

Home Worship July 2020 – Jan Millar

This month's readings and reflections are based on some of the 'I am' statements in John's Gospel.

July 5th Read John 6: 25-51 – 'I am the Bread of Life'

'I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.' John 6: 35

This is the first of seven statements in John's Gospel which really bring out the divinity of the Lord Jesus Christ. Bread is what sustains life as it is a basic food that is cheap, nutritious and filling. In Biblical times it was even more important than it is to us today because there were fewer alternative sources of nourishment. Here the Lord compares Himself to bread.

This passage comes soon after the account of the feeding of the 5,000 and just as He fed the crowds of people He also feeds us spiritually through the teachings of His Word which sustains, nourishes and satisfies us. 'I am the Bread of Life' is about the way in which the Lord provides the goodness and guidance that we need in life. This is the basis on which everything else can be devolved.

Bread signifies the Lord who alone is the source of all goodness and truth, the source of all love and wisdom as everything that is holy, everything celestial and spiritual, all things that are good and true proceed only from Him. In the same way that our physical bodies need proper nourishment, our souls need the spiritual goodness that only the Lord can provide. Swedenborg tells us many times that good must first be present before the seeds of truth can be sown in it.

The invitation is to everyone. The Bread of Life is ours for the taking but we have free will whether or not we accept this spiritual food. But if we do accept the Lord as 'The Bread of Life' and take into ourselves His goodness and truth and then share these with others, our lives are changed forever. To begin with we experience a new and lasting satisfaction in life. The human heart is able to find what it has been searching for and life is no longer merely an existence made up of earthly concerns and pleasures. Instead we can experience a true sense of fulfilment, joy and peace by partaking of the Lord's spiritual food.

In Luke's account of the Last Supper [Luke 22] we are told in verse 19 *'And he took bread and, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them saying, This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.'* When we join in this sacrament we allow the Lord's love [bread] and truth [wine] to enter our inmost being. Reflect on how you feel that the Lord's love is freely available to everyone. Does it make you feel more, or less, special to be one cell in the Lord's spiritual body? – one stone in the wall of the New Jerusalem!

Prayer – Bread of Life, may Your love continue to fill our spiritual needs. Teach us to give to others all that we have so freely received from You that they too may experience the joy and peace that can only come through true communion with You. Wherever people hunger for a greater meaning and purpose in their lives may Your unconditional love nourish and sustain them deep within. Amen

July 12th Read John 1: 1-14 & John 8: 12-20 – ‘I am the Light of the World’

‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.’ John 8: 12

The contrast between darkness and light is something that we see throughout the Word. The incarnation of the Lord took place at a time of great darkness on earth. He came to be a source of light in a time of spiritual darkness.

Light is a symbol for the truth, particularly truth which is grounded in goodness. Light also is a symbol for the Lord’s Word which contains this truth and light also corresponds to understanding and enlightenment. In the highest sense light means the Lord Himself as He is the source of all goodness and truth. Darkness on the other hand symbolises ignorance, negativity and fear. It was to dissipate this darkness that the Lord came into the world to bring light and life to all people that were willing to follow Him.

In Greek ‘the light of life’ means two things. It can mean either the light which issues from the source of life or the light which gives life. Here it means both of these things. Through the incarnation Jesus is the very light of God brought to men and women in the world and He is also the light which gives them life. Just as everything in the natural world needs light in order to grow and develop to its full potential so our spiritual lives can only attain their full growth and potential in the light of the presence of the Lord.

We all find ourselves in dark places at times when we feel cut off from friends and family. It may be caused by feelings of doubt, insecurity, fear and an inability to cope either practically or spiritually in the situation we are facing. It is then we can open ourselves up to the Lord’s love knowing He is always there for us to support and guide us through our struggles. But the onus is on us. We have to open up ourselves to the Lord, let the light in and listen to his still small voice speaking in our hearts and minds and then follow where he leads.

A number of years ago when visiting the Refectory at Keble College Oxford I saw the original painting by Holman Hunt of ‘The Light of the World’. It is based on the words in Revelation 3: 20 *"Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any man hear My voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with Me"*. This had a profound effect upon me and I have reflected on it many times since. Take time now to look at the print of the painting. What do you particularly notice about it especially with regard to the situation you are in at present? Reflect on your own willingness or ability to open the door to let in the Lord’s love and truth.

Francis of Assisi said, ‘A single sunbeam is enough to drive away many shadows.’ May we reflect the spiritual light of the Lord as an offering to dispel the shadows both within and around us.

