

Sermon notes for the Circumcision

This is the only Prayer Book provision for the period between the 1st and 5th of January. The 1928 book supplied a separate collect, epistle and gospel for the second Sunday after Christmas, but they are not very good choices. Let us then use the Gospel as an approach to Saint Luke's Christmas.

Saint John provides a theological (almost philosophical) analysis of the meaning of Christmas, and it is only from ironical hints elsewhere in his Gospel that we realise he knows some details about the birth.

Saint Matthew provides a theological analysis of the meaning of Christmas in which the Old Testament is the main tool for understanding.

Saint Mark, notoriously, says nothing.

So what does Saint Luke do?

Firstly, he gives a long thought-out exposition of the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus, and of the relationship between both of them and the soon to be validated form of the hopes of Israel. (Exactly the introduction a gentile reader like Theophilus needs.) As a minor issue, he is concerned to provide a classical historian's date. (There may be problems interpreting it, but not about what he is trying to do.) Jesus is to be anchored in history. He is mainly concerned to stress the routine nature of the birth (within the limits of a seemingly casual overcrowding at the inn) and infancy. This may seem odd, but if we want the colourful and dramatic incidents (like the Magi, the massacre of the innocents and the flight into Egypt) we go to Saint Matthew.

Saint Luke does seem to be stressing that this is a pious Jewish birth (consistent with what he has already said). Jesus is a Jew (because he is born to a Jewish mother); he is circumcised on the eight day according to the Law; he is redeemed on the fortieth day according to the Law (Luke is aware of this aspect of what we think of as the Purification), making use of the prescribed temple ritual because the family is (still) living locally and this is practical. There is no sense of danger anywhere in these narratives.

Many of the surrounding details are secular (the census, no room at the inn, the manger) with no Old Testament antecedents. We do well to assume that it did happen like this. Even the shepherds are very humdrum (there are no gifts in Luke, their business is simply to be witnesses); almost the only theological touch in the birth, if you like, is in the passage which gives rise to our Glory be to God on High: "Let all the angels of God worship him". Obviously, the prophecy of Simeon is theological, but it arises almost spontaneously from a priest simply doing his routine duties.

When God immerses Himself in our world, He does so not in some abstract, philosophical, politically correct manner, as if he could be human without any of the details which make us human. No, He chose a particular time and place, a particular nation, a particular religion, a particular sex. He is human in the same way that we are.

Circumcision is a very obvious instance of this. Jesus is to be marked out as a Jew, as one dedicated to God, almost from birth, in a manner almost ineradicable. This mark had only a few generations before led to the martyrdom of children - the first chapter of 1 Maccabees tells how women were hung with their circumcised children about their necks, when the mad Greek king was trying to eliminate the Jewish faith. Jesus is human by being at the human level given over to God. Full humanity is bound up with the acceptance of God's covenant.

So when the Word was made flesh and erected his tent among us, Jesus did so as a Jew, with all the heritage of God's people.

We are not required to be Jews ourselves, of course. But Saint Luke is sure this is our history, our heritage. And Saint Paul gives us the understanding of it: just as many plants are grown by being grafted onto a different root stock, so we have been grafted onto the Jewish root (see Romans 11.17). There was no other way for our Lord to be human; there is no other way for us to be Christian. Anglicanism has in the past been more familiar with the Old Testament than many other legitimate forms of Christianity; this is at least one thing we got right.