

Home Worship for October 2018 – Gwen Hardy

7th October “I have called you by name” Isaiah 43 v 1

Everything has a name, it is how we relate to everything about us. As we look around we have general names for what we see - trees, flowers buildings etc. - then we have particular names to describe them further. The word buttercup perfectly describes the shape and colour of that flower. In Genesis God named the different aspects of the world as they were created, “God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night”. It would be impossible to function and interact in life if nothing and no one had a name. Our own name identifies us and sets us in context. Friends and family know us by our Christian name and our surname tells what family we are connected to and is used for more formal communications, but it does not necessarily describe us. In the Bible names have much more meaning.

The Bible has many names for the Lord and each tells us something about him – JESUS means God **saves**, IMMANUEL God **with us**, CHRIST the **anointed**, THE LION of JUDAH telling us of his **strength** and THE LAMB of GOD his **gentleness**, PRINCE of **PEACE**, and ALPHA and OMEGA meaning **first and last**. Let us go to the early part of the Old Testament where we hear about the name Moses was told to use for God, when he went to Pharaoh to free the Israelites from Egypt. Please read Exodus 3 v 7-15

‘I am’ doesn’t sound like a proper name, but then the name for God, being the creator of the world, would have to be unique, unlike any other name. Arcana Caelestia 6880 gives an explanation of this name:

‘I am who I am’ means the Being and the Coming into being of all things throughout creation. This is clear from the fact that ‘I am’ means to have Being and since He alone is the source of all being ‘I am’ is used as a name.

God as the source of all life is coming into being, or coming into expression, throughout all creation. We only have to look at the world of nature in all its variety, and the many wonders of the universe to see that. How any scientist could deny the existence of God is beyond me. We as human *beings* are part of creation. The Lord gives his life freely and we are given the choice as to how we use and express it. Our natural name is not deeply significant, as in the bible, but over the course of life our thoughts and actions are forming a description of who we really are, giving us a spiritual name. The Lord is always wanting to come into *being* in new ways. Each person is an individual into whom He can come in a unique way. He wants to call out all that is good and true. Let us be open to receive his call and ‘create a name for ourselves’, or more importantly for The Lord.

Please read Isaiah 43 v 1-7

Prayer Dear Lord we thank you for the gift of life with its many blessings and opportunities. May we use your life wisely and be truly named by you. Amen

October 14th “I am the bread of life” John 6 v 35

The main focus of John’s gospel seems to be on who Jesus really was and the purpose of his life. Jesus said seven specific things about himself, sometimes known as the seven ‘I am’ sayings, which state the different aspects of God that he came to live and express. Today we are thinking about the first, and the foundation for the others, **‘I am the bread of life’**. Read John 6 v 16-35

At this point Jesus’ ministry is gaining momentum and he is beginning to draw the crowds. He has been performing ‘signs’ (as John calls them), turning water into wine and healing the sick, and the more recent sign of feeding five thousand people with five loaves and two fishes.

Jesus' whole ministry was aimed at raising the people's thoughts from earth to heaven, from the natural to the spiritual. He talked to Nicodemus of being born again, and to the Samaritan woman at the well, of living water welling up to eternal life. The crowd came to Jesus after being fed on the hillside and what follows is a conversation about bread. Jesus said, **"Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life"** (v27), but they were slow to get the point. He then brings about a shift in the conversation saying, **"The bread of God is HE who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world"** (v33). No longer is bread a thing - it becomes a person, HE! He continues by saying, **"I am the bread of life,"** and when he said this he used that name that Moses was told to use as God's name, Ego eimi **I, I am**. The people would have been shocked. Jesus pushes the point home further. Read John 6 v 46-58

Bread/food is essential to life, without it we die, and spiritually the same applies. For our lives to have any true spirit in them they need the basic food of goodness and love. These two words encompass so many beautiful qualities: kindness, compassion, friendship, forgiveness, and so much more, all displayed by our Lord in his life. This was his purpose: to be a living expression of love. He is the true source of all life, natural and spiritual, and to get it we need to ask for and truly desire the spiritual food of love that he offers. Jesus says, **"Ask and it will be given you"** (Luke 11:9) and **"I am the bread of life"** and he goes on to say **"I am the LIVING bread"** (John 6:51). To me this brings it right out of history. The use of the word LIVING gives a sense of the present day and a feeling of continuity.

Just as the Israelites were given manna day by day on their journey, so the food Jesus offers us is continuous throughout life. But there were conditions: the bread had to be gathered. Each day we must gather our spiritual food. This comes in many different ways. We may get inspiration and encouragement from someone we come into contact with, or from something we see, or something we read, especially when reading the Word of God.

In this passage Jesus says **"Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man... you have no life in you"** (v53). This was a hard saying for the people of that time when human sacrifice was still practised, but of course that was not his meaning. We are being asked to take Jesus' goodness right into us, to really digest it and make it a part of our life; then joined with the life-blood of his truth we may go out and share it with others.

