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I am the Way, the Truth and the Life

Revd Brian Talbot writes:

"I am the Way, the Truth and the Life"

(A sermon preached at the Zoom Worship Service on Sunday 27th July)

Lessons: John 3:1-21; 14:1-14

Readings from the Writings for the New Church:

"A life of neighbourly love involves thinking well of people, wanting what is good for them, and feeling personal joy in the notion that others too are saved. If

we wish to see no one saved but those who believe as we do, and particularly if we resent any other arrangement, our life is not one of neighbourly love.” (*Secrets of Heaven* §2284:5 [LHC])

“Those who are guided by kindness, on the other hand, hardly even notice evil in another but pay attention instead to everything good and true in the person. When they do find anything bad or false, they put a good interpretation on it. This is a characteristic of all angels — one they acquire from the Lord, who bends everything bad toward good.” (*Secrets of Heaven* §1079:2e [LHC])

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“Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!” (Matthew 13:43)

“Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’” (John 14:6)

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

Some Christians believe that only Christians go to heaven. In the New Jerusalem Church we not only believe good people go to heaven, but that the Bible teaches that good people go to heaven. If you were to ask a Jew, whether only Jews go to heaven, they would immediately draw your attention to Psalm 15 and Psalm 24, which talk of good people who live their faith. To quote Psalm 24:4 “Those who have clean hands and pure hearts”. Notice deeds and motivation.

Let’s look at our readings. In chapter 3 we have Jesus talking to a Jew, not a Christian. He is talking about being reborn by the Spirit of God, Jesus’ Spirit. We can’t control it. It comes from nowhere.

“¹⁷ Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹ But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.” (John 3:17-21)

Jesus didn’t come to condemn people but to save people. People are condemned because they do not believe “in the name of the only Son of God”. As Jacques More, an Evangelical Christian, who wrote the book *Will there be Non-Christians in Heaven?* (2008) points out, the name is the attributes or character of the LORD. (A very Swedenborgian thing to say!!) As Swedenborg teaches: The LORD “wants to save everyone in the entire world and to draw all people to himself. The Lord’s mercy is infinite; it does not allow itself to be restricted to the few within the church but reaches out to everyone on the face of the earth.” (*Secrets of Heaven* 1032:2) It is a response to the light inside us, which determines whether we are saved or condemned. “But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.” (John 3:21)

In John 14 Thomas asks Jesus where he was going and how to follow him. Jesus replies that he is “the Way, the Truth and the Life”. (John 14:6) “the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do” (John 14:12) Followers of Jesus are moved to show mercy and compassion, kindness and empathy, and so on.

Peter says: “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12) However, in speaking to Cornelius, the Roman centurion and his family, “Then Peter began to speak to them: ‘I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.’” (Acts 10:34-35)

We have a slight difference in understanding of Son. The Son is more than just some historical, factual entity. Jesus is more than just someone you learn about, he is experienced as Light, Love and other Virtues. “You are the light of the world. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:14, 16) He is the Divine lingering Presence in everybody’s soul, whatever our religion, or whatever our skin-colour, whatever our ethnicity. In the New Jerusalem Church we believe that Yahweh or Jehovah, the God of the Old Testament, became a human being. (AC 10055; 10579:5; AE 328:22; AR 281:2; 743:2; 962:3 (= BE 120:3); DLW 233; 234; 282; Lord 29; 31; 9; TC 81; 82; 98; 101; 159:7; 296; 370:3; 641:4; 691; 853) He was the Word made flesh. As such he continually incarnates in us and all people. He has “other sheep” who are not of my sheepfold. (John 10:16) “I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven,” (Matthew 8:11) “Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God.” (Luke 13:29) He is the Divine reality at the centre of all human hearts and minds. But he is a loving, inclusive reality, not an exclusive one. He is the vine and we are the branches. (John 15) Mystically or spiritually, he is present in every human no matter their religion, or their ethnicity, or their skin colour. “That the church of the Lord exists also among the Gentiles, although specifically where the Lord is known and where the Word is read, may be seen in the work, Heaven and Hell, n. 318-328; and The New Jerusalem and its Heavenly Doctrine, n. 244, 246.” (AE 21e [Tansley])

Swedenborg encourages us to from the inside out, not from the outside in. The LORD joins us together by the virtues in our heart, whether love, patience, empathy, tolerance and so on. He is in those virtues and is connected to us through them. But our LORD uses our childlikeness, our humility, our willingness to follow, our innocence, to purify our soul and everybody else’s soul:

“For to do those precepts [the Ten Commandments] from religion purifies the internal man, opens heaven, admits the Lord, and makes a man, as to his spirit, an angel of heaven. This is the reason that the Gentiles, outside the church, who do those precepts from religion, are all saved, but none of those who do them only from civil and moral law.” (AE 902:5 [Tansley])

If Gentiles “act in agreement with the laws of their religion”, spiritual life is imparted to them”. (*Apocalypse Explained* §107:3 [Tansley])

“angels look at the inner features of faith, not the outward aspects of it. This is why everyone, whatever their religion, even gentiles who possess no truths from the Word, can be saved, provided that they have regarded leading a good life as

their end in view, and the religious teachings they have received as the means to that end, see 2589-2604.” (AC 10648:1 [my emphasis])

One of my favourite visions of Swedenborg’s is that of an idolater. You would think that a Gentile at least outwardly worshipping statues of stone or rock covered in precious gems and gold, would be the least likely to enter heaven. But remember we are not to judge by appearances. Angels judge our faith from the inside out, as said above.