Prayer - Go forth this day and live as you were meant to live: with light in your eyes, joy in your being, peace in your soul, and love in your heart. Amen

'The Light of the World'
William Holman Hunt 1827-1910



July 19th Read John 10: 1-18 – ‘I am the Door of the Sheep’, ‘I am the Good Shepherd’

In these two statements Jesus describes Himself as both the door of the sheepfold and the good shepherd. In Biblical times both these roles were undertaken by the shepherd as, once the sheep were in the fold, he would lay himself across the entrance acting as a door to protect the sheep and to prevent them wandering away in the hours of darkness.

Spiritually sheep correspond to the quality of innocence and the genuine goodness which develops from it and the sheepfold represents heaven. We are the sheep and the Lord is the Good Shepherd. Innocence and trust are qualities that the Lord wants us to keep and He will guide, feed and protect us if we place our trust in Him and follow where he leads. But the choice is always ours. Are we led by the spiritual things of heaven or the material things of earth?

Swedenborg tells us that all goodness and innocence comes from acknowledging that we aren't good or wise of our own accord but that all the goodness and wisdom we have is from the Lord. So if we have the Lord as our shepherd and we are indeed His sheep and follow Him in true humility and trust we will be able to enter the sheepfold through the door; in other words, we will be able to enter heaven through Him. Heaven will then be in our hearts here and now and whatever problems we have to face we can experience love, peace, security and spiritual fulfilment based on our trust in the Lord.

The concept of the Lord as the Shepherd of His people would be one that was easily understood by the early Christians. Shepherds in those days led their sheep rather than the sheep being driven as we are familiar with today. The good shepherd had a close relationship with his sheep and would know each of them by name. They were personally responsible for the safety of the sheep. Lost sheep had to be tracked and found and the shepherd daily risked his life for the sheep. By the same token when the Lord states ‘I am the Good Shepherd’ it reinforces His relationship with us who are His flock. He knows us intimately, indeed far better than we know ourselves. We only have to seek His guidance through listening to Him, trusting Him and following Him for He is the Good Shepherd, our Risen Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. The Lord actively seeks His lost sheep. By the time we call on His help He is already there. Does this comfort you as it should?

In John 10:16 Jesus speaks of having other sheep that are not of this fold and says they too will listen to his voice and will be one flock. Reflect on who these other sheep could be and your relationship with them.

The 23rd Psalm is one of the most well-known and best loved passages in the Word as it speaks to people at all times and in all situations. Read it again and reflect on the times in your life when you faced great difficulties. To whom did you look for guidance and support?

Prayer: Thank you Lord, for your constant guidance and support throughout our lives, for the assurance that you are always with us, giving us strength in times of weakness, support when we are feeling alone and encouragement when we are fearful. Teach us to trust you more completely in the future confident that you are always there for us, the Good Shepherd caring for his flock. Amen

July 26th Read John 15: 1-17 – ‘I am the True Vine’

The symbol of the vine and the vineyard is used many times throughout the Word. The vine was the symbol of Israel but in the Old Testament it is invariably used to describe Israel's degeneration. Israel is described as a vine run wild, but Jesus now states that He is the true vine and we are the branches.

The vine has two branches, one that bears fruit and one that doesn't. All the branches that don't bear fruit need to be drastically cut back each year to conserve the vine's life and energy. So Jesus uses the vine and the branches to show how we are connected with Him.

In its highest sense the vine represents the Lord as Divine Truth which is why Jesus states '*I am the true vine*'. He is the source of life, supporting us as the vine supports its branches. The vine brings water and food to its branches and by the same token the Lord gives us His truth and inspires us with His love. But again we need to remember that all life and all goodness come from the Lord alone. Jesus tells us this clearly in verse 5, '*apart from me you can do nothing*'.

So what does it mean to be branches of the vine? Some Christians are fruit-bearing branches of the Lord while others are useless because they bear no fruit. They profess to be Christians but merely pay lip service and don't put into practice what they have been taught by the Lord. Salvation cannot be obtained through faith alone, it is how we put that faith into practice through service to others that enables us to do the Lord's work here on earth.

Just as the branches of the vine are connected to the vine itself they are thereby interconnected with each other. We also need to be aware that we aren't the only branches. Do we recognise that other people, perhaps with a different outlook from us may also be bearing the fruit that the Lord wants them to? We don't have to be uniform in order to be united in His work.

