

Please read Psalm 46.

At the start of a New Year, we need to remind ourselves that the New [Jerusalem] Church has an optimistic theology. The glass is always half-full! It isn't as difficult as some believe to go to heaven. (HH 528) It is "easy" for the humble people to go to heaven, whether materially rich or poor. (HH 357; Matthew 5:3; Luke 6:20-21) When Europeans were losing their faith because of the devastating Lisbon earthquake of 1755, where thousands died in their pews in collapsing churches, Swedenborg wrote *Divine Providence* (1764) to counter the pessimism, the cynicism, the atheism and the ridicule. When we are in "the stream of Providence", it doesn't matter what is happening outside ourselves, we are at peace inside, because we are aware of the LORD influencing how we think and what we feel. (AC 8478:4) The LORD is continually drawing us to himself. (John 12:32; TCR 652:3; AC 8604:3) Another example is "everyone is predestined to heaven and no one to hell." (DP 322) We have many more optimistic ideas in the spiritual teachings revealed to Swedenborg.

LORD Jesus Christ, at the start of a New Year let us reaffirm our faith in you and your providence. The very hairs of our heads are numbered and each of us is valued by you. (Matthew 10:30; Luke 12:7) In 2023 we will have good times and bad times, success and failure, joy and sorrow. Recall to our minds that the only constant in our lives, is you and you alone. Your loving wisdom continually flows into our hearts and minds, giving us peace, good ideas and determination to serve you and other people. You are helping us to rise to and conquer each challenge. AMEN

"¹² 'Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done. ¹³ I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.'" (Revelation 22:12-13)

All of us have a visual image of the Lord in our minds. (AC 7091:1, 4211:2-3, 4692:2-4; 4733, 7091, 7211e; 10736; HH 86; AE 955:4-5; 109:2; SE 3951; 4222; 4441; 4442; TCR 135:1) Many Christians picture God as Divine triplets, or as a Father, a Son and a dove to represent the Holy Spirit. We picture our LORD as one Divine Human Being. A good example of our LORD as a Divine Human Being is in *True Christianity* paragraph 787, of a supernatural "person in the air or on the sea, whose arms then reach out, inviting us into an embrace." We can picture him as the transformed LORD as he is seen at the Transfiguration. (Matthew 17; Mark 9; Luke 9) All our Christian theological beliefs depend on our beliefs about our LORD. (TCR 163, BE 40, DLW 13; CA 1; AR 839:6 = TCR 113:6; CH 201) But our visual image is not just 'up above': the Alpha, the First, the Beginning, but inside us as well: the Omega, the Last, the End. Our vision of God is of a visible,

accessible, comprehensible being. Just as the LORD is present amongst our thoughts and feelings, we are continually on the look-out for this lingering Divine Presence. Like the LORD we are bringing the purest and the highest principles and values in us, into the everyday world of relatives, friends and acquaintances.

LORD Jesus our anointed King, you are at the beginning of our inspired ideas, and also at the end, when the ideas are acted upon. You arrange the coincidences so that we can help others and be helped by others. (DP 187) Without you we can do nothing. (John 15:5) AMEN

Home Worship for 15th January 2023

by Revd Brian Talbot

Please read Matthew 25:31-46

“In general there is only one doctrine, that is to say, the doctrine of charity, for, as stated in 2228, all things of faith have charity in view.” (AC 2231:2)

In recent translations of the spiritual teachings revealed to Swedenborg, ‘charity’ is rendered (God-inspired) kindness, caring, goodwill and so on. We need to remember that when we arrive in the after-life we will be asked how we have lived, not what church we attended, nor what we believe. (DP 101:3) Underlying all the teaching about the LORD or our explanations or interpretations of the Bible, is the LORD’s love for us and all people. He gave us commandments and decrees for our benefit. (cf. Deuteronomy 10:13) The LORD looks at our heart, (1 Samuel 16:7) because the virtues in our heart are reflected in what we think and feel, say and do. But more than that, it is how the LORD moves us and inspires us, which allows us to worship and serve him and other people. This cycle of creativity and spirituality is reflected in our faith and love “to the Lord from the Lord” and Isaiah 55:10-11.

