



Home Worship



The General Conference of the New Church

Home Worship for April 2024

By Revd Brian Talbot

Week 1

Reading from the Word: Luke 24:13-35

As the week following Easter Day, it's traditional to look at least one of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances, such as Jesus appearing to the two disciples on the Road to Emmaus. The detail that jumped out at me this time was: "So he went in to stay with them." (Luke 24:29)

The idea of the LORD lingering or tarrying is very important and powerful to me at the moment. I'm talking of experiencing God as a Divine Human Person, a lingering Presence. One who stays with me. In the Gospel of John, our LORD Jesus remains or dwells with us. I and others continue to hear his voice inside our heads. Isaiah would write: "And when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it.'" (Isaiah 30:21)

We begin picturing Jesus from looking at pictures in our Children's Bible. But it is also our ability to picture a Divinely Human Being possibly surrounded with rays of light, such as our LORD at the Transfiguration. Swedenborg wrote: "Establishing contact with a God we can see is like making eye contact with a person in the air or on the sea, whose arms then reach out, inviting us into an embrace."

We worship a visible, audible, accessible Divine Human being who stays and remains with us.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank you for continually working hard to communicate with us. There are times when we are too preoccupied with our routines and our challenges, that you can only squeeze the start of a good idea into our heads. At such times our heart is barely open to receiving courage, patience and love from you. However there are times when you stay with us, because we're more receptive. We know you are remaining with us, because a plan is unfolding step-by-step in our minds. We're energised by your Presence and we thank you for it. AMEN.

Further Readings: Matthew 17:1ff.; Mark 9:2ff.; Luke 9:28ff.; Swedenborg *True Christianity* 296; 787:1e



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Week 2

Reading from the Word: John 20:19-29

“Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”” (John 20:29)

“²⁹ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ ³⁰ He said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’ ³¹ He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’ ” (Luke 16:29-31)

What is the basis of our faith? For the disciple Thomas, he had to see and touch the LORD to believe he was alive. He didn’t believe his comrades when they told him that Jesus had risen. I have never seen the Jesus of the first century. Maybe I’ve missed out? I haven’t seen him but yet believe in him. Part of our faith is to trust. Swedenborg wrote: “People of today ought to believe what they do not see, as is also clear from the Lord’s words to Thomas”. I can see some truth in that. But part of my faith is to believe because of what I have seen. I have seen people moved and inspired by God to show great acts of kindness, helpfulness and selflessness. It’s those people I identify with. In Swedenborgian terms we have felt his Divine Human, or lingering Presence, in our lives. We have experienced the partnership or union with him, that makes us better people, that gives us brilliant ideas, and new and improved ways of looking at people and situations. We have seen this partnership or union with other people, and it fills us with immense joy when we see other people being brilliantly creative and wise.

I can understand why Swedenborg is worried that miracles or signs force us to believe in God, and because of the compulsion we are likely to dismiss the miracle over time. But he also points out that if we are reformed in our inner self, we can be changed for the better outwardly because of miracles. I suppose it is about being led by the LORD. As we are guided to examine ourselves and apologise for our waywardness, we can love authenticity, integrity and sincerity more, and want to put them into practice.

Our faith can come from outside ourselves from parents, teachers, ministers and so on. Swedenborg would call this “historical faith”. The danger with it is that it is just a series of memories. A deeper faith comes from inside us. When we have “an affection for truth for the sake of true service and for life's sake”, we can be enlightened by the LORD from within, as we read our Bibles. It is this inner way, which allows us to “be led to love God and to believe in Him”. Inspiring messages and moving lessons from the Bible, as well as the teachings of the Church, and “looking to the Lord”, remove the failings and shortcomings that reside within us. Part of the deeper faith is recognising what is hopeful, encouraging and insightful from within. I suppose it’s an internal GPS or SatNav which identifies what is of God and what is not. Swedenborg would call it conscience or heaven inside us.