Those branches that do bear fruit still have to be pruned to make them even more productive. This spiritually can be a painful process as we strive to give up those things that are holding us back. Reflect on what you have to do in order to bear fruit that will last. What has to be discarded in your life in order to have true communion with the Lord? With hindsight are you able to see how something that was a difficult situation for you to deal with in the past was actually a necessary painful experience for you to go through?

The main message of this passage is that all life and all goodness come from the Lord alone. It is only by following the Lord's example that we are able to produce good fruit. '*You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. This is my command: Love each other.*' John 15: 16-17

Prayer: Dear Lord, teach us to use the opportunities you give us wisely, creatively and fruitfully. Teach us what it means to belong to you and to be part of your Church so we may serve you by serving others. Help us simply not to call you Lord, but to make you the Lord of our lives. Amen

Home Worship for August 2020

Revd Becky Jarratt

2nd August

'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

Read Matthew 25:31-46

Do you think you can tell a sheep from a goat? It may not be as easy as you think. However, I have some hints here to help you.



Goats' tails usually stick up in the air, whereas sheep's tails hang down. If sheep have horns, they are usually curved, but goats' horns are less curved. Sheep usually have fluffy wool that must be sheared, but goats have flatter hair.

God often describes his people as sheep in scripture. Sheep listen to their shepherd, and follow him. They look to him for all their needs and

without his care they will suffer. Goats are stubborn. They resist being told what to do. They will consume almost anything, even rubbish. Have you ever fed a goat? For me, it felt like they were never satisfied.



Like sheep who follow the shepherd, people who are open to the Lord's lead follow Him. We don't always know where He is taking us (John 21:18), but we know He will always care for us and keep us safe. However, people who resist the Lord and want to do their own thing are stubborn, and end up accepting the lies and rubbish of this world. The goats in the reading thought they were doing His work, but they were obviously not listening to how He wanted it done, or they were doing it for their own goals, not His.

The examples given in the parable of the sheep and the goats illustrate how we are to love people in the same way we love ourselves, as our Lord commanded us in Matthew 22:39. We are not expected to give away all of our food, or to share so much that there is not enough left for ourselves. This is not what the Lord wants us to do – if we do this, we are then no good to other people. We have to make judgements about how much or how little we are able to give to charity, or to give to people in person.

The example of visiting someone in prison is a tricky one. Do many of us know someone in prison? Perhaps we could think of someone that we know has done wrong. More than likely, they are suffering within themselves. They may even have wronged us personally. "Visiting" them could be as simple as forgiving someone who has wronged us, or accepting that someone behaved badly. This does not make them a bad person. Only the Lord knows what is going on inside a person. We cannot judge that.

Kindly and thoughtful actions without thinking of what we will get in return truly is doing what Jesus has asked us. Helping others without concern for ourselves means that we actually are doing it for the Lord. 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

Task: In what ways can we follow the guidance Jesus gave us in Matthew 25:35-36?

Prayer *Heavenly Father, we can be selfish at times, and forget that You have commanded us to treat our neighbour as ourselves. Help us to remember this, and to do so with care and compassion whenever we can. Amen*

9th August

““Did you not come to an agreement with me?””

Read Matthew 20:1–16

Have you ever been in the situation when you have felt as if you have been treated badly? How did it make you feel? How did you react?

I remember an occasion when I had agreed to play my viola at a concert. It was for a local orchestra that was just starting up. I had a music degree, and felt I was supporting the orchestra by going along to rehearsals beforehand. I had played for them in their previous concert, and had been paid for doing so. When it came to this concert, I discovered on the day that only players who were there just for the weekend rehearsals and concert were being paid. I was incensed! Not only had I sat through dreadful rehearsals for weeks on end, I was playing for free when some school children were receiving a fee. How could this be fair?

But had I been told I would be paid on this occasion? Actually – I hadn't. I believe that the conductor had indeed been underhand in his dealings, but we had never shaken hands on the price for my participation. I am relieved to say that I swallowed my pride and stayed to play for the concert, but, nearly twenty years on, it came to mind when I read this parable.

The workers in the vineyard have a similar tale to tell. Those who were employed in the morning had their fee fixed. They were content with it – they had agreed to it before they set off to work. So why were they so unhappy when others were paid the same? All of the workers would have hoped to have been gainfully employed all day.



Would the story have been different if only one worker had complained?

