

Jan 1/14 Circumcision of Christ & St Basil the Great
Today's readings, followed by a few pastoral & personal thoughts.

The Readings for the Circumcision and St Basil include 3 OT readings in Vespers, a Matins Gospel and the usual Epistle and Gospel in liturgy. The readings follow the commentart, because they are so long.

The Vespers readings cover three different subjects, and taken in total, describe a substantial part of the moral content of Christianity.

First Vespers Reading.

The first reading describes the institution of Circumcision as a covenant between God and His people. Circumcision is the cutting off of the foreskin. It is a “type” of baptism, meaning that it “points” to the later Christian covenant of baptism.

There are many parallels between Circumcision and baptism.

Of necessity, Circumcision can only be done once, and we believe in only one baptism. It is not repeated.

Circumcision was required of all male members of the Jewish household:

“And the uncircumcised man child whose flesh of his foreskin is not circumcised, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant.” (Gen 17:14)

Likewise, baptism is required of all Christians:

“He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.” (Mark 16:16 KJV)

Circumcision was only done for males, and baptism, which confers much greater grace upon a person, is for all Christians, male and female. The “type” of a Christian mystery always has limitations, since it points to something greater.

Circumcision was performed on an infant, but adult converts to Judaism were also circumcised. The Christian church also baptizes infants, and also adult converts.

Circumcision produced permanent physical change in a person, and baptism produces permanent spiritual change. Whether there are verifiable changes in a person after baptism depends on the person. We believe in one baptism, and the enabling of a person through baptism is permanent, but whether the fruits of baptism occur is dependent on our moral struggle in this life.

The changes of circumcision were physically verifiable; baptism produces no permanent verifiable physical changes, and spiritual changes occur over time, according to our zeal. The Lord told us that we shall know a tree by its fruits.

The Jews did not understand the full moral implications of circumcision; in their limited understanding it was a physical sign of their privileged relationship with God. Christian baptism is also a covenant between man and God, but its implications are moral in nature. An echo of this moral change is seen in the name change of Abram to Abraham.

With circumcision comes the shedding of blood. For the Christian, the blood shed is from Christ.

Second Vespers Reading.

The second reading describes Jesus Christ. In poetic language, it is firmly asserted that

“The LORD possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old. 23 I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was.”

This is a pillar of our theology: that Jesus Christ always was and is fully God. The language here may be confusing, precisely because it is poetry, and in the OT, the true nature of Christ was not exactly revealed.

Third Vespers Reading.

This reading ties together the first two readings. Its basic message is this. With baptism, we become a “new creature”, able to become perfected. This is only possible because of Jesus Christ, Who, becoming man, fundamentally changed our nature so that death could not have dominion over us. The only way to begin this change is through baptism and our subsequent moral struggles. Whereas for the Jews religion was more about a physical covenant between man and God, for the Christian, it is about moral change.

**“He that is void of wisdom despiseth his neighbor:
but a man of understanding holdeth his peace” (Proverbs 11:12)**

I personally find striking the way in which in English we can say that we hold our tongue – to “hold our peace”. This phenomenon may not occur in other languages, and that is okay – the emotional impact of this verse upon me, a speaker of English, may not be that same if read in another language. Our emotional response to scripture can be very helpful, if it guides us to the truth. The way this verse resonates in my souls is: I cannot gain peace unless I learn to “hold my peace”.

This simple truth has manifested itself many times in my life; and has spawned a little saying of mine: “the best things I have ever said are the things I have not said”. It takes great inner peace in order to not be compelled to speak out about every little thing, as if my opinions and preferences are so important. The man who holds his peace is at peace.

VESPERS

Genesis 17:1-7, 9-12, 14 1 And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect. 2 And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly. 3 And Abram fell on his face: and God talked with him, saying, 4 As for me, behold, my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations. 5 Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee. 6 And I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee. 7 And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee. 9 And God said unto Abraham, Thou shalt keep my covenant therefore, thou, and thy seed after thee in their generations. 10 This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; Every man child among you shall be circumcised. 11 And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you. 12 And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every man child in your generations, he that is born in the house, or bought with money of any stranger, which is not of thy seed. 14 And the uncircumcised man child whose flesh of his foreskin is not circumcised, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant.