But being kind to other people is sometimes not that simple. We have to develop common sense and perceptiveness, rather than naivete and sentimentality. We have to be wary of helping wolves in sheep’s clothing. We have to be as wise as snakes. (Matthew 10:16) Our goal is an inspired heart and mind working in partnership. “Religion is all about how we live, and the religious way to live is to do good.” (Life 1)

LORD Jesus the Messiah, thank you for teaching us that you are working in our heart and expressing our religion in our daily life. Thank you for all the words and deeds you encourage us to perform. We enjoy being an extension of your compassion and insightfulness. AMEN

Home Worship for 22nd January 2023

by Revd Brian Talbot

What is the most important teaching or feature of the Church? We're told that it is repentance, (TCR 510) kindness or caring, (AC 1091; 7755; HD 121e) the priesthood, (AE 229:4) or the acknowledgment of the Lord. (AC 10089; 10112) This week we're going to look at repentance.

Repentance is "the pathway to heaven". (DP 114e) The LORD himself taught repentance, as did John the Baptizer, and his disciples. Throughout the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles repentance is preached so that people's failings and shortcomings can be forgiven. In fact, in two verses in Acts it is the LORD who inspires the repentance. (Acts 5:31; 11:18; 2 Timothy 2:25; cf. Romans 8:15; 2 Corinthians 7:10; Galatians 4:6) Christian theologians have come up with all sorts of theories about how we are reconciled to the LORD, and yet seem to neglect the most Biblical and the most obvious: repentance. Not surprisingly to be reconciled to God, we must actively apologize. "Nor can God be reconciled by any other means than by the repentance of man himself." (AE 805:3e) "Nothing washes our sins away except repentance." (TCR 409e; cf. TCR 130) "If we want to be saved, we must confess our sins and repent." (HD 159 = AC 8387) So what is repentance? "Real repentance is examining oneself, recognising and acknowledging one's sins, appealing to the Lord and beginning a new life." (TCR 528)

LORD Jesus our anointed Priest, we apologise to you for all the crazy ideas that have come into our minds, which we have entertained. We are sincerely remorseful for the careless words we have spoken. We are well aware that such general apologies are ineffective compared to acknowledging actual, specific faults that we have. (AC 8390 = HD 162 = TCR 525) We humbly apologise for these specific sins. AMEN

Home Worship for 29th January 2023

by Revd Brian Talbot

Please read Luke 16:19-31. Swedenborg the psychopomp.

"The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side." (Luke 16:22)

On 29th January we usually celebrate Emanuel Swedenborg's birthday. But Sweden at that time were using the old Julian calendar. In other parts of Western Europe we were using the Gregorian calendar, whose date was 8th March.

I write this on the eve of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II's funeral. Quite a few people both within and outside the Royal Family have expressed the wish that the Queen will meet up with her late husband, His Royal Majesty, Prince Phillip. We do in fact meet up with relatives and friends. (AC 1114; HH 427; 494; TCR 120; SE 290; 294; 610-611; 2771; 2909) In the Bible you can find a phrase "gathered

to his people” or “gathered to his fathers”, by which “the ancients meant that he was in the process of going to his parents, blood relatives, and relatives by marriage in the next life.” (AC 3255:1; cf. AC 4619) But angels – and I include family members and friends who have passed on – help us to heaven. “Nothing makes angels happier than giving information to spirits newly arrived from the world and teaching them; serving people on earth, making sure that the evil spirits present with them do not go too far, and inspiring them with good; and reviving the dead as they enter eternal life, eventually taking them to heaven, if the condition of their souls allows it. Angels find more happiness in these activities than could ever be described. In performing them they become images of the Lord. In performing them they love their neighbour more than themselves. This makes heaven.” (AC 454) Swedenborg himself also helped people to heaven. “I made them welcome, and told them many facts they did not know about the spiritual world.” (TCR 12:1; cf. AC 537; 548 (= SE 4104); 4805:2; 5006:2; 5056:1) In his ‘hands-on’ way he teaches people have recently arrived some things about heaven. (5M 7; 12; 19) In some passages he “was led [by the LORD] to say” or “answer”. (AC 5056:2; 5573:2; 6484; 8847; 10738:6)

One of the blessings of being a member of the New [Jerusalem] Church is that we have detailed descriptions of the after-life.