We may be familiar with the expression “Misery loves company”, which originates in the 5th century BC through words said by Sophocles. It is much more fun to grumble with someone else than to feel wounded alone. Two of my friends have fallen out. One of them was rather rude to me. I found myself wanting to message the other to complain about the first. Fortunately, I stopped myself just in time. This is exactly what evil spirits would like us to do. They love it when we are cross, and want us to linger in this sensation for as long as possible.

We can read in the teachings of the New Church that if we surround ourselves with people who like to grumble and complain, we attract like-minded spirits to be with us. When we are being heavenly in our thoughts and actions, we encourage the presence of angels. However, when we engage in grumbling and complaining, the evil spirits delight in this:

“...as is the good present with a person, so is the community of angels present with him; and as is the evil present with a person, so is the community of evil spirits present with him. A person chooses certain communities for himself, that is, he places himself within one of these; for like is brought into association with like. For example, one who is grasping chooses for himself communities of like-minded spirits who are motivated by his kind of desire; one who loves himself pre-eminently and despises others chooses for himself others who are like himself; while one who takes delight in acts of revenge chooses for himself such as delight in these; and so on with everyone else.” (Arcana Caelestia 4067:3)

It was not up to the workers to decide what the master should pay them. They may have had some grounds to feel that they had been badly treated, but they had come to an agreement with their employer. When we are cross, let us try to get over it without seeking out others to agree with us and make us more entrenched in our negative thoughts.

Task: Can you remember a time when you went to seek out someone to grumble with? What were your motivations? Are there times when you align yourself more with one group of friends than with another?

Prayer *Lord, help us to remember that we can choose to align ourselves with evil spirits, or with angels. Let us recognise when we are not in a good state, and turn to You for Your help. Amen*

16th August

““Love your neighbour as yourself.””

Read Luke 10:25-37

At the beginning of the month we considered how we could be a good neighbour. But who are we to consider as our neighbour?

At the time of writing, the UK is under lockdown due to COVID-19. This is such an unusual time for us. Some have compared it to World War 2, still a live memory for many people. Our movement has been restricted, as has our ability to shop for what we want, when we want. One good thing that has come out of this crisis is that neighbours have got to know each other a little better. People have put notes through each other's doors offering help and support.

There have also been reports of people ignoring the social distancing restrictions, and anger from those who have been watching. It can seem so unfair when we try to do the right thing, and yet others flout the rules by having parties in their gardens. How would you feel about helping the neighbour who had deliberately put themselves in danger?



William Barclay tells us about the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. It was a very dangerous path to take, dropping over 1000 metres in less than 20 miles. There were also many twists and turns where thieves could hide. The man who travelled this road in the story of the Good Samaritan would have known that it was perilous to travel this road without companions. He chose to take the risky journey alone.

There were also risks for the people who passed him. Had he been dead and the priest had touched him, the priest would have lost his turn at temple duty. The Levite may have been afraid that the attackers were hiding around the next corner, waiting to ambush a helper. Can we judge these travellers, of which we know so little? Were their reasons for ignoring the man justified? It was the Samaritan who was the good neighbour. The Samaritans were shunned by the Jews. They were Gentiles, so were considered “unclean”. However, it was a person from another part of society that was the one who helped the traveller. There is good inside everyone, whatever their race, religion, class, status, and so on, and it is this good which is to be loved. This is not always easy, though.

We need to open up to the Lord when we are struggling with people. They may have triggered something specific within us that says more about us than it does about them. Taking time to pray in these situations can help us to appreciate that our first reactions may not always be our best reactions.

Task: Think of a person, or a group of people, you struggle with. Can you articulate why it is that you don't like them? Have they done something personally to you? How can you reconcile your current feelings with what you know the Lord would want you to do?

Prayer *Lord, help us to recognise our sense of injustice when we see people being reckless. Teach us to remember that we are all Your children, and only You know what is in our hearts. Amen*

23rd August

““For this son of mine was dead and is alive again;
he was lost and is found.””

Read Luke 15:11-24

Have you ever done something so awful that you thought you could never be forgiven for it?

In the story of the Prodigal Son, or, as it is sometimes called, the Loving Father, the younger son is forgiven immediately he arrives home. He has seen the error of his ways, and is willing to be taken back into the household as the lowest of lowly servants. He hasn't crept back, hoping that

his father will be so pleased to see him, he will forget all that has been done. Rather, he is repentant and asks for forgiveness.