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Prayer

LORD Jesus Christ, we thank you for our faith. We thank you for the Christian, religious or spiritual heritage, we received from our parents, Ministers, Sunday School teachers, and significant others. We thank you for the inspiring way they embodied your compassion and insightfulness. We thank you for their love of the Bible, their love for you and their love for serving others. Help us to use their influence on us to be kind and helpful to others.

LORD Jesus, you are the Divine Human, the lingering Presence in our lives. You know us better than we do ourselves. You can guide us and lead us intimately and personally, by drawing on our memories, our talents, and our life experiences. You and your angels can gently nudge us away from our desire to control others or situations. The still, small voice inside us quietly offers us alternative viewpoints of other people, instead of repeating the same limited biases and presuppositions. AMEN.

Further reading: Swedenborg *Arcana Caelestia (Secrets of Heaven)* 5508:5; 8078:4; *Apocalypse Explained* 1136:6; 1155:3; *Love in Marriage* 432:1; Rev Brian Keith "Seeing the Lord" *New Church Life* 1990:244-252, 314-319, 366-369



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Week 3 St George's Day

Reading from the Bible: Psalm 74:12-23

We know little about St George. Our crusaders probably brought back knowledge of him from the Holy Land. He was popular amongst soldiers, as he represented honour, bravery and gallantry.

He was born in what is modern-day Turkey in the 3rd century AD. His parents were Christians. His mother was Palestinian, so moved with her son back to Palestine after the death of his father. He became a Roman soldier. He protested against the persecution of Christians in about 303 AD and resigned his commission as a Tribune. He was imprisoned and tortured, but stayed true to his faith. He was beheaded in Palestine on 23rd April. The Council of Oxford in 1222 named 23rd April as St George's Day. English Crusaders claimed that St George appeared in a vision and led them into battle.

George is famous for rescuing a maiden from a dragon, but the earliest mention of this is from the 12th century. I would suggest that this is a myth. However, the LORD slays sea monsters in Psalm 74.

We have monsters inside us. Have you heard of the "green-eyed monster"? Maybe it means envy or jealousy. Some scholars trace it back to William Shakespeare. We can all be "Jekyll and Hydes". In the words of the hymn *When a knight won his spurs*, we all have to fight against "the dragons of anger, the ogres of greed" and escape "from the castle of darkness". We get the 'wrong end of the stick', stew on it (to mix my metaphors) and come out with all sorts of unreasonable and crazy notions.

We all need the LORD's help in fighting our illusions and delusions, especially the ones that fester and grow, and become even more fearsome. We can all mis-hear, mis-see, and mis-interpret what is happening to us. We can explain and justify what is happening using all sorts of bizarre and silly ideas. The more our monsters grow, the more we repeat the same arguments, or dismiss being conciliatory or kind.

In the first chapter of Mark's gospel, we are reminded that we can be tempted, that wild beasts are around us, and so are the angels. We need to hear about heroes so that the LORD can arouse the hero inside us. We can say 'no' to unkindness and cruelty. We can calmly recognise the ideas which are from the LORD in our minds, and give them a higher priority than the selfishness, ignorance and hate inside us. We can focus on constructive, optimistic, collaborative ideas in us, while we look compassionately at ideas that we've dismissed as inferior or hurtful:



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Prayer

Loving LORD, during times of darkness and inner crises, we feel surrounded by monsters, that we have created. Our jealousy, or greed, or impatience, takes on a lives of their own, and become monsters in need of taming. At such times we need to admit, that we've allowed our earthly self to be in control. LORD, help us to wake up our angelic self, the hero in us, to re-prioritise our thoughts and feelings, so that they align more with yours. AMEN.



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Week 4 “Greater things”

“⁵⁰ Jesus answered, ‘Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.’ ⁵¹ And he said to him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.’” (John 1:50-51)

“¹² Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³ I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴ If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.” (John 14:12-14)

Our LORD Jesus’ works were done in 1st century Palestine. Whatever works we do are done through us by the LORD. The Divine Vine works through us branches, to produce fruit that will last. (John 15:4-5,7-8, 16) In the Faith of the New Church we read: “Good actions are to be done, because they are of God and from God.” Possibly they are greater in that we do them in our sphere of influence, amongst our family, friends and acquaintances. I can look back through my years as a Minister and point to moments when I was given the right words to say. They were far wiser than I’m usually capable of. I’m sure you can also think of such times in your own life. I think when you say something inspired and moving to someone from the LORD, this creates eternal memories, and maybe that’s an example of “greater works”.

