

The Circumcision

School of Bellini *Circumcision* c.1500
(in the National Gallery, London)

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A Sermon preached in Trinity College Chapel, Cambridge

by Jessica Martin

on Sunday 28th January 2007
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

OT: Deuteronomy 10: 12-20

NT: Colossians 2: 6-17

['Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiff necked'. (Deut. 10:16).

'In [Christ] dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.' (Col. 2:9)]

'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.' (Luke 2:21). This is what it says in the Gospel of Luke about the Circumcision, and with an unexpected literal-mindedness the Church holds its 'Feast of the Circumcision' – which is sometimes called 'the Feast of the Naming of Jesus' eight days after Christmas day, on January 1st. Apart from the three days between the Passion of Good Friday and the Resurrection of Easter Sunday (and even they are counted rather opportunistically) this is, I think, the only time the liturgical cycle of the Church follows Jesus' life in real time. And if you've only got a year to get through the events of 33 years- less than a year really because you've got to take proper time off for getting the harvest in - then grabbing the full eight days for the gap between the birth and the ritual of naming is pretty deliberately generous. This is a big deal; something important is happening. There's some kind of difference here between birth, pure and simple, and the initiation ritual a week later.

This evening's painting, from the workshop of Bellini, probably painted around 1500, discovers that difference. You are a guild member, let us say, belonging to an association with a special devotion to the name of Jesus, and your association commissioned this painting. You'd have had rather a serious time at Christmas, because the eight days leading up to the Circumcision would have been part of a

devotional process which would prepare for, and in some sense replicate, the rite of passage which circumcision represented. You'd start with sorrow for your sins and proceed through confession and prayer, penitential and charitable exercises, towards thanksgiving and adoration on the day of the Circumcision itself [Voraginus]. What with the fasting and the almsgiving and the tears and contrition and all, the modern incidental mortifications of Christmas - gluttony, enforced inactivity, and relentless exposure to one's nearest and dearest - would be pretty distant, so it wasn't all bad. For our guildsman the joys of Christ's birth reached their fulfilment only on this day of naming and initiation into the sociability - which means also the collective sorrows and frailties - of humankind. The two signs of fulfilment were the physical sign of the ritual of circumcision, and the gift of the name Jesus, which means 'salvation': 'thou shalt call His name Jesus' says the angel to Mary in the Gospel of Matthew (1:21), 'for He shall save His people from their sins.' Not until then, for our guildsman, was the scope and extent of the God's sacrificial love towards human beings properly manifest or fully ratified.

The artist is painting the moment when the baby Jesus starts to take upon himself the weight of sorrow and responsibility which his Incarnation brings with it. All that joyful stuff with angels and shepherds is over. With his circumcision comes, for the first time, physical pain - and along with it a *human* identity which is expressed in his name: the one who saves. That's going to be this baby's job in human society. Carpenter would have been a lot easier. The baby whom we see in the centre of the painting knows this. And because he knows this, Bellini must paint a child who is both vulnerable and knowing. Eight days or no eight days, this baby's not a newborn. He's at least nine months old, physically; he can hold up his head, his back's straight and loadbearing, his hands clench into fists; his eyes look upward and a little sideways into the dark, towards some source of strength we cannot see. He is not looking at his mother - though both she and Joseph, eyes cast down, look at him. Newborns lie around waving their limbs ineffectually; their hands fall into a strange fluttering dance as if to unheard music; their heads are too heavy to lift, their eyes turn wonderingly towards the nearest source of light. They choose nothing; everything happens to them, good and bad. The initiation rites to which we subject our newborns are as much without their consent as our decision to bring them into the world in the first place happens without their consent. They happen because, well, now that they are here, their social identity - as Christian or as Jew, or simply as citizen - is inescapable, and wholly necessary. It cannot be avoided; even deliberate abdications of responsibility - those parents who say 'we'll wait until he/she's older, and can make up his/her own mind' - are as much decisions on behalf of a child as anything more active. 'Of course we had them schnipped' said an acquaintance of ours, a non-observant Jew with a strong sense of his identity, of his two boys. (He went on to say that there was something so terrifying about seeing an elderly Rabbi approaching your tiny baby with an open razor blade in one shaking hand that, unable to face it a second time, they had taken the younger boy to

have his done by a doctor.) But for him it was irreducibly necessary that that sign of identity should be upon his sons. He took that responsibility, and from it his sons found their place in the world. Non-observant Christian families who ask for their children to be baptised do so with a similar sense that the sign by which their child enters the identities and responsibilities of human society is more important than their personal doubts and difficulties. It should be honoured.

