

Trinity College Cambridge
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FOLLOWING CHRIST FROM EPIPHANY TO LENT

Circumcision and Naming

Fra Angelico's *Circumcision*

Genesis 17: 1–2, 9–12a Luke 2: 15–21

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The legend of Pope Joan has it that, at some point in the early medieval period, a woman became Pope. She disguised herself as a man, became a priest, and her outstanding abilities saw her become first a member of the papal curia, then a cardinal, and eventually Pope. The legend has it that she was only discovered when she gave birth to a child during a papal procession. (Interestingly, nobody seems to have commented on the fact that she had conceived a child, simply on the fact that its birth showed that she was female). An associated legend also grew up that after that, medieval popes had to prove that they were male. The story goes that they sat on a chair with a hole in the seat and a cardinal felt through to check that they had two testicles. One version of the legend even had the cardinal declaring the pope's gender by announcing – In Latin - 'he has two, and they dangle nicely'.

It's a myth that is a little too close to the truth about how important male genitalia are in the Church. I personally know of one young man, who was a candidate for the Roman Catholic priesthood, who was diagnosed with testicular cancer. When he was discussing how he felt about this with his vocations advisor, he was startled and not a little upset to be told that if he just had one testicle removed, that would be OK, he could go ahead with the discernment process for ordination: but he would be ineligible for ordination if any more of his genitalia were removed.

And I'm sure I need not remind you, that we are here on the eve of the consecration of Libby Lane. Tomorrow, in York Minster, she will become the first woman to be made a bishop in the Church of England, something that I and many others have worked and dreamed for, for many years. I'm going to have to get up very early in the morning to get there from here! But there are still some, perhaps some of you here, who are unsure about this step; and there are some who think that actually, no, maleness – male genitalia – are required for a valid ordination.

I say all this because the topic I've been given tonight, on your journey through Jesus's life this term, is Jesus's circumcision when he was eight days old. So perhaps my title for this sermon could be, 'It's all about the penis'.

Look at the picture. In Fra Angelico's depiction of the circumcision of Jesus: It is Jesus's penis that is the centre of attention. All hands point to it, as do the glittering tips of the knife. Look, says the artist: this was a real boy, with a real willy. I could have chosen many other depictions of this scene, and in all of them the centre of attention is Jesus's naked penis, with the knife about to slice.

I have quite a few problems with this image, and with what it says about medieval theology. So perhaps we should deal with those first, before going on to think about how on earth this relatively obscure incident in Jesus' childhood might tell us something about the good news of God's love for us.

The rise in celebration of Jesus's circumcision happened in the middle ages. Interest in the circumcision as an artistic subject went alongside a rise in devotion to and promotion of purported relics of The Holy Foreskin. Now of course, you can understand the temptation here. In a culture where relics were the gold standard of devotion, it must have been really annoying that none of Jesus's body parts were available. By definition, Christians believed that Jesus's body had been raised from the dead and then had ascended into heaven. Whoever first thought to claim that they had the foreskin removed from him as a child was a genius.

But these centuries in which devotion to the Holy Foreskin and the Circumcision arose, were also the period in which women were increasingly being marginalised by a centralising and clericalising church. Women's devotion was increasingly being portrayed and promoted as limited to the domestic sphere. Abbesses, for example, were systematically being demoted, their powers to hear confessions, absolve, and appoint bishops being removed. I can't help wondering whether the rise of images such as this, with Jesus's penis taking centre stage in such a dramatic way, was at least partly about staking a claim to the centrality of maleness to salvation.

The picture we have here is not entirely male, of course. The feast day of the Naming and Circumcision began life as a Marian devotion – and there Mary is, nearly at the centre of things. Mary here literally enacts her title of God-Bearer: she is bearing Jesus, holding him out, presenting him to the men. Her role is essentially passive – she is the handmaid of the Lord – presenting him to the men who will act upon him.

And there at the very centre of the picture is Jesus's penis.

The medieval theologians who discussed the circumcision all agreed that this was important because it showed that Jesus was fully human. He was a real boy, with a real willy. The circumcision was held to be of central importance because it proved that the incarnation was real. Just being born from a woman eight days earlier didn't seem to be enough to prove that – but having your penis on display, having it literally taken in someone's hand, 'fondled' (as one medieval preacher rather unfortunately puts it), made the real humanity of Christ beyond doubt. It is notable that these writers seem entirely blind to the question of what this means for women.

Does being ‘really human’ really mean being male? They didn’t even ask the question, it just seems to have been self-evident to them that having a penis was the definition of being properly human!

Today – on the eve of tomorrow – it would be hard for us not to think to ask this question. The unquestioned assumption that real humanity is male humanity has been the underlying theological justification for women’s subjugation in the church – and wider society – for much of Christian history. Women’s service has been seen as essentially passive and preparatory: men’s service, by contrast, has been conceptualised as being active agents, for good or ill. Just as in this picture, Mary presents Jesus for the men to do their thing with.