I have never made blind people see, or deaf people hear, or raised the dead. I knew New-Church people who felt that they were given gifts of healing, and used them to heal others. If I were a Spiritualist, or a Christian Scientist, or an Assemblies of God Christian, or a charismatic Christian, I could claim various healings. As exciting and interesting as these are, they’re temporal. I don’t doubt for one minute that physical healings are possible, but I wonder whether to do works greater than Jesus, they need to be eternal? They need to touch people’s souls deeply. Measuring what is eternal is almost impossible. As the Apostle Paul said we all have different gifts, and we can’t all be healers, and we have different specialities in the Body of Christ.

I think the key message is how are we being led by the LORD. Are we being asked to review one of our attitudes or alter one of our perspectives slightly? Are we willing to let it go for something better? Are we willing to act on the hints, nudges and impulses, which we identify as coming from the LORD working at our level? Are we willing to become kinder, more compassionate, more insightful?



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Prayer

Dear LORD Jesus, we acknowledge that of ourselves, we cannot perform good deeds. If we exercise our sense of autonomy, we have a distorted view of ourselves. We desire to have an angelic selfhood, one inspired and energised by you. It is this angelic, willing dependence on your ideas and impulses, that move us to reach out to others. When we are in an angelic frame of mind, we are capable of recognising opportunities, which you present us with. When we in a heavenly mood, we can receive your love and wisdom, and use them to bless the lives of others. You are the Vine and we are the branches. You produce good fruit through us. Thank you. AMEN.



Home Worship for May 2024

Revd Becky Jarratt

5th May “Then Jacob kissed Rachel and began to weep aloud.”

Read Genesis 29-30:22

Picture the story: a man has had to flee from his family, has been on a long journey with a mind-blowing revelation in the middle, and now arrives at his destination to find a truly beautiful woman that he wants to marry.

Jacob's uncle agrees that he can marry his daughter Rachel if Jacob works for him for seven years. However, instead of marrying Rachel after the time is up, Jacob finds himself married to her older sister, Leah. Jacob then has to agree to work for Laban for a further seven years to be able to have Rachel as his wife.

How would you feel in this situation? Jacob had undoubtedly been tricked. Not only was he married to a woman he did not love, he had to stay and work for seven years more. Jacob was unable, or unwilling to love Leah, so then he had a further blow when Leah conceived and yet Rachel did not. It must have felt like a huge punishment to Jacob.

What lessons do we need to learn before we are able to see what is really good for us? Rachel was the ideal, Jacob's beautiful dream, and it is never easy to make the dream reality. There were many steps he needed to undertake before marrying Rachel and then before her bearing him children. When we can see the dream before us, we are willing to do the hard work that is required to reach it. Leah represented practical truths, and they help us to make small steps towards that wonderful end point. Jacob needed to learn to love those truths before the Lord allowed Rachel to become pregnant.

Up until the point in his life that Jacob met Rachel, he had been a selfish man and had focussed on what he could get out of every situation. This was a pivotal moment: he began to change, and because he loved her he was willing to work for seven years before being allowed to marry her.

Have you had a moment where your viewpoint completely changed? In our early lives, we are basically selfish beings, with desires for a perfect life through achieving all we want that we think will make us happy. Even when we do good things, we want them to be noticed and for people to appreciate that it was us who did them.

The well that Jacob came to, represents the Lord's Word, but the well was covered by a huge stone. This is like our resistance to following the Lord's teachings because we feel they are not in our best interests, and are certainly not easy to do. But because the beauty of Rachel was revealed to him, he was able to move this stone and see the interior contents of the Lord's Word. The path to achieving our dreams is not smooth, and it takes courage to learn the lessons provided for us on the way. But when we are willing to do so, we will find beauty and peace when we reach our destination.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help us to view the opportunities you give us to learn as a blessing. Amen



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12th May “Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?”

