

Home Worship for December 2018 by David Lomax

2nd December The Word became flesh John 1.1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. John 1.1

It may seem somewhat perverse to begin Home Worship thoughts for December with the first verses of John's Gospel. My sense is that these verses are regarded as a climax and that this particular passage usually comes at the end of our carol service readings. My reason for bringing it forward is that it often feels to me as if we need to shift our perspective when it comes to this reading from John. If we leave that until later in our Christmas focus, there may be a danger that we have already gone too far down a different road.

These thoughts may have crystallised around the first page of a commentary on John's Gospel by Swedenborgian commentator and minister, Rev William Bruce. He emphasises that this gospel "gives precedence and prominence to the subject of the Lord's divinity".

Through these few verses, we are taken through a number of "beginnings", which are each connected with this sense of divinity. We have the "beginning" of creation, which is introduced in verse 1 but then re-appears at regular intervals. We have the "beginning" of Jesus starting his ministry, with the references to John the Baptist in verses 6 to 8, leading to the statement in verse 9 about the "true light". We have the "beginning" of the conception and then the birth of a human being.

However, John's sense of this birth is very different from the details we shall find elsewhere in the Word. He talks rather, in verse 14, about the link between this birth and the aspect of God through which creation was possible ("the Word"). He follows this up with ideas of glory, grace and truth.

The wife of someone I know has recently had a baby. This has reminded me that such lofty hopes or ideals as John holds out can only be manifested in the birth of a human baby if we acknowledge that, amongst the uncertainty, something extraordinary is taking place. Even in the birth of Jesus as such a baby, as we shall see in some of the stories in the Word, it seems difficult for us to connect with what John presents. That may be part of the challenge of the next few weeks.

Let us finish this section with this short prayer:

Lord, may we look for the glory of your birth in our celebrations of Christmas and may we also be able to see in all-too-human situations the possibility of your grace and truth coming through to us. Amen.

9th December The mountain of the Lord Isaiah 2.1-5

*In the last days the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established
as the highest of the mountains;*

it will be exalted above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. Isaiah 2.2

We often use passages from the prophets as part of our focus on the coming of the Lord at Christmas. I'm not sure how often Swedenborg's *Prophets and Psalms* is used to help us to do this. In it, he provides his own summary of themes to go through all the parts of the major and

minor prophets, as well as The Psalms, and to give us at least an outline of what the spiritual sense of these passages is.

His reference to the first part of Isaiah chapter 2 is "Openly concerning the coming of the Lord, and a new heaven and a new earth at that time". This links back to some of the ideas which we have found in John about beginnings, but also about the sense of a "cosmic struggle" between darkness and light being focused in this particular physical location at the time of this birth and at this point in history.

We may not see ourselves in these terms and yet there are ideas of our re-birth or regeneration which also link us with these levels. The passage from Isaiah has a very strong sense of the universal in its references to nations and peoples, but I wonder if we can see ourselves as part of this process of gathering together goodness and truth through individuals and the decisions they make and actions they take in their daily lives. This may not be how we always think of the worship which is associated with the "mountain of the Lord" and yet Swedenborg is clear that it is this level of our life in which true worship must be made manifest.

Another theme which comes out towards the end of the Isaiah passage is warfare. This doesn't come out particularly strongly in last week's passage from John's gospel, other than the reference to darkness and light in verse 5. Here, however, it comes to the fore. There seems to be an ebb and a flow involved - when the coming of the Lord is focused on, harmony prevails, as in verses 2-3, yet when the resistance to that coming appears, there is something more complex. At the same time, there is a sense that the coming of the Lord will overcome these difficulties.

Come, descendants of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the LORD. Isaiah 2.5

Lord, we would worship on your holy mountain. Teach us your ways, so that we may walk in your paths, guided by the light of your truth, led by your love. Amen

16th December The birth of Jesus foretold Luke 1.26-38

'I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled.'

Luke 1.38

This is a well-known passage and is regularly read in our preparations for Christmas. As with other elements of the characters of the Christmas story, we may find ourselves in some ways identifying with Mary and in other ways struggling to be able to have any sense of how we can relate to what was being asked of her. In some ways, there are very human reactions in Mary, such as when we read in verse 29 that she is "greatly troubled". We may also think of times when we too are moved to ask, "How can this be?" when we feel that the Lord is asking something of us.

I don't know if the sense of ebb and flow that we touched on in relation to the passage in Isaiah last week may help here. It would be perfectly natural to feel some resistance in Mary and we too may identify with this in ourselves. When something "big" is happening (or about to happen) in our lives, we often experience anxiety and uncertainty, even if this is something we see as positive in general (such as changes we are looking forward to in where we live, study or work). At one level, we can see the birth which is being discussed as part of this.