LORD, help us to play our part in helping people to heaven. It is our responsibility and joy to lead people to heaven. As bringers-of-good-news about you and the after-life, we have an obligation to share what we know. Help us not to be afraid. As angels-in-training we love sharing what we believe with other people. AMEN.

February 2023 - Home Worship

by Revd D Gaffney

Theme for this month: Avoiding hypocrisy; being proactive in doing good and rejecting its opposites (evil).

“When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it. It shall be for the sojourner (refugees, exiles etc), the fatherless, and the widow, that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.”

(Deuteronomy 24:19)

Note 1: The above quote embodies the general *spirit* of the theme for this month.

Note 2: For those who want to delve deeper and refer to the Writings of Swedenborg which are referenced in the texts, please go to “New Christian Bible Study” web site on:

<https://newchristianbiblestudy.org> and click on ‘Theology.’

Please read: Matthew Chapter 5 verse 13 - 20.

Week 1 - You are the salt of the earth!

“You are the salt of the earth: but if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot by men.” (Matt 5:13)

Address: Until I began to read Swedenborg, this passage had always been a bit of a puzzle to me. Salt makes food tasty and agreeable; so what is the connection of it with the spiritual life? What human quality is saltiness? It seems to me that it is a person’s heartfelt affection and therefore determination to read the word of God and do what it tells us to do. So in simple terms, salt seems to be a desire or longing to do good from the Word in order to lead people to heaven. In a sense, it is ‘*genuineness*’. When it is said, “Those people are the salt of the earth” it means that they are *genuine* in their desire to do good. They are prepared to let the Lord’s truths guide their living. They are the salt of the earth. However not all people across the ages have been genuine about their apparent love of goodness and truth, and there are many examples of hypocrisy in the Word. For example when Jesus calls the scribes and Pharisees of the church of *His day* hypocrites:

“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men’s bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.” (Matt 23:27-28)

Those people who genuinely Love the Lord and their neighbour as themselves are the salt of the earth and those of us who love themselves and worldly things but pretend to love the Lord and the neighbour are the hypocrites. All of us embody at least a modicum of hypocrisy.

In our opening quotation, Jesus is here addressing those who are professing to be members of the church, warning them of the dangers of becoming hypocritical. The genuine people amongst them are the ‘salt’ of the church because ‘earth’ in our quotation means the church on earth. They were in possession of the truths of the church; which at that time was the Word of the Old Testament, and they intended to keep them close to their hearts. They had also seen and heard the Messiah who was and is His Word personified.

People who have an affection for the Word of God are the salt of the earth. It is affection which motivates us to do anything, so if an affection for good is not present in a person then there are no *genuine* good works, no altruism, just religion for the sake and advantages of self interest. The salt has therefore lost its savour.

A Prayer : Dear Lord Jesus, Thank you for your Word that leads us to be loving, wise and useful people. Help us to remain salty so we can do Your Will on Earth. Amen

For further reading from the Writings of The New Church: Swedenborg, Arcana Caelestia #9207

Week 2 - You are the Light of the world

“¹⁴You are the light of the world. A city located on a hill can't be hidden. ¹⁵Neither do you light a lamp, and put it under a bushel, but on a stand; and it shines to all who are in the house.” (Matt 5:14-15)

Address: Jesus called himself the light of the world, and here he is telling His disciples that they also are the light of the world. This may have seemed perhaps to His disciples to be a compliment and also a challenge; as it is to us.

We draw our light from Jesus and pass it on. Any light which we pass on is from the Lord ‘working in us and through us’. We have no light of our own.

A hill signifies the good we do from a charitable heart and the city on top of it with its walls and streets and buildings and structures signify teachings which we derive from God’s Word. When we want to do good, we work out from the Word how to do it, it is our guiding light.

The city on top of the hill which cannot be hidden is a target for the ‘spotlight’ shone on the ways of life which Christians attract the moment they admit to being followers of Jesus. If it is good, it shows up “in a good light,” and if it is bad it shows up “in a bad light.” Also, a life seen in a ‘good light’ can prick peoples’ consciences and cause annoyance.