Read Genesis 37

In Genesis 37 we read that Joseph’s father loved him above all of his other sons. We know that this was because Joseph was the first son of Rachel, the wife that Jacob truly loved and had spent fourteen years working for. Jacob took the unwise step of showing his love for his favourite son quite openly and visibly, which was only made worse because Joseph told tales of their misbehaviour to him. Giving him a gloriously coloured coat or tunic did not go down well with the other brothers, particularly once Joseph shared with them his dreams that his family would bow down and worship him.

Have you ever felt insignificant because someone around you was quite clearly more highly favoured? The brothers had the natural reactions of those who felt scorned – they felt angry, were jealous, and hated their younger brother. But they went to lengths I would like to hope none of us would consider appropriate – they planned to kill Joseph, and only decided on the less dire course of action of selling him when Reuben intervened.

However, at times we all allow ourselves to be overcome by hellish emotions when we feel maligned or are hurt by the words and actions of others. We can become absorbed by negative thoughts, and this leads us to think and behave in ways that, at other times, we would be ashamed of.

Why does the Lord let this happen? Well, it is all about having free will. The Lord allows us to be exposed to unpleasant experiences, and will be constantly working with and around us to try to help us achieve the best results in the circumstances. He watered down the desire of the brothers to kill Joseph and instead allowed him to be taken to Egypt – an action that eventually meant the whole family, and therefore the Lord’s covenant, was saved by Joseph being able to rescue the family from starvation. When we are in a place where evil inclinations are strong, the Lord can show us these evils in order to encourage us to become better people. While they are still hidden, we are not in a position to change. We can read in the Writings of Swedenborg:

“Evil cannot be taken away from anyone unless it appears, is seen, and is acknowledged; it is like a wound which is not healed unless it is opened.” (DP 183)

We may feel that once we have overcome one issue that the Lord has shown us, another one comes along pretty quickly. This is quite true – we are not shown all our spiritual challenges in one go as we would not be able to cope. It may feel that we are getting worse, not better, as we get older because once we have the ability to defeat one evil, we are stronger and better able to deal with more problematic areas. And coming back to the Lord each time we face a challenge will help us in our plight.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we ask for your support and guidance when we feel negative emotions towards others. Help us to take on the trials of working on aspects of our personalities in order to become closer to You. Amen



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19th May “I cannot do it ... but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires.”

Read Genesis 40-41; Matthew 6:1-4

Have you had a very strange dream that stayed with you? I’m sure many of us have. I am not a fan of lifts, and have had a recurring dream about ascending in one. I would be interested to know what this might mean.

In chapter 40 we hear the dreams of the Cupbearer and the Baker. With the Lord’s help Joseph was able to interpret the dreams, and his interpretations were proven to be true. When the Cupbearer eventually remembered that Joseph had successfully done this for him, he was then given the challenge of explaining Pharaoh’s dreams.

It is beautiful to note that Joseph gave God the glory for the interpretation, rather than taking it for himself. When asked by Pharaoh, this was his answer, “I cannot do it,” Joseph replied to Pharaoh, “but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires.”

It can be a real challenge to acknowledge that good ideas we have did not originate within us, and even harder when we appreciate that it is a key teaching of the New Church:

“As long as we believe that everything good comes from the Lord, we do not take credit for the things we do as we practice goodwill.” TCR 439

But once we are able to embrace this notion, it can be incredibly freeing. On this principle, not only do the good things come from outside, but also those negative thoughts that we might prefer not to have. We do not need to take ownership of them and can let them go before they become part of our being.

“...it should be recognized that all evil flows in from hell and all good from the Lord by way of heaven.” AC 6292

Of course, this is more easily said than done, and may take more than a lifetime of work to put into practice. But, with the Lord’s help, we can work towards remembering this.