However, there is a bit more to it when we are talking about "the birth of the Lord". He is being born into a situation which is far from settled on an earthly level, which reflects the fact that the

"birth of the Lord" into us spiritually is always helping us make spiritual progress and this includes acknowledging the difficulties and indeed dangers of this process.

One aspect of Mary which it is difficult to avoid is the question of trust. The angel tells her of the child being "great" and "called the Son of the Most High". When we feel that we are being asked to move forward spiritually, we have to come back to the Lord's power and our ability to put our trust in this. This comes out in Mary saying that she is the Lord's servant in verse 38.

Lord, we ask that we may have courage when we are being asked to move forward and develop in our faith. May we be able to trust in your power and your love at these times. Amen.

23rd December The shepherds Luke 2.8-20

And there were shepherds living out in the fields near by, keeping watch over their flocks at night. Luke 2.8

I want to focus on the shepherds' part in the birth story itself. Several years ago now, the BBC in the UK produced a version of the Nativity which they showed in the run-up to Christmas. One of the shepherds was identified as potentially quite disaffected with the Roman overlords and as liable to be roped into an uprising of violence against the Romans. His experience of the birth of Jesus was portrayed as unravelling what had become quite a tangled mass of thoughts and feelings.

This wasn't something I particularly expected and I thought about it quite a lot. I have come across other presentations of the story of the shepherds which focus on the fact that they were marginalised, as they were living physically at the edge of society and although they had a key role, they were also distanced.

My way of seeing this is perhaps rather more positive. The shepherds are "near" Bethlehem but not in Bethlehem itself. They are also awake at night in the fields. Swedenborg sees fields as having to do with teachings of the church. Part of the situation of the time, in Swedenborg's sense of the spiritual essence of the era, is that religious ideas were keeping out the light rather than allowing the light to flow through them. Because the "fields" are at the edge of society, perhaps they show that the teachings of the church need to keep some room open for development rather than being too fixed. Perhaps because the shepherds were there for the sheep (which Swedenborg relates to a feeling of the Lord's love, hence he is also described as a shepherd), they were able to see the angel and be open to see the light of "the glory of the Lord". Sometimes, in order for us to fully appreciate the Lord coming to us, we need to "take a step back" from our normal ways of thinking. Something which we don't normally see as a good thing may actually be more like the Lord being "born" than it may at first appear or than we care to think.

30th December Matthew 2.13-18 The killing of the boys in Bethlehem

'A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.' Matthew 2.18/Jeremiah 31.15

Throughout these weeks I have endeavoured to present a balance of light and dark in what I have pointed to in the Christmas story. What I am including on this final Sunday seems to have more to do with the darkness which (as John puts it in one translation of verse 5 of the passage we used in the first week) cannot overcome the light. Strictly speaking, this story comes after

Epiphany, which is celebrated in early January, but it seems to me to make sense to include it as part of our Christmas thoughts.

So what do we make of the putting to death of male children by Herod in order to try and wipe out what he seems to perceive as the threat of Jesus? There are a number of huge imbalances here, such as so many children being killed to try and find the one in question or the idea of killing children who have no power in order to maintain earthly power. All of this seems extreme but perhaps we are aware of topical examples of actual violence which mirror the reports about Herod.

Swedenborg encourages us to look at the reasons for this violence on a spiritual level when he refers back to the passage from Jeremiah quoted in Matthew:

This refers to the infant boys put to death in Bethlehem by command of Herod, as is evident from the passage cited in Matthew; but what this signifies has not heretofore been known. The signification is that when the Lord came into the world there was no spiritual truth remaining; for "Rachel" represented the internal spiritual church, and "Leah" the external natural church, "Bethlehem" the spiritual, and "the boys put to death" truth from that origin. That there was no spiritual truth any longer remaining is signified by "Rachel weeping for her sons, she refuseth to be comforted for her sons, because they are not." Apocalypse Explained 695.15

Whilst this gives us the spiritual historical background to the literal birth of Jesus, if we are thinking about the birth of Jesus in our own lives here and now, what sort of aspects of ourselves parallel Herod's reaction in some way? I wonder if the over-reaction of Herod gives us some sort of clue. I know that, when I observe myself (often after the event but occasionally at the time) over-reacting to something, it usually has something to do with some part of my "self" which is needing to assert itself, to be propped up or justified, or to have an outlet for some of my own feelings. We have to be realistic that Herod is still "on the scene" but we also know that he is not able to destroy the new truth which Jesus brings. So whilst I may distort my version of events, either internally or even when talking to other people, I can equally pray that the Lord's truth will balance this and keep it from taking over for me or others.