

## **Circumcision of Jesus, Jan 1<sup>st</sup> 2017.**

*Point: Jesus is Jewish. Our faith is emphatically Jewish-shaped: in terms of its Kingdom hope, and in terms of its emphasis upon the community which embodies that hope. This year, let's be a lot more Jewish.*

So one day, a priest, an imam, and a rabbi decide to see who's best at his job. They each go into the woods, find a bear and attempt to convert it. Later, they get together to compare notes.

The priest goes first, beaming with pride. 'When I found the bear, I explained to him all about Jesus and baptised him in a nearby stream. His first communion is next week.'

The imam is equally chuffed. 'I gave the bear the teachings of the Prophet, and he has made shahada and will keep Ramadan.'

Next comes the rabbi. He is lying on a stretcher, covered in bandages, bloodied and battered. 'On reflection,' he says, 'maybe starting with circumcision wasn't such a good move.'

So much for the humour. Here's the serious thought prompted by today's Feast of the Circumcision of Jesus. Jesus Christ was a Jew. This may seem a statement of the astoundingly obvious, but from time to time the Church has been rather keen to avoid or even deny it. Type 'was Jesus really Jewish' into Google, and you can see some of the wilder attempts at this still going on.

There's a much more mainstream position, however, which is only slightly less silly and equally poisonous. This is the one that admits that Jesus was of course Jewish, but does so as if this should be considered really a rather unfortunate oversight on God's part, something of an embarrassment. How odd of God to choose the Jews, as the old rhyme puts it. He really should have started somewhere else, preferably somewhere sensible and rational and enlightened – say like here, and now. There's a kind of Christianity which is very, very keen to get far away from anything which looks like its Jewish roots. So, for instance, one of the greatest theologians of the nineteenth century, Adolf von Harnack – whose influence was simply immense upon European Christianity – was quite open about it: we should simply stop reading the Old Testament, and remove it from our Bibles. Jesus' teaching was about the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man – simple, and sensible. All that muddled confusion of law and ritual and sacrifice and angry God in the Old Testament was just that: *Old*, and ready to be put aside. Christianity, said Harnack, is not Jewish.

One hundred years after Harnack, that position is deeply unpopular now. Most scholars and most churches have rejected it sharply. That's partly because they saw that some of it was mixed up with the same kind of anti-Semitism which led to the Holocaust. But mostly it is because the more people read the New Testament, the more it became clear that Christianity simply was Jewish. It was all one story with the Old – a story which in Jesus Christ took a very surprising twist and found a very strange fulfilment, but emphatically *one* story. Christianity was Jewish right the way down to its core. Indeed, as one sensible person put it, if you want to think like a Christian you'd better learn to think like a Jew. If you want to think like a Christian, you'd better learn to think like a Jew.

That is true in many, many ways – ways far too numerous to list in one short sermon. If you'd like to get a really good sense for how it is true, perhaps a good New Year's resolution would be to read and pray through the Psalms slowly day by day. But here are two of the most basic ways in which it's true. Number one: Jews – and Christians – believe that that whole world was made by a good God, and that one day, one glorious day, that goodness will shine through everyone and everything. There will be a time of justice and peace. Evil will be put in its place. The Kingdom of God will come. Religion is not just a matter of what you feel inside, or what will happen when you die... it is about the world being made as God wants it. Not all religions are like that. That's the Jewish thing, and because it's the Jewish thing it is the Christian thing.

Number two: Jews – and Christians – believe that they are the chosen people of God. Not chosen because they're better than anyone else, not chosen because God loves them more than anyone else, not chosen to lord it over others. No: chosen, as the prophet Isaiah put it, to be a light to the nations. Chosen to be the community where people can look and see: right, that's what the world is about, that's what we're meant to be. A community like the Jewish Law and Prophets describe, where the weak are protected, the old honoured, where money, and sex, and political power are all ways people help each other rather than exploit each other. Now of course, both Jews and Christians fail in that task all the time – but that's what 'chosen people' means. To live out on earth, what is in Heaven. Not all religions are like that. That's the Jewish thing, and because it's the Jewish thing it is the Christian thing.

All of which means that it's no bad thing the Feast of the Circumcision falls on New Year's Day. This year, why don't we individually, and as a church, try to be a little more Jewish? To remember that our hope is for the whole world made right. That we believe we will see all things, somehow, shot through with the justice and peace and goodness of God. And that because we believe that, as God's chosen people we will begin *to do* it - not just in theory, not just in words, but actually and practically, in this little community, with each other. Relating to each other, and serving the world around, in such a way that others might see: that's what the world is about, that's what is meant to be. In the next few months, we'll be discussing together what the next stage of this parish's Mission Action Plan is to be. My hope on this New Year's Day and Feast of the Circumcision is that it all looks rather Jewish.