The lamps mentioned in the passage looked a bit like gravy boats, and the houses were dark inside with a minimum of windows. As there were no matches in those days, fire needed to be preserved, and it seems that householders, when they went out, covered their lamps with a grain container or measure which in our quotation is called a bushel. It was probably an earthenware pot which had a volume of about 32 litres or roughly a cubic foot. But there is perhaps a double meaning to this. A vessel or cup also represents the human mind or spirit as a container of all things good and true that the Lord can give us, hence the famous phrase, “My cup runneth over” in Psalm 23. Here the psalmist is talking about being filled to overflowing and being overwhelmed by goodness, truth and blessings from the Lord. To turn the ‘cup’ over, as with the upturned bushel, could represent a rejection of those blessing because of the fear of reprisals as a result of shining abroad the Lord’s light. The Lord asks us as Christians not to put *our* lamp under a bushel, but on a stand so that it can light up the whole house. He is talking about letting His light shine through us by way of our lives and actions as a witness to His goodness and truth. We sometimes do indeed put the Lord ‘under a bushel’; but he’s still there!

Sometimes it can be very hard to give Christian witness to the world. We are afraid of persecution, or of presenting a bad example and doing the good Lord an injustice, getting into conversations about issues in which Christian faith seems to clash with the ways of the world, and we feel that our eloquence is simply not up to the task. But I wonder, on the positive side, it seems that all this can be like a kind of gymnasium where we can develop our spiritual fitness

and become wiser. When we speak the Lord's Words and endeavour to act in his ways, we take risks but we may also help save ourselves or someone else in this life to eternal life. So, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven." (Matt 5:16)

A Prayer: Dear Lord, When things seem tough, give us the wisdom and strength to turn to you. When our path seems dark help us to search for your light and guidance. Thank you for never leaving us. Amen

For further reading from the Writings of The New Church: Swedenborg, Apocalypse Explained, #223/18 and Apocalypse Explained, AE #405/32

Week 3 - Shine your Light

"Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven." (Matt 5 verse 16)

Address: When the Lord says: "*Let your light so shine before men ...*" He does not mean showing off like the 'hypocrites' do: "*For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. Truly I tell you, they already have their full reward*" (Matt 6:5). When they prayed on street corners their primary objective was to be seen doing it, and this over and above their desire to communicate with the Lord. Because of this, I would speculate that the Lord did indeed hear them, but He was not *with* them. Unless we approach Him worthily, He is indeed present but there is no reciprocal 'conjunction'; no *con-joining with Him*.

What the Lord actually means is that we should do *genuine* good works for the love of God and the neighbour. So we do good not to be seen doing it, but because it is the Lord's will that we should do it. The Light within illuminates the Word and gives us knowledge of the works which must be done; we must practise these but *genuinely*; not to do so is useless for our own and other's regeneration. If we do good work from obedience to the Lord; over time this becomes a love.

When we read the Lord's word in humility, we have his light within us. What the New Church calls regeneration is to co-operate with the Lord's guidance and to change the affections of our wills from being self-centred and worldly into a love of God and our neighbour. Also, to love our neighbour means that we have their **eternal** life primarily at the forefront of our minds. The Lord is asking us to set an example but that we should do it with humility.

The important thing for us all is to start the journey and persevere, keeping careful watch over our motives and consciences. We usually know when we are lapsing into dangerous territory. There are constant temptations for those who, with God's help, are endeavouring to live according to the light (Word) and to regenerate. A life like this, is not cultivated for the purpose of impressing our fellows, but good works coming from genuine intentions cannot help being seen by them. Our primary object should be to help others in whatever ways we can; giving freely **but wisely**, and using and developing our God-given potentials, skills and qualities; becoming wiser in the process. *Social justice* is essential but it must have **spiritual justice*** at the heart of it. It is hoped that our charity and sincerity may move ourselves and others to glorify the Lord, "*For in Him we live, and move, and have our being.*" (Acts 17:28) In such ways, our hope is that we inspire others to do likewise. Therefore may we, in all we think, and say, and do, give God the glory.

A Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus, please help us always to be aware of the dangers of crossing that fine line between loving you and our neighbour and loving ourselves and worldly things. Amen

Further reading from the Writings of The New Church: Swedenborg, Apocalypse Explained, #254/3. *True Christian Religion #428

Week 4 - Our Lord's guidance will never pass away.

