

Sunday Sermon

Fr Ambrose Young
Entrance of the Theotokos Skete



Sunday, January 1, 2011, Feast of the Circumcision of Christ, Feast of St. Basil the Great

"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." (Luke 2:21)

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Circumcision of Christ which, according to Jewish law, occurred on the 8th day after His Nativity. This is also the Feast of St. Basil the Great, a very great and important Orthodox Father of the Church.

PEOPLE TODAY SOMETIMES ASK: WHY DO WE COMMEMORATE THE CIRCUMCISION OF THE LORD? WHY REMEMBER AN EVENT THAT COMES FROM THE OLD LAW AND IS NOT AT ALL REQUIRED OF CHRISTIANS SINCE THEN?

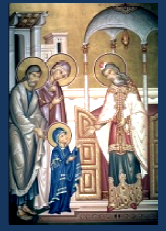
The answer is simply this: The Lord's mother, the Virgin Mary, and His foster father, Joseph, who were pious Jews, showed their humble submission to the Law of Moses. They were faithful to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, trusting Him, who was in fact and in truth their own Son, the Incarnate Messiah! Jesus Himself was to live His whole life in accordance with the Law—but, however, more in keeping with the spirit of the Law rather the letter of Law. In this way He fulfilled, completed, and actually elevated the Law of the Old Testament to an extremely exalted level. And we see this "elevation" and perfection of the Law over and over again in the New Testament Gospels.

Similarly, as the Child Jesus grew and reached adolescence, His parents lost Him in Jerusalem and then found Him again in the Temple, where He, Jesus, had been drawn as if by a magnet to the house of His divine Father, the place where the Law was preserved and expounded, and here, even though He was only 12 years old, the young Lord taught the inner meaning of the Law to even the elders of the Temple, amazing them, astonishing them, as the Gospels tell us.

In this way the Lord Jesus Christ took to His sacred and divine Self all of the Old Testament; indeed, He actually *became* the Old Testament, He *incarnated* it and raised it to a higher level than had ever been known or even suspected by the Hebrew patriarchs and prophets and sages before.

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In all of these things the Savior showed us how to live—that is, how to live in complete harmony with the Laws of God.

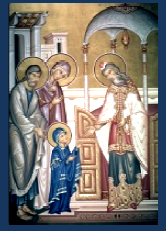
Now, in the time of the first Council of the Church, held in Jerusalem after the Lord's Ascension into heaven and after the first Pentecost, and recorded in the Book of Acts, we see how the Holy Spirit also guided the Church into a magnificent deeper understanding of the Old Testament Law of Circumcision, whereby it was not abolished but re-interpreted so that we could see that it is more important to **"circumcise our hearts"**—in other words, be set apart, and hallowed, by the way in which we *live* each day, rather than by a mark on the flesh. And this applies to women as well as to men.

This is why St. Paul was to write: ""Let no man trouble me, for I bear in my body, not the marks of circumcision, but the marks of the Lord Jesus, the marks of His Crucifixion. I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." Now, these words are particularly significant for Orthodox monastics such as myself and Gerondissa Theadelphi, for, among other things, the Great Schema of a tonsured monk or nun bears these very same words: *"I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus"*--and this, then, is the fullness, the very perfection of the New Law regarding circumcision of the heart.

Now, we must remember too that on the occasion of a male Jewish baby's circumcision he was officially and formally given the name by which he would be called by his family. (By the way, for this reason, in traditional Orthodoxy, the parish priest still reads the "naming prayer" for a newborn child on the 8th day after its birth.) Thus, the newborn Messiah was called "Jesus" or "Yeshua", in Aramaic, the commonly spoken language of that time. "Yeshua" means "salvation" or "savior", sometimes also translated as "he saves." It is believed to be derived ultimately from the Old Testament name of God, "Yahweh." In Greek this is *Iesous*. Jesus would also often be called "Adonai" by His disciples—"Adonai" being one of the Old Testament names for God, that is, "Lord." According to the Old Testament prophesy He was also called "Emmanuel"—or "God with us"—prior to His birth in Bethlehem--and of course He rightly acquired the name "Christ"—"the Anointed One"—because He fulfilled the prophesies concerning the Messiah, who was the Anointed One of Israel.

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Therefore, perhaps you will not be surprised to learn that today's Feast of the Circumcision and Naming of the Lord is also a special Feast for all those who practice the Jesus Prayer! We all know that St. Paul tells us that we must pray without ceasing, and that this is done through and by the Jesus the sacred Name of Jesus: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me."

As St. Seraphim of Sarov taught:

"Let all thine attention and training be in this [prayer]. Walking, sitting, doing, and standing in church before the divine service, coming in and going out, keep this unceasingly on thy lips and in thy heart. In calling in this manner on the name of God thou wilt find peace, thou will attain to purity of spirit and body, and the Holy Spirit, the Origin of all things, will dwell in thee, and He will guide thee unto holiness, unto all piety and purity."

Similarly, St. Theophan the Recluse instructed his spiritual children in the following manner: "If you have not yet heard of this [the Jesus Prayer], then hear it now, and if you have not done it, then begin to do it from this time.

Those who have truly decided to serve the Lord God must train themselves in the remembrance of God and in unceasing prayer to Jesus Christ....Through such practice, by guarding oneself from distraction and by the preservation of the peace of one's conscience, it is possible to draw near to God *and to be united with Him*!"

"*And to be **united** with Him*"—Brother and sisters, is this not what all of us desire with all the strength of our minds and hearts, to be *united with Christ*...

Therefore, through him who suffered circumcision of the flesh for our salvation, and upon whom was bestowed on this day the sacred, holy, precious and saving Name of Jesus, "before which every head and every knee must bow," be glory and honor now and ever and unto ages of ages. Glory to Jesus Christ!

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.