

OLD HABITS DIE HARD

SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS DAY

Luke 17. 11-19

What a busy time of year it is in the Church's calendar! In the last few days we've had Christmas Day, St Stephen, St John the Evangelist and the Holy Innocents. And today it seems we are spoilt for choice: it is the Sunday After Christmas, the Circumcision (or Naming of Jesus) and New Year's Day. We have an almost embarrassing richness of opportunity!

In preparation I did look back to see if I have preached on these subjects recently – and I have, both the Sunday After and the Circumcision. New Year is a secular festival and not one that I feel any need to comment on! So, it would appear that there is nothing more to be said. However, before I sit down again...

Today I should like to draw your attention to the words of the Collect, for it seems to me that they are rather striking, and in particular the following:

Grant that we being regenerate, and made thy children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by thy Holy Spirit.

I don't know that I have ever seen the word *regenerate* used as an adjective. We know its opposite, *degenerate*, which is applied to a person who falls short of recognised moral standards, but what about *regenerate*. It clearly means

generated again, or created anew, perhaps even reborn, so let's look back over what has been happening in recent days and consider why we should be using this word of ourselves just now.

Obviously, the central event of this festive season is the birth of the baby Jesus in Bethlehem, some 2000 years ago, and many people, if they think about the religious meaning behind the glitter and consumption of Christmas, will point to this. The Nativity Play, performed in school or church or village hall, reminds us of its universal appeal.

Now the birth of any child is a wonderful occasion, even a miracle in its own way, but the birth of Jesus is especially significant. At this time, God entered into human flesh and became subject to man's mortality. He did this in order to bridge the painful separation brought about by our own sinful behaviour, and in doing so he opened up the opportunity for reconciliation. As we read in John's Gospel (3.16):

God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

The birth of Jesus represents a new start for all of us, and as a result we can describe ourselves as regenerate, or renewed. Let us take that thought away with us when we leave this Cathedral Church today and walk with a light step, rejoicing and giving thanks for the love of our Father in Heaven.

However, as the days pass, and Epiphany comes and goes, and the long cold winter deepens before the eventual return of spring, let us not forget that we have a part to play in all this: we have been given a new start, but it is up to us to make sure that we don't fall back into the old ways. We all know the saying, *old habits die hard!*

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