But those sorts of decisions, decisions taken on the behalf of someone helpless and unknowing – they're not quite what we are seeing here. No one is taking the decision for this child. Looking on him, we see the set jaw of adult pain and adult patience; the visible tension in his arms and shoulders, and his clenched hands, also display the mature stance of endurance. Yet the round, vulnerable nakedness of this Christ is authentically baby; the fat bracelets and little round tummy, the plump bent legs and soft feet which haven't developed enough to bear his weight. His defencelessness is emphasised by the female assistant next to the Madonna, who draws back a diaphanous veil to expose him, and this echoes the shape of the High Priest's cloak, drawn back by his assistant on the far left, so as not to get in the way of his hands as he cuts the foreskin. So in this baby we see a delicate balance of deliberate choice and helplessness, of doing and being done to, strength and patience. Around him the adults intent on the circumcision display a comparable balance of qualities: their lowered eyes are humble and indicate a prayerful awe; yet they neither meet the child's gaze nor can move to protect or – one is tempted to say 'save' – him from what is evidently being shown to us as a first sacrificial act. They must walk through the rituals of that sacrifice in order to be themselves obedient: this child is not only an actor in a human rite of initiation but a sacrificial lamb, or even Isaac lying bound upon the bundle of sticks, waiting for his father's knife. The adults too, then, caught by the logic of the scene, are both powerful and helpless. He is touched by two of them; his mother who holds him and watches; the High Priest who makes the cut. It is a hard thing to hold your child and watch, as anyone who has taken a child even for routine vaccinations will know. It is not, I think, straining interpretation too much to see the suffering of Mary also promised in this scene.

For this artist the Circumcision is a prefiguring of the Passion, the first piece of human bodily suffering encountered by the child Jesus. It celebrates with awe the true bodiliness, the genuine humanity of God made man, it shows His readiness to be obedient to the Law, and it honours the suffering which our need for salvation imposed upon Him. All three combine in this moment of initiation and naming; he obeys as his flesh is cut for the first time in naming him 'Salvation'. That is the logic too of Milton's poem on the same subject. 'He who with all Heav'n's heraldry whileare' writes Milton,

'Entered the world, now bleeds to give us ease;
Alas, how soon our sin

Sore doth begin
His Infancy to sease!

Milton will finish his poem looking towards the Passion most explicitly: the child today 'seals obedience first with wounding smart' but

'...O ere long
Huge pangs and strong
Will pierce more near his heart.' [*On the Circumcision*]

For medieval watchers, this bodily emphasis was extraordinarily important. Just how important we can see in the fifteen separate relics purporting to be Christ's foreskin kept in different reliquaries across Europe. Christ's mature body had, of course, ascended, which made any pieces as it were, detached earlier, highly prized.

For modern watchers, this somewhat literal way to devotion is closed, really. But we do have before us the powerful metaphorical dimension to the Circumcision which appears in a boldly profound formulation in the reading from Deuteronomy: the verse which says 'Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiff necked'. You will recall, no doubt, the famous mixed metaphor which is supposed to characterise the weak and wandering preacher: 'Lord, teach us to take our hearts and look them in the face, however difficult that might be'. This is a more deliberate kind of mixing. We are being asked to be ready to be vulnerable, to expose our hearts to the vicissitudes and needs of our human communities. The love which is ready to be wounded in the service of human community participates in the love of God, 'who had a delight in thy fathers to love them (Deut. 10:15)' and therefore commands 'Love ye ...the stranger' (Deut. 10:19). This points most profoundly beyond obedience to the law towards the intentions behind the law: those of Divine love and Divine justice. The letter to the Colossians picks up the metaphor and points towards the incarnate person of Christ as the law's fulfilment: 'In [Christ] dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily' [Col. 2:9]. He is Messiah, he is Salvation: to 'walk' in Him is to learn the difficult and painful task of loving God and our neighbour. Now it might be that that was, for our weak human strength, impossible. But to God all things are possible. Jesus, who became truly human, is our 'Mediator between God and men. From the very beginning, from His birth, He allies the human with the divine, the lowest with the most sublime.' The words are St Bernard's and I finish with words of encouragement and advice, suitable to this rite of naming, which are also his:

The name of Jesus is not only light, it is also food. Are you not strengthened whenever you meditate on it? What is its equal for enriching the mind that thinks about it? What else can so renew your fatigued spiritual powers,

bolster virtue, make good and upright habits grow, foster pure affections? All spiritual food is dry if this oil is not mixed in with it, tasteless if it is not seasoned with this salt. Anything you write is without savor for me unless I read the name of Jesus in it. Your disputations and your conferences remain flat to me unless they ring with the name of Jesus. "Jesus" is honey to the mouth, sweet song to the ear, joyful delight to the heart.