

A Sermon for the First Sunday after Christmas, Year C  
December 31, 2006  
Fr. Jim Cook

## *A New Relationship.*

Today's readings are good for today, New Year's Day: when our thoughts are on a new calendar, on making changes for the next year. For today's readings focus on change. In the first reading, the prophet Isaiah writes: "You shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give."

A word about names in the Bible is appropriate. The names that people were given in the Bible weren't mere "handles" that you attached to someone, and by which you could refer to them. Rather, they said something in particular about the character or nature of the person. So, when Isaiah says that we will get a new name, he is saying that something important about us — that *we* will be changed. Here are a few examples of prominent people in the Bible who had their name changed. Abram's name was changed to Abraham. Sarai's name was changed to Sarah. Jacob's name was changed to Israel. And Saul's name was changed to Paul. Actually, in this last example, it wasn't so much that the name was changed, for Saul is the Hebrew version of the Greek name Paul. But the author of *The Acts of the Apostles* changes how he refers to this man at a particular point in his narrative. So the effect is the same.

Now, in his letter to the Galatians, Paul explains the nature of this change that has taken place. He writes that we have been redeemed by God in Christ; we have been adopted as God's children. To be able to fully appreciate what this means, we need to understand what adoption meant to Paul. In those days, adoption conferred all the rights, benefits and privileges of natural children. And to understand just how seriously this was taken, we need to remember that the eldest son was the prime benefactor of his father's estate. However, if the father adopted a son who was older than his natural son, the adopted son became the prime benefactor. Another thing we need to remember is that adoption was entirely at the initiative of the adopting parent; the child could do nothing to cause it to take place.

So, the change in status or relationship that Isaiah was talking about was our adoption. We were the *people* of God, but by adoption we became the *children* of God. And none of this was the result we did to earn it or deserve it. And by our adoption all the rights, benefits and privileges of Christ are conferred upon us as well.

Paul explores further this change in us as it relates to the law. Before Christ, the law was our "disciplinarian." And the Greek word that Paul uses to describe the law's function, was a word that described an actual person employed by a father for the sole purpose to keep watch over his children, and make sure they stayed out of trouble, and make sure no harm befell them. That is, the law was something like our modern babysitters; it watched over us. And the law, by defining our actions, allowed our actions to show us to be the people of God. But when we were adopted, it was no longer our actions that set us apart (it was no longer obedience to the law that made us

unique), it was God who set us apart. Therefore, after Christ, the operating principal was no longer us; our decision to obey the laws, or our decision to be identified as the people of God. And, therefore, *what we did* became less important than *who we now are*: God's kids.

This is why Paul could later write that, while Christ did not abolish the law — it's still in place, but now serves a different purpose — he did fulfill the law's original purpose. And there's a subtle, but interesting, difference between being "under the law" and being "under God in Christ." For while the laws generally tell us what *not* to do, God in Christ tell us what *to* do.

Also, in my reading of all this, I sense another change that is taking place within us, and that's from a state of immaturity to a state of maturity. That is, we went from needing the laws to direct our steps, to being trusted by God to work out — admittedly, within certain boundaries — the minutia of our daily acts. We went from having hundreds of laws telling us what not to do, to having only a couple of laws telling us what to do. And that is a significant change, if you don't mind my saying.

A personal example might be in order. This week, our daughters, Laura and Emily, are in Orlando. Laura is there with her highschool marching band. Emily is there with some friends. When both of them were much younger, their mother and I were The Law in their lives. I can remember, in a moment of rebellion, Laura declaring to me: "You're not the boss of me!" And I simply put my face close to her's and replied: "Oh, yes I am." But that was then. Now, Peggy and I trust our girls to be away from us, and make good decisions. And that's how it is, I believe, between God and us.

In this new year, it's good to remember that, in Christ, we have a new relationship with God. God trusts us to make good decisions, and he has given us more responsibility in the directing of our lives. If we are of a sort to make new year's resolutions, let it be to continue to grow and mature in our new relationship with God, and to prove to God once again that his trust in us is not misplaced.