

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYAER
The Circumcision of Christ
(January 6, 2012)

Lessons:¹

First Lesson: Here beginneth the thirtieth Chapter of the Fifth Book of Moses, called Deuteronomy.²

“And it shall come to pass, when all these things are come upon thee, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before thee, and thou shalt call them to mind among all the nations, whither the Lord thy God hath driven thee, And shalt return unto the Lord thy God, and shalt obey his voice according to all that I command thee this day, thou and thy children, with all thine heart, and with all thy soul; That then the Lord thy God will turn thy captivity, and have compassion upon thee, and will return and gather thee from all the nations, whither the Lord thy God hath scattered thee. If any of thine be driven out unto the outmost parts of heaven, from thence will the Lord thy God gather thee, and from thence will he fetch thee: And the Lord thy God will bring thee into the land which thy fathers possessed, and thou shalt possess it; and he will do thee good, and multiply thee above thy fathers. And the Lord thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live. And the Lord thy God will put all these curses upon thine enemies, and on them that hate thee, which persecuted thee. And thou shalt return and obey the voice of the Lord, and do all his commandments which I command thee this day. And the Lord thy God will make thee plenteous in every work of thine hand, in the fruit of thy body, and in the fruit of thy cattle, and in the fruit of thy land, for good: for the Lord will again rejoice over thee for good, as he rejoiced over thy fathers: If thou shalt hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to keep his commandments and his statutes which are written in this book of the law, and if thou turn unto the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the eleventh Verse of the second Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Ephesians.³

“Wherefore remember, that ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands; That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world: But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: And came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh. For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father. Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “*For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross....*”⁴ In the Name of the ✠ Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the ✠ Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

⁷ ACHTEMEIER, P. J. (ED.), HARPER’S BIBLE DICTIONARY 474, s.v. “Jeshua”. HarperSanFrancisco, 1985.

⁸ Deuteronomy 30:6-7 (RSV).

⁹ Genesis 17:10-11 (RSV).

¹⁰ Genesis 17:14 (RSV).

¹¹ Ephesians 2:11-13 (RSV).

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Circumcision is a *sign and seal* of the covenant between God and His people. Under the covenant, the Christian opens his heart and mind and soul to God, and agrees to live under God's rule, and in return is granted salvation and eternal life.

Our LORD Jesus did not need to humble Himself to the process of circumcision, but He did so to show us His humanity. When a small amount of blood was spilled at His circumcision, it was a foreshadowing of the effusion of blood He would later spill—again willingly. He showed us the way to Him and to the Father.

We must allow our hearts to be “*circumcised without hands*”. We must be willing to endure the exposition of our own faults so that we can let them go. Male, female, all of us.

Let us pray:

LORD, give us the grace to let go of our pride, our fear and our sin. Help us to open ourselves to Your circumcision of our hearts, which You alone can accomplish in our lives. Give us the wisdom to know that letting go of sin is not a taking away, but a great gain. Let us never fail to live in covenant with You as LORD and Savior. Amen.

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¹ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

² Deuteronomy 30:1-10 (KJV).

³ Ephesians 2:11-22 (KJV).

⁴ Ephesians 2:14-16a (RSV).

⁵ Colossians 2:11.

⁶ St. Luke 2:21.

Homily:

In the ancient world, the chosen people of God were known to the rest of the world by their faith and the practices of that faith. The Jews worshipped a monotheistic God, and were a “covenant” people, meaning that they lived in the context of an agreement with God involving practices of worship, living, and the laws. Among the best known, but perhaps least understood, of those practices was circumcision.

We usually think of “circumcision” as applying only to the Israelites’ male children, and among them only to the removal of one small flap of skin. The implications of the practice went much farther than that. All the children of Abraham were set aside from the peoples of the world by what is called in St. Paul’s letter to the Colossians “*the circumcision made without hands*.”⁵

Since the time of Moses, the sons and daughters of Abraham were set aside by this mark. Yes, daughters too. For the reality of the circumcision is not just the surgical procedure that we think of today, but a spiritual “circumcision of the heart” that sets aside the entire person, body and soul, and not just the body.

The circumcision made without hands is this setting aside of the entire person as part of the God-ruled community of the Old Testament, part of the chosen people of God.

In accordance with the tradition of the Hebrews, Jesus was brought forth by Joseph and Mary to be circumcised and named on the eighth day following His birth. He received the name that had been given for Him by the Angel Gabriel when the Angel told Mary she was to bear the child of God: “*And when eight days were accomplished for the circumcising of the Child, His name was called Jesus, which was so named of the Angel before He was conceived in the womb...*”⁶

That Name was Jesus, which is the Greek for Joshua or Yeshua, which means “Yahweh is salvation”.⁷ And by being circumcised, Jesus’ authenticity as being conformed to the Old Testament Law was proven, and He was in a position to fulfill that law as He later revealed was His purpose.

In today’s First Lesson, too, this message was presaged:

“And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live. And the LORD your God will put all these curses upon your foes and enemies who persecuted you.”⁸

To be circumcised, then, clearly involves much more than just the cutting off of some excess skin. Something much deeper is happening here.

In Genesis, God sets forth the terms of the covenant of which this circumcision was a sign:

“This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and your descendants after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.”⁹

And if anyone failed to participate in that 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.”¹⁰*

Breaking the covenant with God involves breaking away from God, which means living without His Grace, His Love and His Salvation. For that tiny group of people worshiping the one true God in the midst of a hostile world, it would be deadly. But living within the covenant means living in accordance with God’s will, loving and worshiping God, and He in return will protect and guide us.

St. Paul further defines the circumcision of the heart. The Apostle to the Gentiles reminds the church at Ephesus that experiencing this “circumcision of the heart” involved not just the Jews, but all people who accepted Jesus as God:

“Therefore, remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ.”¹¹

In other words, the Ephesians were once Gentiles, held in contempt by the Jews. They were living in the New Israel, but were aliens in the land. They did not participate in, nor benefit from, the covenant relationship between God and the people of Israel. Because they were strangers to the faith, Paul says, they had no hope of salvation, and they were people without God. But once accepted into covenant relationship with God they enjoy all the benefits of being one of the chosen people.

By accepting God, they were accepted by God, and became no longer strangers in the land, but members of the people of God. The benefit of this circumcision, then, is not a cutting off, but rather coming into union with God and His people. It is not loss, but gain. This is the promise.

John Gill, in his “Exposition of the Whole Bible”, comments that it is a spiritual circumcision that is being spoken of, not physical. The purpose of the circumcision of the heart is to open the heart, expose the sin, and making us willing to part with our sin. Then can the Grace of the Holy Spirit fill us and the blood of Christ clean us. This, says Gill, is the “circumcision made without hands” which is only possible through God.