

2. Is there someone you would like to pray for, someone especially in need of peace?

3. As we look around the world today, it would be easy to be anxious. Let us pray for peace, especially peace between the religions that respect may be shown to all.

PRAYER

May the LORD bless you from Zion, that you might see Jerusalem prosper all the days of your life, and that you might see your grandchildren. May Israel experience peace! (Psalms 128:5–6)

READINGS 1 AND 3

The first and third readings honour different realities. The Aaronic blessing is chosen to mark the civil new year and it makes for a fine introduction to 2017.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 67 (66) is a very fine prayer and an excellent continuation of the blessing in the first reading. The psalm and the blessing are linked and one may have inspired the other.

FEAST DAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Numbers 6:22–27

Today we have a blessing, a prayer for God's help and presence as we start the new year. The psalm going with the reading continues the theme of blessing.

Second reading

Galatians 4:4–7

Paul reminds us today that Jesus was born like one of us, a member of the Jewish people. Christianity is, in some way, the continuation of the Jewish faith, but for all humanity.

Gospel

Luke 2:16–21

Today is the eighth day after the birth of Jesus and, according to Jewish tradition, the day for circumcising a newborn son. We are reminded that Jesus was Jew and that the roots of Christianity lie in God's first chosen people.