Have you ever had the sensation of having said something profound, but realise it did not originate in you? This can happen when we allow the Lord to work through us and it is all for the good when we are willing to recognise that we do not need the credit for what we have shared. Explaining Pharaoh’s dreams was very different from when Joseph was boasting about his own dreams to his brothers. Joseph was now in a state where he was able and willing to accept the Lord’s influence and put it to good work.

Experiencing the Lord working through us, being tangibly aware of it, is more likely to happen when we are in a good sphere – when we are open to the Lord working through us. Of course, it will actually happen all of the time, but we may only be able to notice it when we are in a state of humility, which can be challenging to find in the modern world where demonstrating how good we are at everything appears to be more important than the truths the Lord teaches us.

Prayer: Lord, grant us the humility to accept that all that is good comes from You. Help us to embrace the knowledge that You are working through us, leading us to help others find You. Give us comfort when we are distressed by others taking credit for our ideas or actions in the certain knowledge that they began in You. Amen



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26th May “And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them.”

Read Genesis 45; Psalm 37

Joseph had led an eventful life. He had been sold into slavery by his brothers, had been sent to prison through no fault of his own, and was now second only to Pharaoh in leadership of Egypt. He had undoubtedly been through major challenges, but had been faithful to the Lord and was now reaping the rewards.

It must have been astonishing for him to meet with his brothers, the young men who had betrayed him, as their superior. Of course, they did not know that it was Joseph they were bowing before. It must have been hard for them when they remembered that this was what Joseph had predicted in his dreams all those years ago.

How would you feel if you were in the position to decide the fate of people who had quite definitely harmed you? Would you be tempted to let them take responsibility for their actions, or would you be able to feel compassion for them?

Joseph didn't let his brothers get off too easily. Simeon was held captive until they returned with his younger brother, Benjamin. And then a trap was set: Joseph wanted to see what their true motives were, and if they would defend Benjamin or leave him to rot in Egypt. But Judah rose to the challenge. He offered to take the punishment to save his father, Jacob, from the distress of losing the second son of the wife he truly loved.

Joseph could have been vindictive. He could have made his brothers pay for the fact that they had sold him into slavery when he was a young man. Instead, he rejoiced at being reconciled with them, in the knowledge that they had learned some lessons in the time they had been apart.

Had he taken this path, what would that have done to Joseph? We can read in the Writings that when we hold on to a deep-seated desire for revenge, it can completely block the inflow of love and goodness into our lives. In Psalm 37 we heard that our feelings about other people and the way they have treated us is not to be dwelt upon for long. If we take revenge, ultimately the only person we destroy is ourselves. One analogy I have heard is that it is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die.

If we go a little further on in the story, we can read that Joseph tells his brothers: “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.” (Genesis 50:20)

The Lord watches over the whole of our lives. Everything happens for a reason. It is not always easy to see this when we are struggling, but when we look back at a later date, we may be able to see the good that came out of a difficult situation.

Prayer: Lord, help us to trust that You have our best interests at heart. Help us to remember that thinking about revenge can obstruct Your blessings. Remind us that when times are difficult, You are holding us close to You, and that if we turn to You in prayer and humility, we will feel Your loving and calming presence. Amen



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The General Conference of the New Church

Home Worship: June 2nd 2024: Stephen Thomas:

Please read Matthew 7: 24 – 27

Psalm 118: 1-4 and 15-29

True Christian Religion Faith 347

Building a Structure of living

The Word of God has much to say regarding foundations, the materials used for building and the buildings themselves. The Lord said, **“I will open my mouth with a parable; I will utter hidden things, things from of old.” (Psalm 78: 2) (NIV).** The Psalms talk of God laying the foundation of the earth, and the prophet Haggai mentions the day the foundation of the Lord’s temple was laid. **Isaiah talks of a tested stone, a precious cornerstone.** The psalms describe God as a rock and a fortress, a rock and refuge and the rock of salvation. **In the Word we read of the building of Solomon’s temple – Ezekiel’s vision of the construction of the Holy Temple and of course, the beautiful image of the Holy City in the book of Revelation.**

If you think about it, we all need some structure in our day to day living on which to build. Our lives are structured day by day. We are building our routines and tasks that we each undertake – our various duties in employment, leisure, home responsibility and in our church work as well. **But we also need to remember that “unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain.” (Psalm 127: 1)**

A building needs to have a firm foundation upon which to start construction, otherwise cracks and weaknesses will start to appear eventually.

