

Holy Name of Jesus

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Introduction

From a contemporary western Christian perspective, marking the circumcision of Jesus can seem both anachronistic and baffling. However when set against its own sociological background, this event in the life of Christ can give us some interesting pointers towards the importance of witness and accountability. The actual event being celebrated only occupies the final verse of today's gospel reading but the story contained in the preceding verses also relates to these things.

Anchor question

How important is it that we publicly associate ourselves with people or causes we feel strongly about, or make public declarations of our own allegiances and responsibilities?

Text

Luke 2: 15–21

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. 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.

Comment

The actions of both Mary and Joseph (even though he is not actually named) are significant parts of this short text – though we will need to dig down a little into the cultural background of the text to get to grips with this.

In the reflection for Proper 2 we considered Mary's actions as described in v19 – in

particular the implications of the dynamics of the verbs – with respect to her own journey of understanding. However if we look at her action in the light of the prevailing culture and custom, then there is an additional dimension to it located at a more family/social level which can also shed some light for us. Honour–shame culture was an important part of 1st Century Mediterranean society: we have somewhat lost the sense of what honour means in this context but essentially it was the status one claimed in the community, together with the recognition of that claim by others. Thus it served as an indicator of social standing and enabled people to interact with others of similar and different status in the correct socially prescribed ways. It also governed many aspects of social life: potential marriage and business partners, where one could live, what events one could attend, what religious roles were open to one etc. Thus the defence and recognition of one's honour was an important part of the social and cultural dynamics.

Moreover since the family, rather than an individual, was the basic social unit, the dishonour of one person could destroy the well-being of their entire kin group (cf the reflections from Advent 4). The notion of 'shame' is also not what we might infer – it does not equate to losing honour (being shamed) but instead to having an appropriate sensitivity for one's own and one's family's honour/reputation: how one's status was perceived by others was as important as actually possessing the qualities required for that status. In agrarian societies this role was the domain of women – it was they who were expected to have this particular sensitivity in a developed way and to teach it to their children. We can therefore also understand Mary's actions in verse 19 (as also in 2:51) as monitoring the honour status of her family – recording the confirmation by both heavenly and earthly witnesses of the status of Jesus.

But what does this have to say to those of us who do not live in such a society? Perhaps the lesson for us here comes through Mary's awareness of and careful attention to detail and nuance and the importance of the role of being a faithful witness to (and keeper of) events and interactions, particularly in situations of conflict and war. One has only to think of those who tenaciously keep alive the memory of 'the disappeared' in places from Northern Ireland to Argentina; or the various human rights groups who bring to public view those who are wrongly killed or imprisoned. Such witness – and the challenge it presents to both Governments and bystanders in holding them to account – has often been an important catalyst of social and political change, or in bringing about justice. Mary's actions as recorded here are conducted in the privacy of her own heart – but we can assume (and there are possibly hints of this in some of the Gospel stories) that she would have been willing to take public action to attest to the honour of her family unit if the need arose.

Joseph too – though hidden from view in the text – does something which has an important message for us, and one which is also related to accountability and witness. Once again though we need to understand something of the cultural background in order to fully appreciate this. The practice of circumcision was widespread in the ancient Near East though far from uniform in timing and significance, even in Israel's own history. Circumcision on the 8th day was not the initial Jewish practice, coming instead from the rather later OT law (Lev 12:3 is retrojected into Gen 17: 12). Before this the rite would have been carried out at puberty or marriage (the Hebrew word for father-in-law means 'the circumciser') and signified a particular transition to a different level of functioning and responsibility – hence also references to circumcising lips (Ex 6:12, 30), hearts (Lev 26:41 etc.) and ears (Acts 7:51) as signs of understanding and obedience (see also Jer 9:24–5).

Infant circumcision clearly had some religious significance as a sign of covenant relations but the practice – just as at puberty – also had social implications connected with acknowledgement of connection. Circumcision was – from early in its practice – associated with the acceptance by the father of the child as his own (which may also account for its association with naming – as here and in Lk1:59). The practice of doing it on the 8th day rather than at puberty gave a special weight to this acknowledgement since it had to be made before anything could be known of the child's character. Community participation in the rite gave the seal of public recognition to the father's acknowledgement of his assumption of parental

responsibility. Thus Joseph – in publicly acknowledging his acceptance of fatherly obligation for Jesus – follows the journey we reflected on in Advent 4 through to its conclusion. As with the story of Mary, there are things here which can speak to our very different contemporary situation: the importance of faithfulness to an undertaking – before having any certainty as to outcome; the acceptance of responsibility and of accountability for that in the public domain.

These two stories then, though they come from a history and culture which are somewhat removed from our own, nevertheless speak to us of the importance of bearing faithful witness – whether that be by careful attention to events so that we can keep alive important knowledge in the pursuit of resolution and justice; by holding ourselves and others accountable; or by public association with what we know to be true and just in the light of God’s love. This is a responsibility which transcends time and place and which we all share as witnesses to the rule of God.

Response

Think about your local community or church: how aware are you of the different things which go on in them? What practical steps could you take to develop your level of attentiveness? or Visit the website of a human rights watch group and read some of the stories there. Consider adding the people involved to your daily prayers as a way of keeping them in remembrance, or writing letters to the authorities involved as a way of raising that remembrance in a more public sphere.

Prayer

A collect:

All-seeing God—
who glories in the lilies of the field
and notes the fall of every sparrow –
Help us to attend with conscientious and compassionate care
to those stories which daily unfold around us,
that we may be faithful and accountable witnesses –
celebrating what is good
and challenging what is wrong,
so that your Kingdom
in all its beauty and justice
may become more visible.
Amen