It is only when we are in this state of true repentance that the Lord can help us to change. In our family, we sometimes discuss the difference between a “sorry” and a “soz”. If we say “sorry”, we actually mean it, and wish that the other person will forgive us. If it is more of a “soz”, what we are actually saying is that we will apologise to smooth things over, or because we have been told to. We may not care that we have hurt someone, or that we were wrong to behave in this way. There are many situations in our lives when we may apologise to get the end result we hope for, rather than because we honestly wish to make it up to the other person.

Our Lord is always forgiving us, whatever the circumstances. He wants the best for us, and is always there. But His forgiveness only becomes a reality when we turn to Him, genuinely seeking forgiveness, and asking for help to change. When we have to make difficult and painful decisions, we can remind ourselves that there are always angels and evil spirits trying to influence us. We are not aware of them, and it is as if all of our thoughts are coming to us purely as a result of our own thinking. However, evil spirits want us to join them and celebrate in winning arguments to massage our own egos.



Image: G. Roland Smith

To counteract this, the Lord ensures that angels are also with us, helping to keep us from constantly making poor decisions because of the influence of these evil spirits, and so keeping us in freedom:

In particular the angels call forth the forms of good and truth residing with a person and set them opposite the evils and falsities activated by the evil spirits. As a result the person is in the middle and is not conscious of the evil or of the good; and being in the middle he is in freedom to turn towards one or towards the other. Angels from the Lord employ means like these to lead and protect a person, doing so every instant and fraction of an instant. For if the angels were to let up merely for a single moment the person would be plunged into evil from which after that he cannot possibly be brought out. The angels are motivated to do all this by a love they receive from the Lord, for nothing gives them greater delight and happiness than to remove evils from a person and lead him to heaven. This is their joy, see [Luke 15:7](#). Scarcely anyone believes the Lord has that kind of concern for a person, a constant concern lasting from the very beginning of a person's existence to the final moment of his life, and for evermore after that. (Arcana Caelestia 5992:3)

The father saw his son from a long way off. This indicates that he must have been watching and waiting, hoping against hope that today would be the day that his beloved son returned. Our heavenly Father watches and waits, ready for when we are ready to return to the fold. And He does not hold a grudge, nor does he bring up our past misdemeanours. He lets us remember them, so that we do not make the same mistakes time and time again. But once we have repented, we are free to follow in His footsteps once again.

Prayer *Lord Jesus Christ, thank you for the forgiveness that You are always willing to show to us. We pray that we remember to be sorry with our whole hearts, as we cannot hide our true feelings from You. Amen*

30th August

**“This brother of yours was dead and is alive again;
he was lost and is found.”**

Read Luke 15:25-32

Have you ever felt that you have tried your best, and yet you haven't been properly rewarded?



We heard last week that the father of the Prodigal Son was delighted to have him back. There is, however, one person in this story who is not happy to see the wandering son return. Of course, it is his brother. He has watched the younger child take what Bible scholars tell is a third of the family estate and squander it. And now he is being welcomed back with open arms! How can that be fair? The elder brother has done nothing wrong. He has stayed at home and been good. In fact, he might have been the model son the whole time his brother was away. Why has no-one killed the fatted calf for him?

I wonder if we have ever felt like this? I find it interesting to note my reactions to those who have “found God” later in life, rather than having been a believer all of their lives. I have experienced envy when I have heard of the changes that have happened to them since they have had the Lord in their lives. They seem to have a different type of fervour. How is it that someone who has tried to be “good” and follow the Lord for many years misses out on the wonder and delight of it being new?

Here, I see a Pharisee in myself. The elder brother has followed the letter of the law. He may not have done it out of love. He may have stayed with his father out of obligation, awaiting his inheritance. In verse 29, he describes himself as having been “slaving” for his father for years. This does not sound like a son who is nurturing the farm, but more as a duty so that he will gain his legal inheritance when the time comes.

Have we ever stuck to the letter of the law like a Pharisee? Has there been an occasion when we could have used our compassion and judgement about the circumstances? Have you had a delivery that arrived a few minutes after the specified time, and you chastised the driver? Perhaps that driver had stopped to help an elderly person who had fallen. We cannot know the motivations of everyone around us. Let us remember that we can only be entitled to think about our own spiritual development, and not judge that of others.

The Lord is delighted whenever we come to Him. We may come as children and live a fairly faithful life throughout. Or, we may only be introduced to His truths later on. He does not punish us for this. And just because we have known the Lord for a longer period does not mean we have always behaved in a way that we could be proud of, nor does it make us a better or superior person.

