

A few years ago I visited a memorial to the 6,000,000 Jews killed in the Holocaust. One of the exhibits was a harrowing black and white drawing representing that huge crowd of people going to their deaths. At the end was the figure of Jesus carrying his cross: the caption was 6,000,001. Jesus was of course one of the almost countless number of Jews persecuted and put to death over the centuries.

1st January is traditionally the feast of the Circumcision of our Lord (renamed in Common Worship as the Naming and Circumcision of Jesus), the annual commemoration of the moment when Jesus was circumcised, as the solemn moment when he was acknowledged as a male member of the people with whom God had established an everlasting covenant. Although a second century heretic (Marcion) tried to disown this, the simple fact is that Christians are heirs to God's promises to his ancient people. The estrangement between Christians and Jews, that began about 40 years after the death of Jesus, is one of the great tragedies of human history.

For reasons we don't need to go into at the moment, the Church decided quite early on that circumcision should not be required for non-Jewish male Christians and that the fundamental mark of being a member of God's people would be baptism. It is interesting that St Paul sees baptism as the equivalent (for all men and women) of circumcision, that is to say the permanent, irrevocable mark that we belong to God.

The new year begins therefore with a stark reminder of the truth that Jesus was really human and really Jewish. Our Christian faith makes no sense except in the context of the Old Testament with its record of God's faithfulness to his people and his promise of salvation for all. Jesus did not reveal a different God but made clear all the wonderful truths about God that we read about during the Advent and Christmas seasons, not least in the prophecies of Isaiah.

At a time when we are becoming more aware of anti-semitism as a threat to Jews above all but also to humanity as a whole, it would be no bad thing to spend some time in 2020 pondering on the wisdom of the old doggerel verse:

*How odd of God
to choose the Jews.*

*But not as odd
as those who choose
a Jewish God
yet spurn the Jews*