

The Lord's Coming Into The World - Part 3. Saved from what?

If you have read my two previous talks in this present series, you will have noted my emphasis on the purpose of the Lord's coming into the world which was to overcome the power of evil then threatening to destroy mankind. In my talk last week, I briefly spoke about the way in which our lives on earth are constantly being influenced by impulses from the spiritual world, both from heaven on the one hand, and from hell on the other. The appearance that we have is that our lives and that this natural world are complete and independent in themselves. The reality is the proximity of the spiritual world on which we as individuals, and on which everything on the natural plane, is dependant.

In order that we might enjoy freewill and have the opportunity to choose to become the type of person, caring or uncaring, selfish or unselfish, that we want to be, the situation is so ordered by the Lord that these influences from heaven and hell which affect our lives come to us in equal measure. Agonize over choices as we may do, and argue them out in our minds much as we have to, the wonderful thing is that we have a choice at all. Pressed and urged along by certain thoughts and attitudes, as we sometimes feel ourselves to be, yet - and especially if we give it a chance - the alternative will present itself. Prompted by selfishness as we may feel ourselves to be in certain circumstances, yet our 'better self' beckons to us, and it is up to us to decide - to decide whether to go along with or to resist the promptings and urgings coming to us.

When we think of those times leading up to the Lord's coming into the world we must bring to mind a situation where the freewill we are talking about was virtually nonexistent. Aided and abetted by the attitude of people on earth, by the constant hankering after selfish pleasures, and by the earthy, external approach to life which had become prevalent over the centuries, the influence of the hells had become more prominent and more oppressive, blocking off in a very real way the influences which should otherwise have been getting through from heaven. Hell had thrown out a kind of covering over the minds of people. A godless, materialistic approach took over. Religion became a dead, meaningless formality. Cynicism and ridicule lay within most people's approach to it. Corruption and immorality went on the rampage. And the time would soon have come when the human race would, in ways about which we can only speculate, have destroyed itself.

It was in order to save mankind from that destruction; to rescue them from the power of hell; to re-establish the free will which had virtually been lost, that God Himself came into the world. Even though He had admonished, threatened, pleaded and promised, down through the ages; sent His prophets among them to call them back to a righteous life, the process had gone on. To avert the disaster, He would Himself have to come. Everything else had failed. There was no other way. People had grown tired of the warnings. They scoffed at the threats. The prophets had become a joke. There was nothing therefore to hold them back.... nothing. No knowledge, no convictions, no fears even, which would keep the hells at a distance from them. It was a critical time indeed. The life of mankind without question, hung in the balance.

It can be said that the time we live in now cannot be unlike the situation which existed then. And just as the human race stood in danger of destroying itself then surely, also it does now. After all, we too know godlessness and materialism. There are widespread injustices and inequalities. There are corrupt and oppressive governments in the world. Granted that the age in which the Lord lived on earth was an immoral one. But then so is this one. Is there any difference?

And the answer is, yes, there is. There is a difference. Whilst we have all of those things we have mentioned, materialism and so on, thankfully, and as well, they are not accepted passively. In the face of inequalities and injustices the voices of protest are raised. In the face of terrible crime, and sickened by it, our resolve is stiffened to rid our community of it. As we think back over the wrongs of the past; of the way in which, for example, during colonial days, aboriginal people were treated, our conscience is troubled by it. We see and are affected by the other side of things. Care and compassion, justice and fair play are influences which are active with us. And these are the influences which were lacking at the time of the Incarnation. This is what is different. That was a time when people didn't care about what went on; when conscience and opposition and protest didn't enter into things. That was a time when, as films have shown, men fought to death for entertainment, and crowds roared for the slaughter of the weaker one. That was the world into which the Lord came.

Though not one of the best known of all the prophecies concerning the Advent, yet one of the most significant, is the one which we find in Isaiah 25, verse 7, where we read of the Messiah that "On the mountain He will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations".

Have you ever stopped and thought what is meant by this prophecy? What is meant by " the shroud that enfolds all peoples " and "the sheet that covers all nations"?

What is meant is that cloud? The cloud thrown up over people's minds such as to block out influences from heaven. The cloud that caused people to be so passive where evil was concerned; so ready to fall in with it all. To accept the corruption and the inhumanity and the immorality, even the beastliness of those times. The cloud that caused such a great darkness to descend. "This is what God the LORD says - he who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and all that comes out of it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: "I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness." (Isaiah 42, verses 5-7). And in similar vein, in the sixtieth chapter of the same prophecy, "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you."

The Lord came to bring light to a situation which was almost totally enveloped in darkness. No longer able to reach and influence people through the heavens as He had once been able to do, He came on earth, the incarnation of Light. It can be said, that in bowing the heavens and coming down for our deliverance, He side stepped His usual channel of access to us and opened up a new one. Most motorists know what it's like when a road has become unusable or impassable and a new one has to be opened up around it. This is how it was with the Lord. The old means of communication had become unusable and ineffective. Some new way of access had to be opened up if hell was not to sweep in and destroy the race.

What is also important is that this new channel of access then opened up was never withdrawn and cannot now be closed off. He who became "Immanuel", "God with us", is still "God with us". He who descended and entered into life as we know and live and experience in this world, is still very much able to be present with us; to identify with us as we come to terms with the challenges, the opportunities and the temptations we know here. It was no temporary access which He set up at that time. By glorifying, or making Divine, the Human He had assumed, it is always there.

If the Incarnation means anything it means a new presence of the Lord at the level at which we live our lives in this world; a presence which wasn't withdrawn when He was no longer physically present. "and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."(Matthew 28:20). With us, as He had never been with mankind before. There is something that is so much more 'immediate' about His Presence. He is 'on hand' to enlighten and strengthen and sustain us.

It is because of this; because of this new Presence of the Lord with us, established at that time, that He is able to work with each one of us for our redemption. In Him we have the resources to draw upon to combat evil when it comes flooding into our lives. Obscured as issues may be yet He can come to us with His enlightenment and help us to see through any darkness which descends upon our minds. The situation is a different one now. For us it is not God in His remoteness, but God in His nearness; able to identify with us; able to be present with us in a very real and immensely significant way.

"There was not" wrote Swedenborg, "so great a force from the Lord to withhold men from falsities before the Lord's Advent as after His Advent, when He had made the Human in Himself Divine." (*Arcana Caelestia* 6945). And this because, as we have seen, the previous means of access to us had become ineffective. It was the consequences of that situation, had it gone on, from which the Lord saved us.

The Swedenborg Program – Number 79.

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