Prayer Dear Lord Jesus we thank you for our daily bread. May we always look to you for our spiritual nourishment. Amen

October 21st "I am the light of the world"

Please read John 1 v 1-14, John 8 v 12 & John 9 v1-6

We take the daylight for granted. Whatever else, we know the sun will rise each morning. Even on an overcast day the light of the sun will penetrate and a new day will begin. We know earthly life cannot exist without light: nothing could grow and no one could live. Another thing we take for granted is the cycle of the seasons, as we rotate around the sun we experience its light and heat in varying degrees and we plan our lives accordingly. Everyone knows these simple facts, yet on a spiritual level we may often remain ignorant. Do we trust the Lord in his love and wisdom to enlighten our minds, as confidently as we trust the rising of the sun each morning? If we did, we would not fret or worry or doubt as much as we do.

The opening sentences of John's gospel refer to God as 'the Word', a strange title one would think. It comes from the Greek word *logos* meaning **speech**. Another meaning of *logos* was **reason**, and the scholars of the day used this term for the underlying reason for everything, in other words the Creator God.

Jesus declared himself to be the '**light of the world**' fulfilling what John had said about him. He demonstrated this in his life on earth with his teachings, bringing light, **understanding** to the people, and even down to the physical level when he healed the blind and sick. These correspond to the many forms of spiritual blindness and sickness that they, and we, experience.

Jesus also said an amazing thing in the Sermon on the Mount, "*You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.*" (Matt 5:14-16)

Those disciples and followers of Jesus may have wondered what light they had and we may wonder the same, but we have all been created with the ability to receive and shine out the light of God's truth in a unique way. His creation is not complete without our contribution, whatever it may be. Our light may not only be through words - whatever flows out from us is a form of speech or expression. It may be a certain atmosphere we create, or it may be some talent we have been given. There is a prayer/song often attributed to a sixteenth century Carmelite nun, Teresa of Avila:

"Christ has no body now on earth but yours; no hands but yours; no feet but yours; yours are eyes through which to look with Christ's compassion on the world; yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good, and yours are the hands with which he is to bless us now."

Prayer Dear Lord, you are the light of the world, the one dependable thing in our lives. Help us to trust your guiding light of love and wisdom, as much as we trust the rising sun each day. May it shine ever more brightly on and through us all. Amen

October 28th "Hallowed be thy name" Please read Matthew 6 v 5-14
Most church services include the reciting of the Lord's Prayer, the prayer that Jesus taught us. It is so familiar to us that we must be careful to pay attention to the words we say. The writings of our church say '*more things are in it, in proportion as man's thought is more opened towards heaven.*'

Swedenborg said, "*As often as I have recited the Lord's Prayer I have had the plain feeling of being raised towards the Lord..... At these times my ideas were open and communication with some communities in heaven was consequently established.*"
Read further from *Arcana Caelestia* 6476

The prayer starts '**Our Father, who art in the heavens.**' This is the foundation for the whole prayer. It holds in essence all that follows. At the outset the prayer is addressed to '**Our Father**', which immediately puts us in a humble and child like attitude towards God as our father. This is followed by the words '**hallowed be thy name**'. To hallow is to make sacred or holy, or to revere. As we have seen, in spiritual terms a person's name describes their quality, so when these words are recited earnestly they are an acknowledgement of the many aspects of the Lord's wonderful qualities of love and wisdom, and our desire to revere or respect them in our lives.

The Lord's name is written on the whole of the natural world in all its beauty, order, and variety, and we *hallow* it when we love and care for it. When we pray '**hallowed be thy name**', we commit ourselves anew to preserving this wonderful planet in every way we can.

Just as precious minerals can be found within the fabric of the earth, so is God's love and wisdom to be found within the letter of the Word. In a New Church service of worship an open copy of the inspired Word of God is to be seen on the altar, a symbol of respect and honour for all it contains. But it is only a symbol, and we only truly *hallow* it when we read and treasure it, and endeavour to live by the truths we learn.

As we saw at the beginning of the month God has many names, but the name most familiar to us as Christians is **Jesus**. Mary was told before his conception, that he should be called **Jesus**, which means **God saves**. God came on earth in human form as Jesus, the 'Word made flesh', a living example of all those qualities of love and wisdom written throughout the Old Testament, bringing them even closer to affect us in heart and mind. When we follow his example and embody his teachings we will truly *hallow* his name and he will truly be our **Saviour**.

Those of us who no longer have a New Church to attend may miss the singing of hymns, but many of the words are still imprinted on our minds. The following comes to mind:

*At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow,
every tongue confess him King of glory now;
tis his own commandment we should call him Lord,
who from the beginning was the mighty Word.*

Prayer 'Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory, for thy mercy, and for thy truth's sake.' Amen Psalm 115 v1

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

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.

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.

Home Worship for December 2018

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.