Sometimes we can be lost without realising we are lost. We may think we are behaving like the perfect person, putting the needs of others before our own. However, as we read in Matthew 7, we cannot compare our behaviour with that of others in the Lord's eyes. Only He knows what our true motivations are. We do sometimes have to make judgments about someone's actions. The tricky and problematic thing is to assess the actions without condemning the whole person. Hard though it may be, we have to try to love the neighbour in the person, treat them as we would like to be treated, and act as far as we can in accord with the Lord's way.

Task: Think of a time when you have treated a person with the letter of the law, rather than with compassion. How might it have felt to have been on the receiving end? If you were faced with this situation again, how could you react differently?

Prayer *Heavenly Father, we thank You for the many blessings You give to us. Help us to be grateful for these blessings, and to treat others in ways we would like to be treated ourselves. Help us to recognise when our motivations have been less than heavenly. Amen.*

Blessing. The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you. The Lord lift his countenance upon you and give you peace. Amen.

The rivalry between Hannah & Peninah***Bible Reading: 1 Samuel 1 v1-7***

This is not the first time in the bible we hear of rivalry between two women over children.

Can you think of other stories in the bible where there were women that were rivals? *Have a look in the book of Genesis, Chapters 18 and 30. So Hannah and Peninah's story is not unique.*

On a spiritual level Elkanah means 'Possessed of God'. he is pictured, in the story, as a kindly, devout man who endeavours to lead a good and faithful life. He has two wives or on a spiritual level - two affections. One - Hannah, who is the affection for the things of Heaven, in fact her name means 'grace', 'beauty' or 'he has favoured me' - the love for heavenly things; whilst Peninah represents the affection for things of the natural. Indeed her name means 'coral, bead or plaything' - the love for earthly things. Of course this can appear to be a great thing but it is nowhere near as valuable as the affection for heavenly things. Elkanah loved both of them but in the story we are told he loved Hannah best, which is only right and true - to love the affections of heaven. So it seems unfair that Hannah was childless, but, again, on a spiritual level children represent the useful things of life and in these early stages of life it is the affection for natural things which appear to give birth to all that is useful; whilst the appearance is that heavenly affection is profitless. Those who are worldly and selfish appear to be the most productive and useful in society whilst the more spiritual minded person seems to do nothing impressive. This can lead to the natural attacking the spiritual, as in Peninah provoking Hannah. 'Look at what I can do. I have made a lot of money, I have a great car, house etc. but you who spend so much time in contemplation what have you achieved?' I'm sure we have all heard people say something along these lines.

We start to understand more about what's more important but, of course, you have to want it too! So it is not worldly things like lots of money, a great car house etc. but being dedicated to a heavenly life that is lasting, and to carry these principles out, here on earth. Therefore when we make up our mind to live for the Lord there is born (as Samuel was born to Hannah) a strength and value that is far greater than worldly natural. Hannah's devotion to God was so great that she promised to give her son up to Him if He would only answer her prayers.

Can you think of times when you have been at loggerheads with a family member or a friend when you were young?

Rivalry of this sort is, of course, common and a natural part of growing up, learning about being fair, about sharing, about being less possessive and coming to understand that, in order to live in the world, we need to be able to share a bit more, we need to be able to get on with people. This is on the natural level. On a deeper level we learn that God loves all people equally and so we should endeavour to do so; that being selfish and worldly doesn't really get us far but caring for people, sharing on a deeper level and using the strength that comes from God to guide us and to lead us on in life will do. This is the difference between Peninah and Hannah. Peninah acts very much on the natural level, teasing Hannah because she doesn't appear to be able to have children, only acting at the level of self, whilst Hannah, as we will see next week, uses the power of prayer to speak to God, to seek what she most desperately wants – a child.

Hannah prays to the Lord**Bible Reading: 1 Samuel 1 v8-20****September 13th**

I love the story of Hannah. Her story is a very powerful one of love, devotion and gratitude. To me she is such a strong and courageous person. It must have been hard to cope with the provocation from her rival, Peninnah, for her husband, Elkanah's attention. It must have been really hard to watch another woman be able to bear children, when you don't appear to be able to have them yourself.

Unless one has suffered the pain of not being able to have children one can't fully understand the anguish which Hannah must have been suffering in her desire to have a child. The maternal instinct can be very strong. Science has definitely done a lot to improve the chances of becoming a mother. Whether this is a

good thing or not is not really what I wish to discuss today; however it is a very touchy subject and one under a lot of debate.