In the sermon on the mount our Lord speaks of the man who built his house on rock. The rain fell and the floods came and the wind blew and beat upon the house but it did not fall. It was built on rock.

Jesus Christ is the rock of our salvation. If we follow His teaching and commands then we can begin to construct a firm foundation upon we can spiritually build and develop. **It is the choices we can make in freedom to love and serve Him by showing love and compassion and useful service to our fellows. We can then start to build a vision of the true church within each one of us.**

While we are trying to build and construct a Christian approach to our life, there is always one stone that we reject! Our Lord continually emphasises this most important truth of all, the “cornerstone.” Clever ideas and thinking will never change our selfish behaviour, because only loving others will do that. **Love is the key – the cornerstone.** This fundamental truth must become the cornerstone and purpose of our living with God. We cannot build it by our own strength. It is the Lord’s work and as the Psalmist say’s “it is marvellous in our eyes, a wonderful thing to see.”

Prayer: Lord we pray you become the cornerstone in our lives, Amen

With every blessing, Stephen



Home Worship



The General Conference of the New Church

Home Worship: June 9th 2024: Stephen Thomas:

THE VINE AND THE BRANCHES

Please read John 15: 1-17, Isaiah 5: 1-7

When Jesus drew his picture of the vine, he knew what he was talking about. The vine was grown all over Palestine as it still is now. It is a plant that needs a great deal of attention if the best fruit is to be produced. It is grown commonly on terraces. The ground must be perfectly clean. It is sometimes trained on terraces; it is sometimes allowed to creep over the ground upheld by low forked sticks; it sometimes even grows round the doors of the cottages; but wherever it grows careful preparation of the soil is essential. It grows luxuriantly and drastic pruning is necessary. So luxuriant is it that the slips are set in the ground at least twelve feet apart, for it will creep over the ground at speed! A young vine is not allowed to fruit for the first three years and each year is cut drastically back to develop and conserve its life and energy. When mature, it is pruned in December and January. It bears two kinds of branches, one that bears fruit and one that does not; and the branches that do not bear fruit are drastically pruned back, so that they will not drain away any of the plant's strength. The vine cannot produce the crop of which it is capable without drastic pruning – and Jesus knew that! Further, the wood of the vine has the curious characteristic that it is good for nothing. It is too soft for any purpose. At certain times of the year, it was laid down by the Jewish law, the people must bring offerings of wood to the Temple for the altar fires. But the wood of the vine must not be brought. The only thing that could be done with the wood pruned out of a vine was to make a bonfire from it and destroy it. This adds to the picture Jesus draws.

He says that his followers are like that. Some of them are lovely fruit – bearing branches of himself; others are useless because they bear no fruit. Of whom was Jesus thinking when he spoke of the fruitless branches? There are two answers, I think? First, he was thinking of the Jews. They were branches of God's vine. Was not that the picture that prophet after prophet had drawn? But they refused to listen to him; they refused to accept him; therefore, they were withered and useless branches, all leaves, and no fruit. And importantly he was secondly thinking of us as his disciples where our Christianity consists of profession without practice, words without deeds if we are not careful! There are people as well who have heard his message and accepted it and then fallen away, become traitors to the master they had once pledged themselves to serve. We can refuse to listen to our Lord at all. We can listen to him, and then render him lip service unsupported by any deeds. We can accept him as our Master, and then, in face of the difficulties of the way or the wish to do what we want to do, abandon him. The fruitless vine is on the way to destruction. Let us pledge ourselves for a reciprocal fruitful relationship with our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, one true God of heaven and of earth. Loving and pledging ourselves to serve our fellows with love, compassion, and usefulness. And indeed, with our Lord's careful pruning, we will surely bear much fruit!

