

461 A Twofold “Palingenesia”

Last week under the heading of “Arise” we dwelt on the Lord’s extraordinary conversion of Saul of Tarsus when on his way to Damascus.

This conversion is a vivid example of the Lord’s words spoken some years before to “Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews (who) came to Jesus by night” (from John 3.1-2a, KJV). In that well-known passage Jesus explains to Nicodemus that unless “a man be born again, he cannot see (that is, perceive, comprehend, discern) the kingdom of God”, and – “except a man be born of water and [of] the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (from John 3.3 & 5). In other words, true spiritual understanding, followed by entry into, and life lived within, “the kingdom of God”, is beyond man’s natural abilities to attain. Both the mentions of the verb “born” in Jesus’ words are not active but passive: man cannot achieve this spiritual “born-ness” of himself, it has to be given to him and done for him

So for Saul of Tarsus, the time for him to be “born again” had come, and in God’s mercies it happened. With his spiritual sight having been granted and now with his physical sight restored, Saul’s “born-again process” was duly completed by his being baptised (another passive rather than active event, Acts 9.18b).

There is another Greek word in the New Testament which covers this same central theme of the need for a completely new start. This is “palingenesia”, which is first applied, as with Nicodemus, Saul and the rest of us, at the individual level. In a standard Greek Lexicon this Greek word is defined thus: “moral regeneration, renewal, re-creation, the production of a new life consecrated to God, a radical change of mind for the better”. “Palingenesia” occurs only once in this individual sense in the New Testament, in Titus 3.4-5 – “But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, not by works in righteousness which we had done, but according to His mercy, He saved us through (the) washing of regeneration (“palingenesia”) and renewal of the Holy Spirit” (J P Green Literal). We see from here once again that this washing and renewal are God-given through Christ, being beyond the capabilities of natural man to achieve by himself; all the Christ-omitting Faiths of today would do well to pay heed.

“Palingenesia” occurs in just one other place in the New Testament, with the same basic meaning but applied in a different, global, context, and

this time spoken by the Lord Jesus Himself to His disciples – “Truly I say to you, you who have followed Me, in the regeneration (“palingenesia”) when the Son of man sits on the throne of His glory, you also will sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matthew 19.28, J P Green Literal). (We see in passing that here is a clear indication that the Lord God is very far from finished with His original covenant people the Jews – hence we carefully watch Israel in these wild times).

This promised “palingenesia” on such a grand scale is both a new start and a RE-start, which is defined like this in the Lexicon: “that signal and glorious change of all things in heaven and earth for the better, that restoration of the primal and perfect condition of things which existed before the fall of our first parents, which the Jews looked for in connection with the advent of the Messiah, and which the early Christians expected in connection with the visible return of Jesus from heaven”. (We also note in passing how this writer of the 1880s avoids the names of Adam and Eve with regard to the Fall, presumably in (unjustified) deference to Darwinian evolution).

So “palingenesia” is, first, all about a God-wrought, totally new start for the individual when responding by faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, sealed and demonstrated by baptism (eg., II Corinthians 5.17). And secondly it refers to the whole of God’s creation, in which all will be restored and renewed under the direct rulership of our Creator, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit (egs., also “apokatastasis” - “restitution”, Acts 3.19-21, KJV / Ephesians 1.20-23 / II Peter Chapter 3.1-13 / Revelation Chapters 21-22).

At this solemn season of remembrance of all those whose lives have been lost or shattered in war, we long too for a similar remembrance of Jesus Christ, the Giver of His own life in bringing God’s victory over sin and death, and still the Giver of “palingenesia” - regeneration - to all who surrender to God’s call (egs., I Corinthians 15.54-58 / I John 1.4-2.2 / John 5.17-31; 6.37-40).

And as COP26 closes we long also for the acceptance that Almighty God our Creator, to whom we are all accountable, is in sole charge, with His promised “palingenesia”, involving “the new heavens and the new earth”, being firmly booked in the divine diary.