

4th November

Hair

This week we are going to look at Hair – the stuff that grows on your head and other parts of the body. Most people will be familiar with the story of Samson, and it would be good to read it now: Judges chapter 16. At first sight, this looks like another old testament story: difficult to understand by modern minds, with little basis in our everyday ‘scientific’ world. But there are many places in the Bible where hair is mentioned: Esau was a hairy man (Genesis 25:24-25); rules for the Nazirites (Numbers 6:5); “*The hairs on your head are numbered*” (Luke 21:18); Mary wiped Jesus’ feet with her hair (John 12:3); the Son of Man has hair *like wool, as white as snow* (Revelation 1:14). You don’t have to read these now, but you may find it helpful if you do so.

Where the meaning of the bible is a bit obscure, it’s good to remember that it can often be explained by correspondences: a spiritual meaning is wrapped up inside a natural one. Some of the parables Jesus told make the idea obvious – the parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:1-23), or of the Lost Sheep (Luke 15:3-7). Jesus explains them to his disciples straight away. Correspondences can also be seen in our speech. “It was like a light coming on”- the light of truth sinking into our understanding. Similarly, “I feel all warm and loved”: warmth corresponds to love.

So what does hair correspond to? Here I quote from Swedenborg’s *Arcana Cælestia*, paragraph 3301: *Hair, or the hair on the head, is mentioned several times in the Word, and in those places it means that which is natural. The reason is that hairs are outgrowths on the most exterior parts of a person; in the same way we are aware mostly of our everyday worldly mind, and not our spiritual mind. During his lifetime it seems to everyone as though the natural within him is all there is to him, but this is so far from being true. The natural is rather an outgrowth from the internal parts of him, like hairs from the parts of the body. They also stem from internal parts in almost the same way. Again from the same paragraph: The chief reason why the ultimate existence of Samson’s strength lay in his hair was so that he might represent the Lord who from the truth in His natural man was to fight the hells and overcome them.*

What does this mean for us? “Don’t cut my hair” can mean not to dismiss simple things about being kind, doing the right thing, and learning the Lord’s way. Equally, “Don’t cut his or her hair” suggests we should not ignore the outer thoughts and actions of others.

People on earth are doing their training to make them right for heaven, a personal duty we call ‘regeneration.’ To express this more in New Church terms, we may observe that at the start of a person’s life of regeneration, their understanding needs to control their desires, and to cut them off (as cutting hair) is to remove the external part of the understanding. Such cutting off would make regeneration difficult.

Therefore, when Samson was tricked into having his seven curly locks cut off while he was asleep, he lost his strength: that is, he lost the power to fight from the simple truths in his natural mind.

Prayer Lord Jesus, whatever our hairstyle, and whatever we may think about our friends’ and family members’ hairstyles, let us keep from unkind words and actions which cut away and hinder good intentions and useful results. May we grow to understand more of your stories as we read them from your Holy Word. And let us thank you for making your teaching about life available to us in stories which are easy to remember. Thank you, bless you, Lord. Amen

11th November

Remembrance Sunday

Shalom

John 14:27

On this day each year we mark and respect all those who lost their lives in two World Wars, and thank them for their sacrifice that we may live in peace. If you are able to watch or listen to the television or radio coverage, you can respect them and thank them as you watch. We also remember those who have died in other conflicts since – Northern Ireland, Falklands, Afghanistan.

However, it's now more than seventy years since the end of the second world war, and exactly one hundred years since the end of the first. The generations move on, and there are very few left who remember active service in the world wars. After war is over, peace is declared, and it's the wider topic of peace I wish to consider, for which we should also give thanks.