"The Lord said to His disciples: "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil them. For truthfully I say unto you, till heaven and earth pass away, not one jot or one tittle shall pass from the law, until all is fulfilled." (Matt 5:17 & 18)

Address: Jesus also said of the two great commandments that we should love God, and love our neighbour as ourselves that; *"On these two commandments hangs all the law and the prophets."*(Matt 22:40).

It is a common misconception amongst many Christians that it is faith 'alone' which save us. Faith that Jesus came and died for us and took our 'sins' upon Himself so that all we have to do is believe in Him and we are automatically heaven bound. We do not need to resist temptations and do good works from charitable hearts. But the Lord says, *"He that does my commandments, it is he that loves me."*(Jn 14:21). The two great commandments describe in **general** terms the purpose of life and religion, but we still need to know **how** to Love the Lord and the neighbour. So we need **specific** guidelines as to how to do it. These specifics are given in the Law and the Prophets. "The Law and the Prophets" effectively means the whole of the Word. So when the Lord tells us that we must love Him and our neighbours; it is the whole Word which tell us **how** to do it, we cannot rely on our feelings, and the best place to begin is with the Ten Commandments. The Lord tells us that every detail (jot and tittle) in the Word is there for a reason; nothing is missing and nothing is superfluous. The Lord's Word is perfect. Great pains have been taken by translators and copiers of the Word over the millennia to ensure that nothing has been added or lost. However, in my view, some more recent translations are less rigorous than others.

Throughout the Old Testament the Lord's coming was prophesied, in many places. And many things are said about the Lord as to what he would do and how he would act when he did come upon the earth, and these things actually did come to pass. Upon the knowledge which those of Jesus' time already had from the Old Testament Word as to how we should live our lives, the Lord came and superimposed upon this, His great examples of grace and mercy and love and self sacrifice so that we would have a full picture of the God we are following, and in our own finite way try to be like Him. And since the Lord's ascension, His Holy Spirit can now flow into everyone who faithfully follows Him, enabling us to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of His Word in relation to our lives.

The Word tells us that we are **all** without exception fallen people to some degree or another, we need the Law and the Prophets to direct us to endeavour to live heavenly lives in this world. Heaven is God's House and everyone who lives there; angels, and good spirits believe in God; and in differing degrees love Him, because He demonstrated that He was a God of Love and was lovable. In order to do so, we need to make a personal connection with the Lord in this life, and accept that we are dependent on His instruction so that we may resist temptations and

do good works and thus regenerate our fallen condition. This connection with the Lord and resistance of temptations are identified by Baptism and the Holy Supper. For this reason, Baptism and the Holy Supper are the only two official sacraments of the New Church. We will never reach 'perfection' because this improvement process, this 'conjunction' with the Lord continues in heaven to eternity. But we need to make a start in this world by accepting that the Word is from the Lord and that we need it to reform our understanding of things.**

The phrase "*Till all be fulfilled*" has been used by many Christians in the past to say that the Lord's advent itself **was** that fulfilment and therefore the Law (in the Old Testament) has already been fulfilled in its entirety so that there was no need to obey it any more. This also is untrue, as the Lord said it himself *after* His advent and this is in fact a solemn declaration by the Lord of the enduring nature of the Law from now to eternity. Because we regenerate to eternity the Law and the Prophets are never completely fulfilled in us which means that our joy in heaven continually increases.

Finally, it has been said that the Lord Jesus Christ did not write the Old Testament and therefore it doesn't count for Christians. This is a misconception connected to a *tri-personal* understanding of the Trinity as three separate Gods. But The Lord Himself did write the Old Testament when he was Jehovah before He put on the garment of a human body from Mary and was born as Jesus Christ on earth. From all this, I hope I have made a case that it is imperative to endeavour in all sincerity and from a genuine heart of charity to follow the Lord's teachings in the Law and the Prophets, to resist evils as offences (sins) against God, and to do good works. Amen

A Prayer: Dear Lord Thank you that you came to dwell among us and that you left us a pattern of how to live. Thank you for your Word, the Old and New Testament and your Holy Spirit to guide us. Amen

Further Reading from the Writings of The New Church: Swedenborg, Arcana Caelestia, 2116(3), **Swedenborg, The True Christian Religion, #571

A series for Home Worship in March 2023 by Alan Misson Sunday 5th March

Ask, and it will be given to you

Suggested Readings: Luke 11:1-13; Mark 11:24; John 15:7; John 16:23-24; Matthew 6:8

And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.

