

Choices, choices, choices. Always so many choices. Wasn't life so much simpler when there wasn't so much choice, when we couldn't press one for this, two for that, three for the other but the phone just rang engaged? Weren't we so much happier when the choice for dinner was eat what you're given or go hungry. And nowadays? Spoilt for choice. This or that. One or the other. Left or right, up or down, now or later. Always being asked to choose, always choices to make. Sorry I think I must have inadvertently sat too close to a copy of the Daily Mail.

Even sermon writers have choices. Recycle now or later? There's never a choice to recycle or not, you *always* recycle. Old Testament, New Testament or Gospel to preach from? Or just preach about whatever you want to and tie it in vaguely with something in the readings. Always my choice.

Even the sermon for today, this very one coming out of my mouth right now, though I had no choice about when it had to be written- several weeks ago if I wanted to have any time at all after the main Christmas event to evolve from clapped-out amoeba to just functioning Rector, even though it had to be done when it was done, there was still a choice. There are after all two things one can preach about on the feast of the naming and the circumcision of Jesus. And as we're all equally as useless at remembering names as each other, it's the other one then. Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin.

Circumcision crops up a lot in the Scriptures. A surprising amount of time for a minor operation of genital mutilation. And it crops up almost never in sermons. Presumably for the obvious reason that talking about circumcision mean talking about, well, a chap's p...rivates You see, even I can't bring myself to say it in the pulpit. Suffice to say, we probably all know vaguely what it's all about in anatomical terms, so I can swiftly move the conversation away from the physical act and onto the spiritual point of it. Because we must assume there is a spiritual point to it. Any 'hygiene' effects of the operation are marginal, unknown to the wandering Aramean and can probably be replicated by occasionally taking a bath. And anyway God could have designed the weaker sex without a bit that needed to be cut off if hygiene was foremost in his mind when ordering the snip.

To find the origin of this practice, at least as much as the Bible treats origins, we need to go right back, way back into the murky mists of myth, even as far as when Abraham was Abram and we find God telling Abram:

*This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old, including the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring.*

God tells Abraham to circumcise his sons and every male of his descendants thereafter; not because he's a vengeful God who likes pain and mutilation but because it's an indelible mark on the body: a permanent, palpable, visible-in-certain-circumstances reminder that your ancestor made a covenant with the Lord and as his descendant you too are party to it.

It's not just a marker of course: God could have insisted that Abram and his sons forever wore a red glove on their right hand or cut their hair like Dare-era Phil Oakey or wore glittery lipstick: although not quite as permanent, these would all have functioned for the most part equally as well as the operation to mark out the person thus marked as covenanted with the Lord. And that's partly what all those weird and wonderful laws, ordinances and covenants in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy are about, and this time women are included as well. Rather like the sacrificial codes of those books which usually instruct the supplicant to sacrifice the more expendable animals- the males basically- what's removed on the eighth day is not something that you're really gonna miss, at least not in the same way as if you lost a leg for the Lord or became a eunuch for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven.

However minor though, circumcision, recognises that humans are a psychosomatic unity: we are a union of body and soul: not one or the other, not one without the other, but both. Our bodies and our spirits are a continuum, one and the same and so what happens to our bodies is reflected in, impacts our souls. We accept without too much difficulty St Paul's notion of the body being the temple of the Spirit; something similar is going on here.

Christians of course have an equivalent of this eight day ceremony, one that is available for all people, males, females, intersex which is of course baptism. Although baptism is richly symbolic on multiple levels and in many ways, part of the ceremony is signing with the Cross accompanied by the words:  
*Christ claims you for his own. Receive the sign of his cross.*

The individual is marked, not in the outward flesh but in their inward being, what we would know, again thanks to St Paul but actually the Apostle quoting Deuteronomy as circumcision of the heart: where the *heart* is indelibly marked as belonging to God. Physical circumcision does not obviate the need for the inward marking; the former should lead to the latter, but the heart can be circumcised without the body being so.

A few years ago as part of our Black History Month activities at St Mary's we hosted a talk and DVD screening about the contribution of African and Caribbean people to the Allied war effort. One of the people who had come to the evening asked me a rather pointed question: why are you doing this? And by 'you' she meant not you as a church, but *you* as an individual, why are *you* doing this, you are not, after all black. It's a fair enough question. And my answer was, first, because it is right to do it, but

more, as a gay man I see the similarities between the way majority society treats me and the way it treats you. And her response was, yes, but it's different, it's easier for you because you can hide your sexual orientation but we, as people of colour, can never hide our race. And that's certainly true to an extent, though living with something you're always hiding has its impact, and when the hiding fails, the world can be unspeakably brutal; and the hiding will fail because something always leaks out. What is inside eventually works its way out. What is inside will change the way you act, react, appear, behave even if you're hiding it. If not, why would anyone ever in that crass way respond to someone's coming out with 'It's no surprise, I always thought you were?' Even when you're deliberately hiding, when you really need to conceal, what is inside shows.

Circumcision is not usually obvious on meeting a person- depends on how you meet them I guess- but you could know a person for 50 years and unless there's been a sharing of the baths or a participation in the games at the Greek gymnasium or an intimate moment in those years, you'll never know. But that's the physical circumcision. If the circumcision has gone deeper than the flesh- to the heart and the soul- it *will* leak out. It *should* leak out. It *must* leak out. Immediately. And constantly.

It should be obvious to anyone not long after making their acquaintance that a Christian has been circumcised in their heart. It can't be the case that 50 years later anyone can say, 'well I never knew!' It should be obvious to anyone that a Christian has been circumcised in their heart. Not because of physical signs cut into our flesh, but by our words, by our beliefs, and most visibly of all, by our actions. Not because we drop the name of Jesus into every conversation as if we're playing some weird version of *Just a Minute*; but because we are obviously, overtly, outrageously guided and motivated in thought, word and deed by love: love for God, love for neighbour.

Jesus was circumcised in the flesh eight days after his birth. But before that he was circumcised in his heart and that, ultimately, was what drew people to him, led people to leave everything and follow him, what was obvious to all who met him and to us who meet him still— that he was, is and always will be not just obviously, overtly, outrageously guided and motivated in thought, word and deed by love: but he is the Word made flesh, he is love incarnate, the love of God made flesh and dwelling among us.