Many will understand the Hebrew word "Shalom" to mean 'Peace,' and I want to explore several ideas that start from that word. I've pasted traditional Hebrew letters so you can see what they look like. But the word 'Shalom' is bigger than absence of war. It has several meanings, listed here:



- The Hebrew word can mean: peace, harmony, wholeness, completeness, prosperity, welfare and tranquillity
- It can be used as a greeting, used where we would say either 'Hello' or 'Goodbye.'
- The end of conflict can be the end of temptations, when the Lord Jesus stops working to save us from that temptation, and we are given a resulting feeling of peace or tranquillity
- As a reminder, we have the Sabbath day, where the Lord gives us rest, or blessings, or both
- The Lord, in instructing his disciples, gives them peace (John 14:27, John 20:19)

How wonderful to greet someone with a word that wishes them Peace, and Welfare! Of course, many times the familiar "How are you?" seeks to find out the other's health and wealth. Sometimes, of course, it is just a conventional question, and we are familiar with those who tell us too much! In Genesis 29:6 it seems that the word 'Shalom' is used to carry the sense of both health and welfare.

Maybe this greeting reminds us of the story of Christmas day in the trenches when a truce for the day resulted in games of football between British, French and German soldiers in 1914.

Perhaps we should consider the Christian experience of temptation. A common, sometimes jokey, example we like to use is the sin of gluttony. It is simple to keep on eating just because it feels good, and we like the taste of the food. Sometimes the consequence is too much gain in weight, but there is a more spiritual problem here too: it can become a way of distracting us from more important things. If or when we become aware of our food-habit, we can diet – now that's temptation! But each time we achieve a victory, and have asked for the Lord's help in it, then we have a victory. And in that victory we can know (a little piece of) peace. Over a lifetime we should reject as many temptations as we can, and states of peace arise: we no longer feel the need to enter the forbidden states and actions.

Of course, if leaders led wisely and truthfully, and nations followed those wise leaders, causes of war between nations could be resolved in peaceful negotiations, not wars. As Winston Churchill is reputed to have said in 1954, "Jaw jaw is always better than war war."

So on this Remembrance Sunday, let us recall those who have given us peace, and do our bit to support peace and gain peace in our hearts and minds.

Prayer Dear Lord Jesus, we ask you for peace in every sense. Amen, and Shalom.

18th November Labourers in the Vineyard Matthew 20: 1-16

When I first heard this parable, probably as a child, my immediate reaction was that heaven is given to anyone who by their work, follows the Lord; and that this applies to those who have started later in their life just as much as to those who have done it for longer. The reward, one penny, was symbolic to me as entry to heaven.

Recent study has shown more depth to this which is given below. However, the lesson I first received isn't a bad one. The Lord treats all equally, giving pay to those who work hard for it, and a gift to all who are willing. We are shown that the Lord is not *fair*, but rather *generous*.

So, the parable, like much of the Word, is a story of regeneration. That's the process the Lord Jesus leads us through in our lives whereby we start as innocent children, live our lives of work, and end up as innocent angels sort-of ready for heaven. And it's the work of the day (which is symbolic of the whole of life) which changes our inner life from obedience, through understanding and faith, to love. For only those who love the Lord can enter and remain in heaven. That sequence: obedience, understanding, love: applies to most topics if you think about it.

In the early part of our lives from around the age of twenty, when we become responsible for our actions, we are offered work. At that time we are keen for fair pay (one penny), but our attitude is that of deserving our reward. The work we do, spiritually, is to follow the Lord - doing things that agree with his commandments (there are ten of them, right?). As time goes on, we begin to see the rightness of the instructions, and our simple obedience of them turns into understanding. The command: "Do not steal" becomes for us: "It's wrong to steal, it hurts the person stolen from." And that is an understanding. As understanding is practised, it becomes automatic... and then it may be described as faith.

Later, when the understanding and faith are well grounded, automatic even, we begin to love the calm and the effects, and slowly the Lord brings us to love the law, and our neighbours, and Himself. By the time we are approaching old age we can return to the innocence we had as little children: we won't have wrong thoughts and motivations as they are then not in our mature, loving nature.

Now, we look at the end of the story. The householder (corresponds to the Lord Jesus) instructs the steward to pay, in reverse order, each person one penny. That signifies the satisfaction and blessing of the Lord's heaven arriving in the ordinary life of the man or woman. But the workers who started 'early' still get one penny, and they moan. We note that the ideas and states of mind that we start with in our life have the slogan "a fair day's pay" and expect a reward. Indeed, they get it! But the nature of those states does not have any notion of the gift of God: they can only receive in a self-centred, self-deserving manner. Which is why they complain.