Proverbs 8:22-30 22 The LORD possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old. 23 I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was. 24 When there were no depths, I was brought forth; when there were no fountains abounding with water. 25 Before the mountains were settled, before the hills was I brought forth: 26 While as yet he had not made the earth, nor the fields, nor the highest part of the dust of the world. 27 When he prepared the heavens, I was there: when he set a compass upon the face of the depth: 28 When he established the clouds above: when he strengthened the fountains of the deep: 29 When he gave to the sea his

decree, that the waters should not pass his commandment: when he appointed the foundations of the earth: ³⁰ Then I was by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him;

Proverbs 10:31-11:12 ³¹ The mouth of the just bringeth forth wisdom: but the froward tongue shall be cut out. ³² The lips of the righteous know what is acceptable: but the mouth of the wicked speaketh frowardness. ¹ A false balance is abomination to the LORD: but a just weight is his delight. ² When pride cometh, then cometh shame: but with the lowly is wisdom. ³ The integrity of the upright shall guide them: but the perverseness of transgressors shall destroy them. ⁴ Riches profit not in the day of wrath: but righteousness delivereth from death. ⁵ The righteousness of the perfect shall direct his way: but the wicked shall fall by his own wickedness. ⁶ The righteousness of the upright shall deliver them: but transgressors shall be taken in their own naughtiness. ⁷ When a wicked man dieth, his expectation shall perish: and the hope of unjust men perisheth. ⁸ The righteous is delivered out of trouble, and the wicked cometh in his stead. ⁹ An hypocrite with his mouth destroyeth his neighbour: but through knowledge shall the just be delivered. ¹⁰ When it goeth well with the righteous, the city rejoiceth: and when the wicked perish, there is shouting. ¹¹ By the blessing of the upright the city is exalted: but it is overthrown by the mouth of the wicked. ¹² He that is void of wisdom despiseth his neighbour: but a man of understanding holdeth his peace.

MATINS

John 10:1-9 ¹ Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that entereth not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber. ² But he that entereth in by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ To him the porter openeth; and the sheep hear his voice: and he calleth his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out. ⁴ And when he putteth forth his own sheep, he goeth before them, and the sheep follow him: for they know his voice. ⁵ And a stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him: for they know not the voice of strangers. ⁶ This parable spake Jesus unto them: but they understood not what things they were which he spake unto them. ⁷ Then said Jesus unto them again, Verily, verily, I say unto you, I am the door of the sheep. ⁸ All that ever came before me are thieves and robbers: but the sheep did not hear them. ⁹ I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture.

LITURGY

Colossians 2:8-12 ⁸ Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. ⁹ For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. ¹⁰ And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power: ¹¹ In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: ¹² Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead.

Luke 2:20-21, 40-52 20 **And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.** 21 **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.** 40 **And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him.** 41 **Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the passover.** 42 **And when he was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem after the custom of the feast.** 43 **And when they had fulfilled the days, as they returned, the child Jesus tarried behind in Jerusalem; and Joseph and his mother knew not of it.** 44 **But they, supposing him to have been in the company, went a day's journey; and they sought him among their kinsfolk and acquaintance.** 45 **And when they found him not, they turned back again to Jerusalem, seeking him.** 46 **And it came to pass, that after three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions.** 47 **And all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers.** 48 **And when they saw him, they were amazed: and his mother said unto him, Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? behold, thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing.** 49 **And he said unto them, How is it that ye sought me? wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?** 50 **And they understood not the saying which he spake unto them.** 51 **And he went down with them, and came to Nazareth, and was subject unto them: but his mother kept all these sayings in her heart.** 52 **And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man.**

Bibliography

The Explanation of the Holy Gospel according to St John, by Blessed Theophylact, published by Chrysostom Press - <http://www.chrysostompress.org/>. ALL FOUR BOOKS ARE HIGHLY RECOMMENDED!

Priest Seraphim Jan 1/14 2009.

[St Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church, McKinney, Texas](http://www.orthodox.net/scripture/feasts-of-the-savior-circumcision.html)

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