

CIRCUMCISION OF CHRIST
“A Circumcision of the Heart”

TEXT: ST. LUKE 2:15

“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.”

On this very first Sunday in the year of our Lord, 2006, I bring you greetings in His name and my prayers for a blessed secular New Year. AMEN

The joy of the birth of a child was still very evident in Bethlehem some 2,000 years ago. There in a lowly manger, a new son, the first born of Mary and Joseph was experiencing his first days of life. It had been a bit of an uncertain journey for the parents. They had traveled far, found no place to stay and eventually found themselves in the stall of a barn among the animals where Mary gave birth to her first child. We don't know of her experience when Jesus was born but it was no doubt not very different from that which our wives, mothers or daughters experience today. Joy at knowing you are pregnant, fear of the unknown experience of childbirth, concern for the child's welfare, the pain that comes with the birth itself and then the joy of seeing that beautiful new life come into the world. No doubt Mary and Joseph faced the same fears as every parent-was the child healthy? Was everything normal? How would this change their lives?

Although scripture tells us that Mary pondered all that went on around her and what was said by those who came to visit. The shepherds came, after seeing and hearing the angels glorifying God. They came to the manger and spoke of their experience in the field. The Lord had told them where to come and they gathered around the manger, looking at this new born child, and trying to comprehend what it all meant.

I often think about Joseph in all of this. He had a new wife and a new child and I am sure the responsibilities he was facing weighed heavily upon him as it does every new father. He was a carpenter by trade and was no doubt able to support his small little family. Yet, a new child was still a very big responsibility and he as well probably wondered about all that he was facing. Would his son be a carpenter like him? Would he be able to raise him in a manner fitting his religion and culture? How would he deal with the fact that he was responsible for another's child? How was he to raise God's son?

Mary and Joseph were both faithful to the laws of Moses. It was for this reason that on the eighth day, they took their young son to the temple to be circumcised. Circumcision represented the covenant between the people of Israel and God. In Genesis we are told that God had appeared to Abraham and said to him “Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations....I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come forth from you. And I will establish my covenant between you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you.” He promised them a land of their own and then God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations....You shall be circumcised in the flesh....and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.”

God had established a covenant with His people and circumcision was to be an outward physical sign of that covenant. A covenant is defined as a bond entered into voluntarily by two parties by which each pledges himself to do something for the other. It was a relationship established between God and man that God would care for, and love His people and that His people would be faithful to Him. The prophets of the Old Testament tried to press home the point that it was not just an exchange of help and sacrifice but indeed that the perfect relationship between God and man is based on the inward righteousness of the heart. Yet throughout the Old Testament, we see God's people not living up to their end of the relationship while God always remained faithful.

Even when God came to us in the form of this little child, men's hearts had turned cold. It was for this reason that Christ came-to establish a new covenant with His children. Except this time, it would be God in the form of our Lord and savior that would bear the burden of the sacrifice to establish this new covenant.

Christ shows us that in His life and death, He is the perfect covenant between God and man, wherein men, instead of offering their own imperfect righteousness, in exchange for the mercies of God, receive the gift of Divine grace whereby their righteousness may be made perfect.

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews refers to our Lord as the High Priest of a new covenant. He said that “if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another.” (Heb. 8:7) The old covenant was flawed because men were unfaithful and turned their backs on God. Man could not hope to keep up his end of the bargain and God knew this which is why he sent His son to redeem us. Our salvation, in this new covenant comes to us by the grace of God—a gift, accepted through our faith.

Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. (Heb. 11:1-2) Faith is our end of the bargain, our responsibility in this new covenant. The people of the Old Testament were not able to be righteous, they could not remain faithful, and they turned away from God’s love in their sin. So God made it easier for His children. Instead of the circumcision of the flesh, let there be a circumcision of the heart. He sent His son and in that Christ would pay the cost of our redemption. We need only embrace that sacrifice through our faith and trust in almighty God. In that, we receive the blessings of eternal life and salvation. What could be simpler?

In the modern world, as in the ancient, man still has trouble with an all loving, all gracious God. Too many have been turned off by what religion and man’s worship of himself has done to taint God and reshape Him in man’s image. All around us we see the degradation of our church and the loss of those who were once faithful. Somehow, the pure message of God’s love for us, Christ’s sacrifice and the hope of His new covenant have been lost.

We need to be deeply concerned for ourselves and for those who are turning from Christ. The author of Hebrews continues “Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to trouble and defile many.” (Heb. 12:14-15).

Our obligation in this new covenant is to be faithful, to love God with all our heart so that our heart may be righteous. To let Christ’s love for us shine for all to see, to glorify God in everything that we do. “And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.” (Heb. 13:16)

We are to be thankful to Him for His grace and His unfaltering love for us, to submit ourselves to His will for us and to “Through Jesus, to continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess His name.” (Heb. 13:15)

As God has established His covenant with His children, so should each of us make a personal commitment to Him. That commitment should be real and faithful, and in our prayers we need give ourselves to Him each day, to thank Him for all His blessings, to ask His guidance so that we may do His will, to ask for His strength in our challenges and ask for His forgiveness when we fail. To open our hearts to God and let Him fill every aspect of our lives so that we will be spiritually renewed. To be faithful in our worship, prayer and study of His word in Scripture. That is the evidence of the circumcision of the heart.

As the new year turns, we will find ourselves once again making resolutions we hope to keep. For me, I will start my annual diet, which should last till the end of the week. For many, it will be an attempt to do better in school, or at work or keeping up with house cleaning. Others will promise to renew friendships or to be nicer to family or friends. So here are a few resolutions that I would like all of us to consider:

Let us be faithful in our prayers, the study of His word and our commitment to worship. Let the light of Christ shine in each of us—for all to see. Let us be a reflection of God’s love for us—to all we meet. Let us touch the hearts of all we know—with witness to our faith. Let us recommit ourselves to the covenant God has established with us and may those efforts fill our hearts with His joy. And may the peace of God which passes all understanding, fill your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. AMEN