Finally, Jesus finishes his parable by saying "The last shall be first and the first, last." The truths we make into our faith first are the least perfect and those we take up last are more perfect, so they re-order themselves in that manner. In a life spent regenerating, one will have considered and ordered many truths, but the important outcomes are good and useful works.

So this parable tells us that all who genuinely work for the Lord over their lives can enter heaven. It also tells us that in our lives, as we progress, we shall deal with ideas and activities that have increasing truth, beauty and worth.

Finally, may we thank the Lord Jesus Christ for giving us the parable and the teaching contained within it. Amen.

25th November The Ten Commandments

I took my car for a service last week. The mechanic checked the oil and filters, and made sure all the parts were working right. It occurred to me that it was time to give my Christian faith a service, and I thought the Ten Commandments given to the Jews in the wilderness were a good way of doing that. So, as a challenge, can you write down, right now, all the Ten Commandments? Go on, give it a try before you read the rest of this Home Worship piece. You can check your answers in Exodus 20:1-17. Don't worry if your numbering or order don't agree with the text in your Bible.

Have you ever thought about the fullness of the Ten Commandments? We are told in Swedenborg's writings that they are a summary of the whole way of life and all the teaching of the Lord to his people. In this brief piece I want to look at the spiritual and heavenly depths of some of the commandments. Again, have you looked over your life to see if you are keeping to the whole intention of the commands?

1st Commandment: You shall have no other gods before me. Do we worship any god but our Lord Jesus Christ? *We should worship him because his life on earth was sufficient to redeem humankind.* We should worship him because he is infinite, eternal and omnipotent; the source of all love and wisdom.

5th Commandment: You shall not murder. Even at a simple level, this forbids making an injury that may cause death. Likewise, we shouldn't injure someone's reputation: for many people their name is as precious as their life. *And it extends to thoughts of revenge or hating, as these are murderous at their root. Since we know all people have souls which are alive, this command also forbids 'killing their souls.'* This can be done by turning people away from the Lord, or from religion, by falsities or by scandal. Finally, no-one should be angry with the Lord and come to hate him, as this is a desire to murder him.

8th Commandment: You are not to bear false witness. Away from the courts of law, this forbids all types of lying, hypocrisy, or slander. *It's also against the commandment to knowingly swap true ideas about the Lord and his church for false ones; or to blaspheme.* The Lord has given us the Word (contained in the Bible) and when we lie about that, we are also giving a false witness.

I could go on and catalogue the depths to be found in all Ten Commandments, but I would spill over the allowed size of this article! So, instead, I ask you to consider: how much of each of these have you been aware of, how much have you kept, and how much must you do now to improve? I know that I have never murdered anyone – and I imagine that no-one else reading this has killed a human deliberately.

You know that the Word contains many levels of meanings. First, there is the simple message that we all can read – the literal sense. Behind that is a spiritual sense which gives moral instruction to people about reforming themselves into Angels, ready to enter the Heavens when they arise after death. It's the spiritual sense of the example commandments I have put in *italics* above, so you can see the way the commandments extend to a spiritual sense. Finally, the Word contains a celestial (or 'heavenly') sense about the Lord Jesus, and His love for all; these are at the end of my descriptions above.

So, when I think about a commandment, I need to move along the path of understanding and obedience from the Natural sense (don't kill) to the Spiritual (don't kill the soul) to the Celestial (don't think about killing the Lord). There's always another step to take, and I can always find something to improve. For each of the Ten Commandments, we can consider what the deeper senses in it are. The Lord will bless us in our efforts. And, we will be "well serviced" like our motor cars!

Prayer Lord Jesus, forgive our sins today. Please make us able to see a little more of the love to You and our neighbours each day, so that each day we can sin less. Thank You, Lord, for the help You give us each day: we acknowledge that all the strength in making our choices comes from You. Amen.