

Sermon for 1st January 2023, Year A, Christmas 2, Naming of Jesus

Preached at All Saints Biddenden,

Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:15-21

Sermon

The first Sunday after Christmas is traditionally something of a low-key affair. After the great build-up that begins around Halloween and rushes through Advent into Mary and Joseph's panicked arrival in Bethlehem followed by Jesus's abrupt birth, we may now feel a slight pause of relief before the three wise men arrive next week at Epiphany.

Theologically, this Sunday is perhaps like the afternoon of Christmas day spent blobbed out on the sofa with the detritus of Christmas dinner strewn all around us. A small moment of peace before the relatives begin to arrive, or indeed we *are* the relatives who arrive, and we must put our game faces on again. Once more unto the breach dear friends!

For Mary and Joseph, the first 'relatives' to arrive are of course the shepherds. In our cribs the shepherds are around for weeks, but in Luke's gospel their visit is, for Mary at least, mercifully brief and kind. They tell of all they'd heard from the angels and then depart, and Mary treasures their words, pondering them in her heart.

Eight days later, as is the custom, Jesus is circumcised according to the law of Moses, and named Jesus, and it's by this naming that Joseph essentially adopts Jesus as his son and fulfils all the prophecies about Jesus being a descendent of King David's line.

But let's leave Mary & Joseph & baby Jesus to their rest for a while and turn instead to Paul's letter to the Galatians, written about 50 years later, in which

he is also wrestling with circumcision and adoption, but from a quite different perspective.

As with most of Paul's letters, he is writing to a church that he has founded and has an ongoing pastoral relationship with, but of course he is not a parish priest who lives next to the church but an apostle who is always travelling to far-flung places, and so he cannot always be around when other preachers arrive and try to tell Paul's young churches that they're not doing Christianity correctly and haven't been properly saved.

The main issue in the Galatian church was the relevance or necessity of circumcision for the men. Galatia, being located in what is now central Turkey, was not Jewish, and most of the new believers there were not circumcised. Paul had made it a key part of his evangelistic pitch that not only was circumcision not required for non-Jewish Christians, but that to make following Jewish religious laws necessary to becoming a Christian would strip away most of the gift that God had sent in his Son, Jesus.

Paul's argument was that whether a person was Jewish or not was irrelevant, as it is through faith in Jesus that God has adopted us as his children. In the past, being one of God's children meant following hundreds of religious rules. It's like being a slave – every infraction must be punished, you never truly belong, and your tentative inclusion depends on being perfect at all times.

But now, according to Paul, the good news is that by believing in Jesus, you are adopted by God as his child, and children of God are forgiven, always truly belong, and unconditionally loved and included. This is why Paul so vigorously declares that 'nothing can separate us from the love of God' in his letter to the Romans. And this is also why Paul is so utterly horrified when people arrive in Galatia and try to undermine this message by arguing that in order to be a proper Christian, the men had to be circumcised. From Paul's perspective, this is a perverse attempt to re-establish religious policies of separation, exclusion, and

subordination. 'You cannot be a proper Christian unless you follow our rules' – except that Paul believes that the core of the Christian faith is the inner transformation that comes from being loved by God *despite* our inability to properly follow all the rules.

Paul's not arguing that circumcision was bad – after all, Jesus was circumcised, and so was Paul. It's just that it's not relevant to being a disciple of Christ or a child of God, and believing that it is, leads you down a rabbit-warren of religious rules that no one can ever fulfil, and right back into the idea that being acceptable to God depends on how religiously perfect we are, rather than how loving and compassionate God is.

No wonder Paul wrote in such a frantic manner, and so angrily. He reaches the pinnacle of his rage in the next chapter of his letter, Galatians chapter 5, verse 12, but I'll leave that as an exercise for you to look up later if you're interested.

So, it appears that the key thing Paul is saying is this: God loves, forgives, and includes you by adopting you as his child through faith in Jesus, not because you've followed all the rules – which is impossible anyway. And this is a great message, but I think there's more to his argument than this.

What Paul also knows is that with a realisation that we are truly God's child comes a transformation of heart and mind that is simply impossible for those who are struggling to be perfect or to belong by following rules.

Consider the parable of the prodigal son. The elder brother does everything right. He stays at home, works tirelessly in his father's fields with little reward, while his younger brother takes his inheritance and wastes it all on fast living. Then the younger brother comes home, and his father throws a party for him, and gives him new, fine clothes and all the best food.

The prodigal son was ready to give up his sonship and simply be a servant for the chance to return home, but the father insists he will always be one of the family and despite all his faults he is welcomed, included, forgiven.

Which of the two sons is likely to be transformed by their experience? Is it the one who has always followed all the rules, albeit begrudgingly? Or is it the one who had been lost, who made grievous mistakes, who caused hurt and distress to those who loved him, but who now has inexplicably been welcomed into a family he thought he had no right to be part of?

So much of the gospels – and Paul’s letters – are full of the stories of people who did not belong and were not good enough at following the rules, but who even so were included by God and adopted as his sons and daughters and who as a direct result of this undeserved inclusion were transformed and made able to love others, just as Jesus did.

For me, this transformation into people of love is the whole point of the Christian faith. Trying to be perfect in word and deed by following religious rules is impossible, and futile, and eventually just makes us hate ourselves and others. But God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying ‘Abba! Father! So you are no longer a slave to rules but a child in God’s family, and therefore an heir to God’s kingdom.

We do not deserve the spirit of Jesus in our hearts. We do not deserve to call God, Abba, Father. And yet, the very fact that we don’t deserve it is what allows us to fully experience the immensity of God’s love. Paul the apostle *knows* this, and this is why he begs the Galatian church not to try to earn God’s love, but simply to experience it, and be transformed.