

Good morning. Blessed Feast of the Holy Name. This holy day is less well known than other holy days like Christmas and Easter. Yet it “takes precedence of a Sunday,” as the Book of Common Prayer states, so that means we celebrate it over the first Sunday of Christmas. It has a message for us that the church wants us to hear. We do well to listen.

The actual day recalls when Jesus was circumcised as stated in the end of today’s Gospel. That is when he was named, like all little Jewish baby boys. He received the name Jesus, the name we honor and hold sacred in our faith. When we pray, we pray in this name and when we confess our faith, it begins with this ancient creed, “Jesus is Lord.”

This morning, though, I want to focus on the ceremony that Jesus endured and what it meant for him and by extension for us. Jesus’ circumcision reminds us that God did not only become human in Jesus—he became a particular type of human being, a Jewish baby born over two thousand years ago. And his parents followed the Law for a Jewish male.

Their obedience obligated and privileged Jesus as he grew up as a Jewish man. The blessing he inherited included a rich culture and tradition that continue to this day, a faith that is *thousands* of years old. A people that have endured hostility and persecution and even attempts to destroy them totally. As a Jew, Jesus was a descendant of the faith of Abraham, the Law of Moses, the Psalms of David, the worship of the Temple, and the words of the prophets.

All these things and more—including his faithful parents-- would shape and guide him as Jesus “increased in wisdom and in stature, and in divine and human favour” as Luke would write later in his Gospel. These things made him the precocious twelve year old who could engage scholars in the Temple, asking questions and amazing them with his understanding.

As a Jewish man of his day, Jesus was also exposed to some other things from his culture that made him fully human. For example, in his day, women were thought of as less than men. People from a religion similar in many ways to his own faith—Samaritans—were considered less than Jews. And sinners—those people who did not keep the Law—were considered less than the religious people.

Jesus was born into that particular culture, that way of seeing the world. The good and holy and powerful part of his inheritance that has been a major part of transforming our world even to this day. But those lesser parts, too—the pride and prejudice and pettiness, traits that are common in all cultures. And Jesus, born as a particular human being, a Jewish male in the first century, was influenced by all those different parts.

Perhaps that is *why* twelve year old Jesus was questioning the Jewish scholars in the Temple. Asking the questions we have all heard from our children and students as they grow

up—“If this is true about our faith in God, how can this be true, too?” That type of questioning was at the heart of the Jewish prophets who preceded Jesus. Prophets like Isaiah who would critically question his people who would follow extravagant religious practices-- and also neglect the poor and oppressed among them.

So as we read the words of Jesus in the Gospels, we feel that evolving prophetic tension within him. Like in the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus repeated, “You have heard it said... but I say to you...” And each time he repeated it, Jesus would be questioning the part of the Law that was used to separate and judge others. Instead Jesus would challenge his followers to live in God’s mercy above religious rules.

In the Gospel of John, we hear a story of Jesus that showed Jesus moving beyond his culture. He encountered a Samaritan woman at a well. This woman was the trifecta of what his culture taught him was “less than” him—female, Samaritan, and (at least traditionally, interpreted as) a sinner. And despite his culture’s beliefs, Jesus treated her with respect. In fact, he held his longest conversation recorded in any of the Gospels with her. Remarkable.

So Jesus was different in how he lived his faith. He embraced all that was holy and good in his tradition—especially mercy, justice, and humble trust in God. And yet he questioned what was inconsistent with those core parts of his holy faith. He changed and transcended his culture. His example allows us room to change, too, as we face a changing world.

Because, like Jesus, we have inherited many things in our faith. Many of them are very good. Yet there have been too many times in our history when the church became partners with the world instead of witnesses against its abuses-- such as slavery and conquest and persecution; and protection of the wealthy against those in need. Like Jesus, we have things in our tradition that we must question, too.

Those questions are best when they start with us—what is in *our* lives, what is close by; not just what is wrong with “those people,” whether those far away in power or in the mist of history. To do that, and as a good lead into the New Year and some possible resolutions, we can ask some tough questions of ourselves. Here are three I am asking myself this year:

1. What-- or whom-- do I **ignore**?

The answer to that question may be tricky because, well, we are ignoring those things! Also, the answers, if we take them seriously, will require us to take action. And that can seem overwhelming. I will confess at least part of my answers (you may have different ones). I tend to ignore people in need, especially the youngest and the oldest among us. Too often I turn my head when things get too real. Do you know what I mean?

Like when I know there are children in the foster care system who may fall between the cracks. Or older people in nursing homes that do not get many visits because often those visits are hard. And I look the other way because I am not sure what to do and I cannot do

everything. But at least I can ask questions so I do less ignoring and instead pay attention to do what I can do.

## 2. What are my prejudices?

Again this can be a tricky answer. Not many of us like to admit our prejudices unless, perhaps, we are with likeminded friends who might agree with us. But if I am honest, I have them. Some are the residue of many decades ago—prejudices based on race and religion, region and class. With God’s help, I have spent years and effort to repent of my prejudice in these areas and change my heart to be more open.

I have other prejudices, though. Like people I see as prejudiced in their beliefs, their lack of change in those same areas where I am trying to change. Yet they are still people beloved by God. Often they are people who would stop to help a stranger change a tire or mow the lawn of an older neighbor. Good people. And my heart needs to change and be open toward them, too.

## 3. How do I use my religious faith to justify my ignorance and prejudice?

That is probably the hardest of these questions. That is the question Jesus had to deal with in his life and in his culture. Religious faith is a powerful force for good in the world. But it can also be used to harm others and justify our actions. The historical examples are many—assuming that if someone believes differently, it is okay to treat them badly.

But again, let’s keep it personal and local. Do we use our faith as a way to distance us from the world and its problems? Is our faith preoccupied with our individual needs and family life and about getting to heaven? Do we believe that if we do the right things, only good things will happen to us? And conversely, that bad things only happen when people do the wrong things? If this is what we believe, it will get in the way of what we need to learn and do as people of faith and followers of Jesus.

A deeper faith calls us to question the dangers of simplistic faith and its easy answers. *That* deeper faith is the faith of Jesus. He calls us to question our cultural assumptions that have wormed their way into our faith; and instead hold on to mercy, justice, and a humble trust in God. Because those core parts of our faith are what will really matter as we seek to follow Jesus our Lord in the New Year. Amen.