I can only imagine the sheer joy Hannah must have felt at learning she was to have a child. Again we get this clear message, though, that it is through prayer, through talking to God, that our desires can be heard and granted. What especially grabs me in Hannah's story, is that as Hannah prays, she promises to give her son up to the Lord, for all his life. What a brave and courageous thing to do. She had waited such a long time to have a child, she had put up with so much provocation because of her inability to bear a son, that it must have been a huge sacrifice to make. However there is this sense that Hannah does this with great strength and certainty that it is the right thing to do. How great her love for the Lord must have been. She was willing to sacrifice her son to the service of the Lord. What an example. As a result of this promise, God hears her prayer and she bears a child. She calls him, Samuel, which means 'heard of God', for God had heard her prayers. This represents, on an internal level that heavenly affection remains useless until we discover the secret of spiritual life - that is, that all that is spiritual and earthly are from God and to be truly useful we need to dedicate ourselves to Him. It's a bit like, when as a child, we don't have an awareness of spiritual things, but as we grow and learn we become more aware. We start to understand more about what's more important but, of course, you have to want it too! So it is not worldly things like lots of money, a great car, house etc. but being dedicated to a heavenly life that is lasting, and to carry these principles out, here on earth.

Can you think of times in your life when you have prayed to the Lord and have then felt your prayer being answered? *Of course God doesn't always answer us in the way we expect but he answers us in the way he knows we need.*

Therefore when we make up our mind to live for the Lord there is born (as Samuel was born to Hannah) a strength and value that is far greater than worldly natural. Hannah's devotion to God was so great that she promised to give her son up to Him if He would only answer her prayers. So when her prayers were answered how easy it would have been to deny this miracle. She could have thought that the baby, who she had been so desperate for, was hers and hers alone. She could have decided that she had made him and would, therefore, keep him and break her promise to God. What a temptation - one all too easy to fall into - to revert to the natural and worldly way and treat things as her own. But Hannah kept her promise and brings her child to the temple, to Eli, the priest, to be brought up in the service of the Lord. What a sacrifice she made. She set a really good example being willing to give up her son to the Lord's service. She acknowledged that the baby was a gift from God and that only through God's blessing could Samuel have come into her life as he did. So she gives him back to the Lord, just as she had vowed. This is how we should treat the gift of life and its many blessings. This is a story of true gratitude and devotion to God. We need to be willing to make sacrifices in life and to show our gratitude to God. Surely spiritual wealth is far better than material wealth? We can get so caught up in what we want, that we forget how much we have already.

Hannah made a promise to God - what is your promise?

Now read: **1 Samuel 2 v1-10**

Samuel Obeys

Bible Reading: 1 Samuel 3-4v1

September 20th

So Samuel was taken, by Hannah, to live with Eli, the Priest, at Shiloh. Samuel was the last of the Judges. The Judges started, after the Israelites exodus to the land of Canaan; led by Moses and then Joshua. During the time of Joshua the land of Canaan was divided among the tribes of Israel - Judah in the south, representing affection and Israel in the north, representing the intellectual. The Hebrew meaning of a Judge is more likely a leader and God set up these leaders to try and steer the Israelites back to worshipping the Lord. This was a time in which they were influenced by other religions from the surrounding area - worshipping Baal and other gods. For us the time of Judges represents when, in our lives, we fall prey to falsity that we thought we had crushed. We struggle in vain and it is when we then realise our weakness, the Lord can then give us the truth which will help us fight the falsity. We have peace for a while before some other falsity arises in us, and the whole process begins again.

Can you think how this applies to you at times?

So we move on to Samuel, the son of Hannah. The main characteristic of Samuel was OBEDIENCE, which is very evident in the reading. He obediently followed Eli's instruction and obediently follows the Lord's words to Him. In us our childhood states of innocence, trust and obedience are covered up but not lost as we grow older. These are called 'remnants' by Swedenborg. No matter how far we stray from them if we realise the barrenness of our state, as Hannah did, and look to the Lord for new birth, these childhood states can be reborn in us and lead us in our spiritual development.

The Lord calls to Samuel three times and as we know three represents fullness or a full state. The three calls are about the way we listen to the Lord. The level at which we read and listen to what we are receiving. For example we can read the Bible and just see the story at face value – on the natural level a story. This is like that first call. We can engage with our intellect and realise there is something more to it and we can attempt to rationalise what it means with our mind alone. However the third call is when we really hear what the word of the Lord is saying and act it out in our lives.