Swedenborg was reading the story of Micah’s idols being stolen in Judges 17 and 18 on 27th June 1748.

The Indian idolater “was deeply pained because of the idol that the Danites stole. His distress overcame him and moved him so deeply that he scarcely knew what he was thinking because of the depth of his pain. I sensed his pain and at the same time the innocence with his particular affections. There were some Christian spirits present who were surprised that this idolater was moved by such mercy and such an affection of innocence.” He was ministered to by “good spirits”. Swedenborg writes: “I could sense his deep feeling of reverence. It was communicated to me as something much holier than what could be found among Christians.” “Because of the state he was in, that is, he could absorb all matters of faith and could accept them with a deep inner affection. There was a loving mercy about him and in his ignorance an innocence; and when these are present, all matters of faith are accepted spontaneously, so to speak, and with joy. After this, the non-Christian spirit was accepted among the angels.” (*Heaven and Hell* [1758] §324 = *Spiritual Experiences* §§2411-2413 = *Secrets of Heaven* §§2594; 2598)

As Swedenborg writes:

“from good and truth which come from the Lord all are saved who live in charity with one another, whether they are inside the Church or outside it. For gentile nations outside the Church who have good within them are as much among the saved as others who have it within them, see 593, 932, 1032, 1059, 1327, 1328, 2049, 2051, 2284, 2589-2604, 2861, 2986, 3263.” (AC 3380; cf. AC 3993:13)

“the presence of the Lord and of the angels of heaven, is also with those who are around or outside, and who are called Gentiles.” (AE 351:1e [Tansley])

If we want others, who are unlike us to be in heaven, because they are kind and considerate, Swedenborg tells us that we have charity, or kindness, or goodwill in us: “A life of neighbourly love involves thinking well of people, wanting what is good for them, and *feeling personal joy in the notion that others too are saved*. If we wish to see no one saved but those who believe as we do, and particularly if we resent any other arrangement, our life is not one of neighbourly love.” (*Secrets of Heaven* §2284:5 [LHC] (my emphasis))

Another point to consider which fits in with looking at people’s inner spirituality and not their outward spirituality. Even the Apostle Paul assumes that the LORD can work inside non-Christians and non-Jews: Gentiles “show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; will accuse or perhaps excuse them ¹⁶ on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.” (Romans 2:15-16)

In the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, the sheep are the ones who unconsciously minister to the LORD working in other people, who are spiritually hungry or thirsty, welcoming strangers, clothing the naked, visiting the sick or imprisoned. (Matthew 25:31-46) The sheep are those who are kind, considerate, helpful, empathetic, (AC 4169:3) “He therefore who has charity toward the neighbour is affected by good and truth, because they are from the Lord, and holds in aversion what is evil and what is false because these are from self; and when he does this, he is in humiliation from self-acknowledgment, and when he is in humiliation, he is in a state of reception of good and truth from the Lord. Moreover, the angels who are with man perceive these words no otherwise, for by the "hungry" they perceive those who from affection desire good; by the "thirsty," those who from affection desire truth; by a "stranger," those who are willing to be instructed; by the "naked," those who acknowledge that there is nothing of good and of truth in themselves; by the "sick," those who acknowledge that in themselves there is nothing but evil; and by the "bound," or those who are "in prison," those who acknowledge that in themselves there is nothing but falsity. If these things are reduced into one meaning, they signify what has been stated just above.” (AC 4956; cf. AC 4958) “The reason the Lord speaks of all these things being done to Himself is that **He is present in those kinds of people**, which is why He also says,

Truly I say to you, insofar as you did it to one of the least of these My brothers you did it to Me. Matt. 25:40-45.” (AC 4959) The LORD cannot help but be moved to help the people mentioned. (AC 5037:6 on Isaiah 61:1-2; Psalm 146:7-9)

Conclusion

The Bible teaches that all good, kind, helpful people go to heaven, whether we look at Psalm 15 and Psalm 24, the Gospels, or the Acts of the Apostles: “Then Peter began to speak to them: ‘I truly understand that God shows no partiality,³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.’” (Acts 10:34-35)

Swedenborgians believe that the LORD “wants to save everyone in the entire world and to draw all people to himself. The Lord’s mercy is infinite; it does not allow itself to be restricted to the few within the church but reaches out to everyone on the face of the earth.” (*Secrets of Heaven* 1032:2)

When we live our religion, the LORD is able to purify our inner personality, and make us, as to our spirit, an angel of heaven. (*Apocalypse Explained* §902:5 [Tansley]) That is why “angels look at the inner features of faith, not the outward aspects of it.” (*Secrets of Heaven* §10648:1) Remember Swedenborg’s vision of the Indian idolater! So it is not what our beliefs are, but how we live our lives. It is our reception of virtues from the LORD, our response to his nudges, our reaction to being moved to compassion and mercy. (*Secrets of Heaven* §3380; cf. *Secrets of Heaven* §3993:13) The LORD and his angels are present with non-Christians. (*Apocalypse Explained* §351:1e [Tansley])

Finally, we show that we are motivated by kindness, empathy, tolerance and love by “feeling personal joy in the notion that others too are saved.” (*Secrets of Heaven* §2284:5 [LHC])