

Christmas 01 C 2018

December 31, 2018 :: Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7

Fr. Jim Cook

“A New Relationship With God.”

Two of our Bible readings are perfect for us today. Because at times like this, our thoughts are often on what sorts of changes we might like to undertake in our lives in the new year. And, those two readings — the first from Isaiah, and the other from Galatians — focus on changes that *God* is going to enact in our lives.

For example, in our reading from Isaiah, the prophet writes:

“You shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give.”

But to really appreciate what Isaiah is saying, a word about names in the Bible is appropriate.

In those days, a person’s name wasn’t just a label that had been attached to them, and by which you could refer to them. Rather, a person’s name often said something about the character or nature of that person. So, when Isaiah says that we will get a

new name, he's saying that something about our character, or something about our nature will be changed.

And then, in our reading from Galatians, Paul talks about the change that's going to take place. Specifically, Paul writes that, by virtue of the Cross, we have been adopted by God to be his children. But again, to be able to fully appreciate what Paul is talking about, we need to understand a couple of things about how adoptions worked in Paul's time.

The first thing that Paul would have understood about adoptions, is that an adopted child enjoyed all of the rights, all of the benefits, and all of the privileges of natural-born children. *All of them.*

For example, in those days the eldest son was the prime benefactor of his father's estate. However, if that father adopted a son who was older than his eldest natural-born son, then the adopted son became the prime benefactor.

Second, and in those days, an adoption was undertaken entirely at the initiative of the adopting parent; the child being adopted could do nothing to cause it to take place.

So, the change in our status or relationship that Isaiah was talking about, was our adoption. That is, we *were* the people of God, but by virtue of what God accomplished in Christ, we have become the adopted *children* of God. And none of this was the result of anything we did or didn't do; it was not something that we earned or deserved. And finally, by our adoption, all of the rights, all of the benefits, and all of the privileges that Christ enjoys, are conferred upon us as well.

And so, the change that is taking place in our character and nature — the change that began at the Cross, and which continues even now — is kind of a big deal. It's a change in our relationship with God. But what's also changed, is our relationship to the Law.

Paul writes that, before Christ, the law was our “disciplinarian.” And the Greek word that Paul uses, that gets translated into English as “disciplinarian,” was a Greek work that had a very specific meaning. It described a person, employed by a father, for the sole purpose of keeping watch over his children, and making sure that they stayed out of trouble, and ensuring that they came to no harm. In other words, the Law was something like our modern babysitters. And what's more, before Christ, it was our *obedience* to the law that set us apart as the people of God.

But when, in Christ, we were adopted by God, it was no longer our *actions* that set us apart — that is, it was no longer our obedience to the Law that made us unique — it was *God* who set us apart, by virtue of God’s adopting us. And therefore, after Christ, what we *did* became less important than *who we now are*: and that is, God’s kids.

This is why Paul could, later, write that, sure, Christ did not abolish the law; it’s still in place, and it’s still something we should follow. But Christ did fulfill the law’s original purpose, which was to reconcile us to God; or, to change our relationship to God.

Now, this may *sound* like a small thing, but it’s not. Because there’s a subtle, but significant, difference between being “under the law” and being “under God in Christ.” For while the Law told us what *not* to do, God in Christ tells us what *to* do.

Now, in my reading of all this, I get the sense that yet another change is taking place within us. And that’s that we’re moving from a state of immaturity, to a state of maturity. That is, we went *from* needing the Law to direct our every step, *to* being trusted by God to work out the minutia of our daily acts. In other words, we went from needing hundreds of laws telling us *what not to do*, to

needing only a couple of laws telling us *what to do*. And that's a big deal!

And Peggy and I can see this principle at work in the lives of our kids. When they were very young, and still living at home, we were the Law in their lives. We told them what to do, and what not to do. But now, Peggy and I trust our girls to make those smart and appropriate decisions that effect the outcome of their lives in positive and meaningful ways. And, what's more, the nature and character of our relationships with them has changed as well. That is, before, we were their parents. Now, we're their friends.

As we approach the new year, it's good to be reminded that, in Christ, we have a new relationship with God. That God trusts us to make good decisions, and that God has given us more responsibility in the directing of our lives. And if we are the sort of people to make new year's resolutions, let it be that we continue to grow and mature in our new relationship with God, and to prove to God once again that his trust and faith in us is not misplaced.

Amen.