But tomorrow there will be a new icon for what it means to be fully human. When Libby Lane is consecrated, the visual image will be of a woman at the centre. A woman having a mitre placed upon her head, a woman and men together representing God for and to the nation as a bishop of the established church. It has taken us hundreds of years to get here, but at last we will start replacing this image of masculinity as central to humanity. At last we will start enacting and representing what we say we believe – that men and women are equally made in God’s image, and that the incarnation saves and includes all humankind.

So let me move on, and I’m afraid I’m going to raise a second problem that I have with this painting and this feast. And that is its implicit anti-semitism.

The man wielding the knife, and his helper with the jug, are very visibly presented as Jewish – their noses and hats are in marked contrast to the Caucasian appearance of the other characters. These images of Jesus’ circumcision, which suddenly begin to appear in the high medieval period, all play into the popular anti-semitism of the time. This was the result of a wide variety of social and economic factors, and also of the crusades, during which the concept of European Christian identity was deliberately fostered by the papacy to encourage the various nations to stop fighting each other long enough to unite against what was presented as a common enemy.

So here we have an image not just of a cosy incident from the Jesus family album, but of ‘The Jews’ shedding Christ’s blood for the first of many times. Circumcision is here being presented as one of ‘those’ things that ‘those’ Jews do. The visual imagery of Jews laying violent hands on Jesus from the beginning is clearly linked with the blame they faced in the medieval popular imagination for their part in Jesus’s death. One of the reasons Aquinas gave for the importance of the circumcision was that it removed any excuse for the Jews to reject him.

Now of course, the very notion of circumcision is about inclusion and exclusion. Circumcision has always been a very powerful – and deliberately indelible – marker of group identity. In the Hebrew Scriptures it is the sign of being part of the saving Covenant, as we heard in our first reading this evening. Reject it, and you are cast out of the People of God.

One of the earliest controversies among the first Christians was whether Gentile converts needed to be circumcised (a practice that was widely regarded with revulsion in Hellenistic culture). The Council of Jerusalem, as early as around 50 AD, decided that they did not, at a time when Jewish councils were asking the same thing but coming to the opposite conclusion. This undoubtedly was a mission imperative of its time, and important in clearing the ground for the church to grow so rapidly, but do note that it represented a radical departure from the Scriptures. It might be interesting to reflect on whether there might be any precedent for today's church there.

And in our own times, as we know, issues of Female Genital Mutilation – a collection of far more dangerous and damaging practices than male circumcision – are hotly contested in many cultures, with those who wish to continue these practices claiming that they are an important marker of their cultural identity, and often ostracising – or worse – those who refuse to conform. I hardly need to say, in the context of all the current debates about sexuality in the churches, that rules and cultural practices about what we do with our genitalia are still widely used as markers of inclusion and exclusion. If original sin means anything to us, I suspect it means something to do with this innate human desire to set boundaries around who is in and who is out of any human group.

So where is the good news for us in this picture, and in this commemoration?

Modern tastes are probably a lot more comfortable with the idea of celebrating the naming of Jesus. Jesus was a common enough name at the time, but the power of it comes in its meaning, 'Saviour'. A whole range of theological resonances of what it means for Jesus to save us are visually represented in this image of the circumcision.

Look again at the picture, at the figure of the infant Jesus. His pose – suspended in the air, arms held out – is deliberately reminiscent both of the crucifixion, and of the priest's traditional posture at communion. For medieval theologians, the circumcision of Jesus was important because it was the first of five times that his blood was shed. The idea of Jesus's saving blood was increasingly important in medieval devotion. And so his circumcision became significant as the first time his blood was shed – the other four times being at the Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, when he sweated blood; at his flogging; at the crucifixion itself; and finally when his side was pierced by the soldier's lance to check he was dead. The first and last of these were often linked, as the beginning and completion of Christ's saving bloodshed. You can see if you look closely at Jesus's side in this picture, that Mary's fingers on his side seem to foreshadow that lance wound. So Jesus's circumcision is being represented here as beginning the process of our redemption; a down payment, if you like, of the price Jesus was going to pay for us.

And there is also a further visual link being made with the church and the sacraments as the means by which that salvation is mediated to us. Historically, circumcision would have taken place in the home, but here the background of the picture suggests a basilica or church. You can see too that the table underneath Jesus suggests an altar, and that combines with Jesus's priestly arm position, to make the visual link in this image between the circumcision, the crucifixion, and our sharing in Christ's blood when his saving sacrifice is made present at communion.

So perhaps it's not really *all* about the penis – it's a lot about the blood, too. I'm not sure how much that helps in making the imagery any more palatable! But in representing this little scene, the artist is inviting us to reflect on the reality of Jesus's incarnation, and all that it implied. The circumcision stands as a token of the daily humiliations that he would have suffered, living his life as a real child. It fleshes out the idea of Christ's willing embrace of humility in giving up his equality with God to become fully human in the incarnation, and it foreshadows his willing embrace of the ultimate humiliation of death on the cross. We are invited to look into this image and contemplate the amazing mystery that such an accumulation of pain and humiliation could be the means by which Jesus became the name that he was given – our Saviour – and, through the Church, continues to mediate that salvation to us.

Amen.

<http://www.wikiart.org/en/fra-angelico/circumcision-1452>