Prayer: Help us to become fruitful branches or you Lord, the one true vine. Amen



Home Worship



The General Conference of the New Church

Home Worship: June 16th 2024: Stephen Thomas:

WHO IS THE GREATEST?

Please read Matthew 25: 31-46

Please read Mark 9: 30 - 37

There is something heart-breaking in the thought of Jesus heading towards a cross and his disciples arguing about who would be the greatest! Yet in their heart of hearts, they knew they were wrong. When he asked them what they had been arguing about they had nothing to say. It was the silence of shame. They had no defence. It is strange how a matter takes its proper place and acquires its true character when it is set in the eyes of our Lord Jesus. So long as they thought that Jesus was not listening and that Jesus had not seen, the argument about who should be greatest seemed fair enough, but when the argument had to be stated in the presence of Jesus it was seen in all its unworthiness. Jesus told the disciples that if they sought the greatness in his Kingdom, they must find it, not by being first but by being last, not by being masters but by being servants of all. When our Lord spoke of the supreme greatness and value of a person whose ambition was to be a servant, he laid down one of the greatest practical truths in this world. In effect Jesus is saying “As you did it to one of the least of these, you did it for me.”

Now it becomes clear how little the disciples understood. They just could not grasp that the strength of God’s love in its complete unselfishness, its giving without the cost, whatever the situation. They had been spending their time arguing over who would be the greatest in this new kingdom. Jesus shows them the true nature of unselfish love, while that love is the greatest virtue, it achieves that by being the last thing thought of, by seeking ways of serving others. He drives home the nature of a Christian by lovingly embracing a child and demanding love and care for the innocent and helpless.

What is revealed in this biblical passage speaks to each of us. The desire to be first creeps into our life in so many ways. It is the whole ambition of so many in business, in sports of all kinds, in politics and government. There are voices today that speak against such overwhelming ambition, but in the world around us there seems to be limitless admiration for “the greatest.” This penetrates too, into our own personal Christian life.

When we help others, we want things to be done our way and people to appreciate us. When we see the impact of some truth, we are pleased we understood it. We make it our own, instead of simply using it to help our fellows. When such attitudes show themselves in church and charity organisations, we are quick to condemn them; it is so much harder to realise that such an attitude underlies much of our personal effort to be a Christian. Love, as the driving force of our life, should never think of itself, but only of those we can help. In a very strange way, it is easy for our religion to be all obedience and to lose all its love.

Our Lord Jesus with his arms around that tiny child must be for us the real picture of our faith. Such innocent love and care must not be from any earthly motive. It must be done in the quality of our Lord’s unselfish love, so that we may receive him into our hearts; and that will bring within us the love of God that moment by moment lives in Jesus.



Home Worship



The General Conference of the New Church

Home Worship: June 23rd 2024: Stephen Thomas:

THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

Please read Psalm 27, John 7: and John 8: 12 to 20

The scene of the argument with the Jewish authorities was in the Temple treasury, which was in the Court of the Women. The first Temple court was the Court of the Gentiles; the second was the Court of the Women. It was so called because women may not pass beyond it unless they were about to offer sacrifice on the altar which was in the Court of the Priests. Round the Court of the Women there was a colonnade or porch; and, in that porch, set against the wall, there were thirteen treasure chests into which people dropped their offerings. These were called the trumpets because they were shaped like trumpets, narrow at the top and swelling out towards the foot. Clearly the Temple treasury would be a busy place, with a constant flow of worshippers coming and going. There would be no better place to collect an audience of devout people and to teach them.