All of the above readings, with the exception of Matthew 6:8, seem to impress on us the need to ask the Lord for what we need. And so we may be left with a range of questions.

- If the Lord knows what I need why do I have to ask?
- If I do ask, what can I ask for and what can I not ask for?
- In what way will the Lord give me what I ask for?

Fundamentally, these sorts of questions, and others we might well have, are all about the real purpose and nature of private prayer to the Lord, so let's consider them in turn.

If the Lord knows what I need why do I have to ask? We need to start I think by recalling that the Lord loves each one of us all unconditionally and wants to ensure our eternal happiness and he is in the position to give us everything we need to support our spiritual progression closer and closer to him. But, and it is a big but, what we receive from the Lord or seem to be given depends on us – on our openness to him and his way of life and on our desire to put away the selfish things that might block the full flow of his life and love into our lives. In asking the Lord we begin the process of acknowledging his presence in our lives as the source of all that is good and true. Asking the Lord opens the way.

If I do ask, what can I ask for and what can I not ask for? Well of course we can ask for anything but should we expect a response regardless of what we ask for? To begin to answer this I think we need to listen carefully to these words of Jesus from John 14 - *If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.* Now it is possible to interpret these words as a simple instruction that our prayers should be literally expressed as being in the name of Jesus Christ. But I imagine we all recognise that names in the Word represent the essential character of a person. Thus the Lord's name means his essential qualities of love and wisdom and all that flows from these. So when we ask the Lord for anything in his name we need to ask for those things that stem or flow from his love and wisdom and to do so in the spirit of trying to live a life of love and faith and concern for others. And because what we ask for flows in some way from the Lord's love and wisdom we are asking for things that affect the way we feel in our hearts, the way we think in our heads, and the way we put these feelings and thoughts into action in our lives.

In what way will the Lord give me what I ask for? In Arcana Caelestia 2535 Swedenborg describes the answering of prayer as a kind of inflow of perception and an opening up to God and this varies according to the person's state and what he prays for. Personal prayer to the Lord Jesus Christ can open heaven to us, bring us closer to him and the heavenly way of life and prepare us to be better receivers of the gifts he wishes to provide us. We ask with our hearts to be filled with the Lord's love and goodness in order that we can be changed.

Ask, and it will be given to you.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, we acknowledge that so often what we feel and what we love is dominated by our own needs and our own wants - and what we think and what we believe is dictated by our own ideas and our own convictions. We know Lord that if we remain wrapped up in our own needs and ideas we will be cold and dark inside and ultimately spiritually dead. Lord help us to break free from the bonds of self-interest and to recognise the power of your goodness and truth to transform our lives so that our focus becomes the needs and ideas of others and not ourselves. And Lord, when you cause us to change for the better, remind us that, of ourselves, we can do nothing good and true, and that really it is your life in us that is working for the benefit of others. *Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.*

A series for Home Worship in March 2023 by Alan Misson Sunday 12th March

Seek, and you will find

Suggested Readings: Luke 11:1-13; Matthew 6:31-33; Psalm 27:4; Jeremiah 29:13; Mark 16:6

And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.

Jesus sometimes used very simple words when talking to the disciples and the crowds of people he met. And this is a typical example – *seek, and you will find*. In just five words he presents something that seems at first very simple and straightforward and yet it contains great depth of meaning. Like all divine revelation its real meaning can only come to each one of us as we try to apply it to life.

We seek all sorts of things in life. When young we seek things to learn and do that we find interesting and these may lead later to a job, career or life-long hobby. As we get older we may seek a partner for life and together seek a home and a place to put down roots. If we are blessed with children we may seek the best schools for them. And all the time we probably seek happiness and contentment. In later life we may seek something of a rest from years of hard work or maybe something completely new to do.

