**Naming and Circumcision of Christ 1st January 2016 Year A**

Numbers 6. 22 – end
Galatians 4. 4 – 7
Luke 2. 15 – 21

Prayer

Today we celebrate the circumcision and naming of Christ, and today we celebrate a new year. There is something wonderful about a new year, there are so many possibilities ahead, so many things that we plan to do, so many things that we hope to do better. It is a time to turn over a new leaf, get things right for a change and kick those old annoying habits we all have. In global terms too there are so many situations that we hope and pray may be different in this New Year. But there is something wonderful about the new year being linked with the naming and circumcision because just at this moment when we are thinking about new beginnings we are reminded of three things that are ours as part of what it means to be a follower of Christ, we are reminded of our belonging, we are reminded of our identity and we are reminded of our mission.

First of all our belonging: we read that Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day. Circumcision was the sign that marked children out as belonging to the children of Israel, to the Jews. Indeed it is still that which identifies men as Jews. So Jesus is born under the law. He is marked out as belonging to his community. He is in a sense not coming from outside to turn everything on its head by force. He is born at a particular time and in a particular place and of a particular race. His circumcision reminds us once again that Jesus is born as one of us, he is born as a human child and we are reminded of his sexuality. This child is no pretence at being a human. Galatians expresses it better than I am able “God sent his son, born of a woman, born under the law that he might redeem those who were under the law”. Once again we have this picture of the God who longs to bring freedom yet who limits himself, coming as a baby, setting himself under that law so that those whom he brings into that circle of belonging, those whom he redeems are incorporated freely. Jesus says that he has not come to do away with the law but to fulfil it. And under this fulfilled law the language of redemption speaks of buying out, about bringing freedom. They are to be brought into the love of the Father as adopted children, as those who belong in the same way that Jesus belongs to the Father. As those who belong they are recipients of blessing, of grace and of peace. It is poignant to think about this belonging at a time when in our world so many are refugees, without state, sometimes without family, people who have no place in which to belong and this must give us pause for thought. At the beginning of this new year we are called to rejoice that we are those who have been freely brought into the ever circling love of the Father, as children in whom our Lord delights. And at the same time we are called to ensure that all those who come to this place, experience that sense of belonging. One of our three priority areas is that of welcome. We pray that all who come here may find welcome and a deep sense of belonging. So our first resolution is to know that we are a source of delight to our heavenly Father and to ensure that all those who come here may know that too.

Secondly, identity. The name that Jesus was given on the eighth day was the name given to him by the angel before even he was conceived. His is a name that means “Yahweh saves” and which thus identifies him as God incarnate. I suspect that only those who had been recipients of the messages of the angels will have realised that his was not simply a name that affirmed the character of God as part of the inheritance of a Jewish child, but instead a name that revealed the true identity of this particular child. In our own culture naming is important. The name that is chosen for us by our parents has an influence on the person we become. There may well have been a great deal of thought given to the name. Is it a name that has been used before in our family? Will it remind us of our links with those who have gone before us? Have we carefully researched the meaning of the name and is this something that we wish for our child? Is it a name we can imagine them carrying through life, a name that may in some way shape who they become? And of course we all know the power of a name. When we are called by our name we are being addressed as not just any person who may or may not be passing but as a specific and chosen one. In the confirmation service the Bishop says to the candidates “God has called you by name”. Again Galatians explores this beautifully. As those who have been brought into the circling love of the Father, as those who belong, our identity is as children of God, as those who can address God with the same intimacy with which he addresses us. Children are those who grow into responsibility, who are heirs of God. In other words our identity is to be those who inherit the kingdom, who become kingdom bearers. So to our new year’s resolutions perhaps we should add claiming our identity as children of God who can address God with intimacy and who can become bearers of the kingdom.

Thirdly mission. As I have already said, the name Jesus means Yahweh saves thus bringing together the identity of the Christ child and his mission to save humanity from all that divides them from God. His mission is not to force people to accept all that he offers but to live among them showing them and teaching them what it might mean to be drawn into the circling love of God, what it might mean to be a child of God, what it might mean to enjoy the freedom that that status brings. The mission of Christ is to redeem humanity, to buy back that freedom even if the price is death from those he came to redeem. The circumcision and naming of Christ prefigures both Baptism and the Passion. Through Baptism we become those who have put on Christ like a garment. We take on the identity of the community of those who belong to Christ. Through the passion of Christ we are redeemed. Edward and I went to an exhibition of tapestries that were made from the Old Masters who had painted the circumcision and I was particularly struck by the one that showed an angel waiting to receive the blood from the circumcision with a chalice and I was also struck at how many of the babies depicted were cruciform. So at the beginning of this new year we are to accept our belonging as those in whom God delights, we are to accept our identity as children and heirs of God with all that goes with that, and we are also to accept our mission to point to the freedom that is ours through Christ’s birth and through his death and to invite others to accept that same freedom.

So at the beginning of this New Year I invite us all to reflect carefully and prayerfully on our belonging and the ways in which this is expressed. I invite us all to reflect carefully and prayerfully on our identity as children of God and how we can live out this identity. And I invite us to reflect carefully and prayerfully on our mission as agents of the kingdom. Together let us take these resolutions seriously and joyfully so that the rumour of God may be heard loud and clear in this place. It’s a wonderfully exciting prospect so I hope you will come with me so that this time next year we can look back and feel that we may indeed have identified the places where God is at work in this community and to have begun to join in. And as we set out on the journey let us hear the blessing from Numbers ringing in our ears:

The Lord bless you and keep you
the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up the light of his countenance upon you and give you peace.

A very happy New Year to you all.