In this passage Jesus makes the great claim: "I am the light of the world." It is very likely that the background against which he pronounced this truth made it doubly vivid and impressive. The festival with which John connects these discourses is the Festival of Tabernacles (John 7: 2). You may have noticed how its ceremonies lent drama to our Lord's claim to give to people the living water. (John 7:37) But there was another ceremony connected with this festival. On the evening of its first day there was a ceremony called the Illumination of the Temple. It took place in the Court of the Women. The court was surrounded with deep galleries, erected to hold the spectators. In the centre four great candelabra were prepared. When evening came these were lit and, it was said, they sent such a blaze of light throughout Jerusalem that every courtyard was lit up with their brilliance! Then all night long, until cock-crow the next morning, the greatest and the wisest and the holiest men in Israel danced before the Lord and sang psalms of joy and praise while the people watched. Jesus said, "He who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." The light of life means two things. The Greek can mean either the light which issues from the source of life or the light which gives light. In this passage it means both. Jesus is the very light of God with us and he is the light which gives us life. Just as a flower can never blossom without sunlight, so our lives can never flower with the grace and beauty they ought to have until they are irradiated with the light of our Lord's presence. In our daily reading and meditating on the Lord's Word we must allow the light of His truth to enter within the darkness of our understanding and then power it with the warmth of His love. We need to follow along His pathway of life then we too can walk in his light. When we walk alone, we are bound to stumble and grope, for so many of our problems in life seem beyond our solution. When we walk alone, we are bound to take the wrong way, because we have no secure map of life. Let us not become spiritually blind but follow our heavenly guide, our Lord, and Saviour Jesus Christ, who, because to follow him is to walk in safety through life and afterwards experience the joy of heavenly life. Amen.



Home Worship



The General Conference of the New Church

Home Worship: June 30th 2024: Stephen Thomas

PRAYER

Please read Psalm 121 Matthew 6: 1-14 Arcana Caelestia 5957

Prayer is talking with God. It is common to think of prayer as asking God for something. Such an idea largely destroys any real use of prayer. Prayer gives us opportunity to talk over with God what we are planning and doing with our lives. We can talk with God so long as His presence and communication with us depends on our **CHOICE** that it shall be so. Wonderfully, such a way has been provided for us in prayer and our use of the Word of God. When we talk with God in prayer, He has a beautiful presence with us in what we have from scripture. For us, there is a possible genuine two-way communication between God and us. When we talk with Him it is best therefore to make sure that we are talking to our Lord Jesus Christ (for it is His work on earth that we know and understand most about God). Keeping Him in mind means that, as we talk about what we want we shall always remember what He hopes from us. The purpose of prayer is intended to help us to live. Once in a prayer we have a clear idea of what we need to amend in our lives, we must set about making that change! There is no point in prayers that go on and on wishing we were better people. If the prayer has shown us a way, we can improve our life, then the next stage must be to change it. Such changes are most useful if they change our routine behaviour, the way that we behave at work, or at home or in contact with other people. Such changes will begin to have a real effect on our character. The greatest part of our prayers should be concerned with our daily living. Whatever our failures, if we have seen them so God has seen them as well. We need to remember the total love of God and His real forgiveness to bring us to open our hearts to Him again. No excuses or complaints in our prayers – but in truly talking to Him He will begin to call to our remembrance what He has told us, we shall know that He always forgives, and what is most important, that He alone has the strength to oppose all evil and that strength is on offer to us if we will only use it. Forgiveness is a comfort, but we still understand what it really means. The Lord forgives any sin as it is done, for he does not condemn, but only wishes to save. That forgiveness can give us the strength to tackle our problems in life again and seek to put them right. But His forgiveness without any effort from ourselves will not achieve anything. What is needed is a real change in our living and until that happens the Lord's love stretched towards us cannot change us. One of the mistakes we make in prayer is to begin to imagine the future result we would like to see in our lives, rather than concentrating on the things in our character now that needs changing! The purpose of prayer is to enable us to see ourselves in God's light, and not to advise Him on the best way to run His universe! All our prayers are meant to follow this pattern and to **WORK TO CHANGE OURSELVES**. Notice too, that the Lord's prayer speaks in the plural: forgive US (not forgive me) deliver US (not deliver me). A prayer wanting just to change our own self smacks a little of a seed of selfishness. In all our prayers and talking with our Lord God, we can only be truly helped **IF WE WANT OTHERS TO BE HELPED AS WELL**. Our prayers must always include them with us as God's people. Amen

With every blessing to you all from Stephen