

# Feast of the Circumcision of Our Lord

Col (2:12) Luke (2:20-21; 40-52)

**Father Deacon Howard**

*Peter said to the Gentiles: Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.... And everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sin through his name. While Peter was still saying this the Holy Spirit fell on all who had heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured even to the Gentiles. (Acts 10: 34-48). The circumcision party was silenced. "And they glorified God, saying," "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance unto life." (Acts 11: 17-18).*



January 1<sup>st</sup> is the feast of the circumcision of Jesus Christ. It is to remind us of the covenant God made with Abraham: "Every man child among you shall be circumcised; my covenant shall be in your flesh" (Gen 17). But Paul in his letter to the Colossians points out the new meaning that circumcision has taken on for a Christian. "In union with Christ you were circumcised, not with the

circumcision that is made by men, but the circumcision made by Christ" (Col 2: 11). Of all the feasts we celebrate, the feast of the circumcision speaks best to the soul of modern Christians. Yet, the rite of circumcision played an important role in defining the kind of Church we have today.

It started in the city of Antioch, a city of 500,000. Antioch had a large population of Gentiles. But it also had a significant number of Christians Jews who had fled in fear to Antioch from Jerusalem after the death of Christ. Trouble began when Paul converted large numbers of non-Jews to the Christian faith. It divided the Christian community into two groups: the "problem-makers" in Antioch who identified with the apostle James, the head of the Mother Church in Jerusalem. And those who identified with the churches founded by Paul outside of Jerusalem, in the diaspora.

The Pharisaic Christian Jews complained that the practice of their faith was being threatened by the growing numbers of non-Jewish converts to the churches founded by Paul.

Moreover, these pagan converts had no understanding of Jewish Law or Jewish Tradition. Therefore, they should follow the Jewish laws before being admitted into the Jewish Christian community. Especially, the rite of circumcision which marked the true entry of the male into the brotherhood of Judaism and publically identified them as one of God's chosen people.

Upon hearing the reports of conflict and the growing numbers of Gentile conversions in Antioch, the leaders of the church in Jerusalem might well have felt uneasy. Were these conversions, far from their own careful oversight, only of Gentiles who agreed to be circumcised and uphold the Mosaic Law, or were they not? Then, too, we might imagine them wondering whether it was wise to allow the church in Antioch to go its way uncontrolled? By vigorous evangelizing it had quickly become the first major centre of Christianity outside of Judea. A swelling Christian community in a city three hundred miles north of Jerusalem might develop traditions of its own and begin to represent a competing centre?

Fearing internal quarrels between the Christians of different cities, James the leader of the Jerusalem church therefore sent an emissary to Antioch to serve as a connecting link. (Acts 11: 25-26). Paul was one of the delegates. The New Testament account of this church meeting suggests chaos occurred. The Jewish Christians shouted in anger: "the Gentile converts have got to be circumcised. They must be told to obey the Law of Moses. They must follow Jewish custom." Paul saw where this was leading too – a division in the Church. Two branches of Christianity, one for Jewish converts aligned with the Mother Church in Jerusalem and another for non-Jewish Christians.

Paul responded with a reasoned argument: He told the assembly that the Mother Church agreed that he would be the evangelizer of the Gentiles. But he did not agree to make pseudo-Jews out of them. He reminded Peter of the dream and vision Peter had from heaven. The symbolism they contained was obvious. Those who are outside the Jewish Law should be welcomed into the Christian Jewish faith (Acts 10: 9-16). Paul put Peter on the spot when he said: "You defended this position at a Church Council in Jerusalem. You ate and drank and associated with non-Jewish Christians in the past. How can you now follow the narrow-mindedness of the Jewish Christians? They speak of Christian love but stubbornly demand that non-Jewish converts to Christianity follow Jewish practices that have no meaning to them".

When Peter went up to Jerusalem, he was severely criticized by the circumcision party. They had heard that the Gentiles had received the word of God; received the gift of the Holy

Spirit and were baptized by Peter in the name of Jesus Christ. When asked to explain his actions Peter told them that God gave the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles just as he did to the Jews. No distinction was made between them “Why are you Jewish Christians trying to put a burden on them? It is only through the grace of the Lord Jesus that we Jews are saved. The same applies to non-Jewish converts.” (Acts 10: 34-48).

Peter understood the logic of Paul’s arguments. You can’t be a church divided and still call yourself a Church. Peter and Paul saved the Church from division. Converts who were not circumcised were to be accepted as full members of the Church. As for, who was right and who was wrong, it all depends on what model of Church is preferred.

The Church in Jerusalem had a centralized structure of governance. Decisions were in the hands of key apostles. Church unity was maintained through conformity of behavior and sameness of expression. That’s why the Christian Jews were head-strong in adhering to Jewish ritual and tradition. Circumcision was more than a matter of hygiene. It defined who they were as Jews, albeit converts to Christianity. For them, non-conformity was unacceptable, unthinkable and undesirable.

The Jerusalem Church functioned as a closed system and wanted to remain that way. But their choice of governance required them to follow 4 objectives: stifle new ideas for the sake of conformity; protect its self from alien outside forces, no matter what; close ranks when threatened so as to preserve the status quo and protect its self from new influences by absorbing them or expelling them, out of fear they may alter the church’s structure or operations.

The Church of Jerusalem no longer exists. It died out because it used up all its oxygen trying to achieve its objectives. That’s the final outcome one can expect of any organization whose governance is based solely on a closed system.

Is this also our parish’s denouement? Death! Or is it that of the Pauline churches. Paul’s foundational churches spread quickly throughout the known world. Why? Because his Christian communities were dynamic, full of growth and movement and allowed new ideas from outside the community to enter and constantly give it new life, new interpretation and new energy.

Their open system of governance involved their congregations more directly. They maintained church unity through diversity of expression, not sameness of expression. They put the doctrines, the spirituality, and the worship of God in liturgical celebration, as the first and foremost obligation of their Christian community. Cultural customs and traditions were relegated

to the circumstances in which the local church found itself. These attributes are life generating. And they should be the mission statement for all of our Eastern Rite Churches.

As a parish, our New Year's resolutions should replicate the guiding principles of the Pauline churches 2000 years ago: to effectively communicate with people who have a different perspective as to the role of the Church; and to accommodate people who don't share the same customs and traditions without sacrificing the Byzantine theology or the richness of Byzantine worship.

In this coming new year let us commit ourselves to personal resolutions: to enliven the way we deal with one another by welcoming the Holy Spirit into our lives; to deal with one another with tenderness of heart; to interact with each other in thoughtful dialogue when discussing controversial topics; to engage with others respectfully; to stop stereotyping each other and putting people in boxes, treating them as a category and not as a person; and to do everything we can to turn our parish into a holy and vibrant Catholic community.

To achieve these goals requires change. A profound spiritual change in our lives that comes from an open heart enflamed with the conviction we are called not only to follow Christ but also to live in Christ.

**I pray you have a healthy, happy and Holy New Year.**

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