Responding, as Samuel, did to that final call; we obediently follow the Lord as he would wish us to. Of course this sounds very easy doesn't it? But, in reality, we know it isn't. Sometimes things in our natural, selfish life get in the way of us being truly obedient to the Lord.

What things in your life get in the way of you being obedient to the Lord?

Samuel remained obedient to the Lord throughout his life and stands as a good example to all of us but I doubt any of us can claim to have remained obedient in this way. The realities of this life mean we are all too easily tempted. However the Lord calls us always to come back to his Word, to come to him, hear his Word and follow his ways.

Why not write a prayer to apologise to the Lord for those times when you have gone astray.

So just remember the Lord is always there watching over you, gently calling you to his side. Listen for his call and never forget he will always be there to listen to you.

The call for a King

1 Samuel 8

September 27th

Samuel was promised to Lord by his mother before he was born. He grew to be a religious leader, not a political one. He lived in Ramah and was known throughout the land. Initially the people were ruled by leaders and holy matters were officiated over by priests. Later, in Eli and Samuel, these two offices were combined. Samuel was recognised by the people to be a 'prophet of the Lord,' mentioned in 1 Samuel 3 v20.

As Samuel grew old and had to assign some of his jobs to others the people became restless. They wanted to be like other countries around them. They wanted to have a King - someone who could rule them. Samuel was not impressed by this but the Lord told him to give the people what they wanted.

During this period in history Israel was under threat from many enemies, not least of which was the Philistines (the sea people). In order to deal with this threat the people had various options open to them. They could continue as before with charismatic leaders who were only temporary in nature; they could establish a hereditary judgeship which was the desire of Samuel but his sons, sadly, were not obedient to the Lord and followed other paths. The people of Israel came to Samuel to ask for a king. This made Samuel sad and disappointed. He wasn't really sure that they understood what this would mean for them. He felt this may draw their focus away from the Lord. He called to the Lord for guidance and the Lord instructs him to listen to the people's wishes. He realises that the people do not see the Lord as their king anymore, but that the Lord is prepared to allow them to have their wish, despite the hardships this may bring. So despite Samuel explaining to the people the difficulties they may face - being taxed and having to serve the king and his lavish court; the people opt for a king, so Samuel, ever obedient to the Lord, gives them their wish and anoints Saul as king. Because the story of Samuel doesn't fall in the book of Judges it is easy to forget that he is, actually, a Judge; and also because the kings followed immediately after this, we don't always

remember that Samuel overlaps the time of the kings, even being alive to anoint the second king, King David. This is a sign that change is not sudden in the Word or in life. It may appear sudden but the Lord always prepares and helps us to adjust to a new situation.

So what does this mean for us?

I am sure that we, fundamentally, believe, in some way, that the Bible is the Word of God. We endeavour to understand its deeper meaning and follow our lives accordingly. But we also live in this world and the reality of this means that we sometimes try to find some big principle which we can use to make us feel influential with those around us. For example, I must take care of myself first; this world owes me a living.

Can you think of others?

This is like asking for a king. And because the Lord gives us the right to freedom, to make our own mistakes, we fall astray until we listen to the Lord again and return to worshipping the true King.

The Israelites wanted a king because they wanted someone to judge them, to go out before them, to fight their battles. They wanted to be like the other nations around them who had a king. Thus the Lord allowed them to have a King, stating to Samuel, 'It is not you they reject, but me.' He can't take away the freedom from the Israelites and he can't take away our freedom. However he instructs Samuel to ensure they are aware of the disadvantages of having a king – their families will be divided as some will have to work for the king, the best of their crops will go to the king, they may not like the rules they make and so on.

What do you think this might mean if we stick to OUR principles?

Basically if I remain stubborn and stick to following the principles I choose to follow, then I have to accept that this may mean I have to give up some things. For example if my principle is to take care of me first I am likely to alienate some of my friends if I ignore their problems and don't care about them. This is quite a dramatic example but we all have times when we choose to live our lives based on selfish principles and it is through the disadvantages that we face in these that we can learn a better way to live and we, instead, turn to the Lord as our guiding principle in life.

This must have been a really testing time for Samuel. It must have been a hard thing to have to do - to obey the Lord despite knowing what this could lead to.

What does this mean for us though? How can we take this on board in our lives?

We have things in our life which really test us, which really challenge us. We have to, like Samuel, listen to the Lord and be obedient to His Word, even though this may seem really hard and, though the easy option would be to back away, sometimes we have to follow the more challenging path. But O what joy when we, again follow the true path following the Lord as our guiding light.