Jesus speaks to us about all these things in Matthew chapter 6 in the section about not being anxious which ends with the words: *But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.* Here we find an expansion of the original words, with Jesus adding that what we should seek first is his kingdom and his righteousness. But when we seek for the Lord and his kingdom it is possible, so to speak, to look in the wrong place and to look for the wrong thing because we have misunderstood in some way what the Lord wants us to hear. This is exemplified by the quotation from Mark 16:6 concerning the resurrection: *Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here.* The disciples were looking in the wrong place for essentially the wrong person. They came on Easter Sunday morning seeking the body of Jesus of Nazareth who had been crucified and they could not find him. They were looking for the man Jesus who had lived in Nazareth and who was now dead. They should have been seeking the risen Lord Jesus Christ in his Divine Humanity!

Seeking is something we do with our understanding and what we can find is enlightenment – light from the Lord that shows us more clearly how we should live. The Writings for the New Church make it very clear that our motive is all important. If we seek with the wrong purpose we will never find anything, we will never receive enlightenment on our lives. Consider these words from Arcana Caelestia 10511:2 – *But anyone at all who supposes that he has enlightenment is mistaken if he does not love to know truth for its own sake and for the sake of leading a good life, thus if he does not love Divine Truth for life's sake.*

We are to seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness for the purpose of applying the truth we find to our lives and not for any other reason! And we need to do this seeking with love as we are reminded in Jeremiah 29:13 – *You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.* Our heart needs to be in the right place when we seek the Lord. We need to have affection and love for what is true because we know it will lead to good in our lives – and we will then be changed by it. We seek with our understanding to know the truth that will lead to greater wisdom in loving and serving others and thus bring personal salvation.

Seek, and you will find.

Prayer

Lord we bring before you: those who are suffering from physical and mental illnesses; those dragged down by emotional and spiritual disorders.

Lord we bring before you: those who are receiving care in hospitals, and those recovering from operations; those haunted with fears, or distressed in pain.

Lord we bring before you: those who are confined to their homes or in nursing homes; those who are disabled and dependent on the care of others.

Lord, you know we long to see your healing and renewing strength in those for whom we pray. May we and all those called to care for them be ever more perfect channels of your love and peace.

A series for Home Worship in March 2023 by Alan Misson Sunday 19th March

Knock, and it will be opened to you.

Suggested Readings: Luke 11:1-13; Revelation 3:8,20; Luke 13:22-30

And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.

I want to start our consideration of 'knocking and opening' by referring to Luke 13:25 – *When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, open to us,' then he will answer you, 'I do not know where you come from.'* This parable of Jesus is clearly describing a possible relationship we might have with the Lord in which he is able to say to us *'I do not know where you come from'*. How could the Lord possibly say to anyone that he doesn't know them? Surely this is contrary to the Lord's unconditional love for everyone!

Remember Jesus' words in John 14 - *If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.* The whole of John 14 is fundamentally about love and how we can know the love that is the very being of God through its manifestation in the life of Jesus. The Lord always knows us and offers his love to us but it can appear that we are unknown to him when we fail to use his love in our lives to care and support others. Our failure to live a life of love in action makes us unknown when we knock on the Lord's door. Swedenborg makes this comment in Arcana Caelestia 1038: *The Lord is indeed present with each individual, but that presence is closer or more remote, all depending on how near the person is to love or distant from it.*

So an important aspect of 'knocking and opening' is the need to live a life of love in action. But how does this link with 'knocking'? Have you ever watched the state opening of parliament when Black Rod summons the House of Commons to attend the Sovereign's speech in the House of Lords by knocking on the closed door three times with his staff before they are opened. We rarely knock on doors with such strength and determination because we usually ring the doorbell instead. Yet there are times when we may have had to knock or bang hard on a door to get the attention of the person the other side. Knocking is a very physical action. Whereas we ask with our hearts, and we seek with our understanding, we knock with our life. Yet the Word makes it clear that we can knock in vain and the door will remain closed and we will be unknown, if our life is centred on ourselves. But knock with a life that is dedicated to loving and caring for others more than ourselves and the door will be opened.

This leaves us with the question of what is being 'opened'. *Behold, I stand at the door and knock.* In this case the Lord is knocking on the highest or innermost door of our being with his life and love and he wants us to open that door and allow his love and goodness to permeate right down to the most external aspects of our daily life. We open that door by living a life of charity and by turning our back on all the wrong we feel, think or do or, as the Writings put it, – by shunning evils as sins. And we do all this as if of ourselves but all the time acknowledging that it is the Lord's power working in us that really opens the door. We knock with a life transformed by using the Lord's love and goodness in loving and caring for others.

When we pray, our prayers are not to induce God to give, but rather to fit us to receive. And to fit us to receive the gifts of God, all our faculties must be brought into activity. We must ask with our heart, seek with our understanding, knock with our life.

Knock, and it will be opened to you.

Prayer

This week may have brought to some of us joy and relief, healing and health, well-being and peace.

To some it may have brought anxiety, worry and stress, and sickness of body and mind.

To some it may have been an ordinary, common, routine time.

We join together in worship today with different experiences, different needs but we know that you Lord can meet and bless us, each one. Lord, enable us by your guidance and strength to share each other's joys and to support one another in our sadness. In your name we meet together.

A series for Home Worship in March 2023 by Alan Misson Sunday 26th March

Bethany before the Passover

Suggested Readings: Exodus 12:1-13; John 12:1-11

Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany ...

Bethany is east of Jerusalem by some 2 miles, close to the Mount of Olives. It is the last place as you leave Jerusalem, the first place when you arrive. For Jesus the home of Lazarus, Martha and Mary was a refuge, a place of peace and rest. It is six days before the Passover and seven days before the Crucifixion. It is going to be a time of great trial and temptation as our Lord's life on earth comes to a climatic close. But now it is time for a peaceful rest at his friends' home in Bethany. So who is there? Martha, Mary, Lazarus, Jesus and Judas Iscariot are certainly present, but we can assume that some or all of the other disciples were also there so I think we can picture this dinner given in Jesus honour as quite a reception.

Jesus is a very welcome guest and after eating, Mary anoints his feet with an expensive perfume. When Judas objects to the cost and says the money should have been spent on the poor Jesus rebukes him "*For the poor you always have with you.*" Lazarus seems to play no special part in this story and yet he has recently been restored to life by Jesus. No doubt the conversation around the table went over the details of how Jesus had called him out of the tomb, from death to life. Martha is there almost in the background, busying herself with all the practical arrangements for the dinner and so concerned to get the basics right, to make sure Jesus' stay is comfortable. Mary is very much at the heart of this story. It was a custom to wash a visitor's feet when they entered a house but Mary goes so much further than this. She takes a large quantity of very expensive perfume, pours it on Jesus' feet and then wipes them with her hair. Nothing is too good for Jesus. Mary's love is deep and full of concern. Judas stands out in this account as reacting strongly to this apparent waste. He looked after the disciples' money and as it says in the gospel "*he used to help himself to what was put in it*". Poor Judas. He argues that the money should have been spent on the poor but really he wanted it for himself.

As with all passages in scripture it treats not just of historical events, however important they might be, but also of much deeper things in the Lord's life and also in ours. This picture of a home in Bethany where the Lord is received as a guest is also a picture of our minds when we receive the Lord into our lives and know that he will bring us to new life. The Lord is wanting to be a guest all the time. "*Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.*"

Martha, Mary, Lazarus, Judas and the other disciples are like the different thoughts and affections we have which are present when the Lord is with us. There is Martha - our need to be of practical service to others, concerning ourselves with their needs and not our own. There is Mary - our deep love for the Lord and his teachings as they affect even the most basic things of our lives. There is Lazarus - our faith which needs to be really alive and aware of the Lord's saving power and presence. And there is Judas - our selfishness which although very much in evidence still does not prevent the Lord being received. Finally, there are the other disciples - all the other characteristics we have which help us follow the Lord in different ways.

But what did Jesus say? *For the poor you always have with you.* How does this fit in? No matter how close we get to the Lord there will still be in our minds ideas and motives and desires that are spiritually poor and which we will need to feed with goodness and truth if we are to grow further. It is a clear reminder that however much we grow in goodness there will still be bad aspects of our character that need attention.

Prayer

Dear Lord, You have given us a world of beauty, and we have spoilt it. A world to feed us, and so many go hungry. A world of riches, and we are unwilling to share. A world to care for, and we think only of ourselves. Forgive us, gracious Lord, for those times your heart is saddened by our selfishness. For those times we have no thought for others, no cares but ours. Enable us to see this world anew as a gift from you, to be shared and nurtured, and those who live upon it to be loved and cared for. We ask this that your name may be glorified, through the beauty of this world, and the service of our lives.