

What Easter Means To Us

Jesus Christ lived for only thirty three years. Of those thirty three years, three were spent in public ministry, during which He said and did things which have had a monumental impact on the lives of people everywhere. In the end He was crucified as a common criminal between two others, one of whom heaped scorn upon Him; and on the third day after His death, less than 48 hours later, He rose from the sepulchre.

During the course of a period of forty days thereafter He was seen by the disciples, and others, on some eleven occasions. He talked with these people and even ate with them. And at the end of those forty days, and during an appearance to the disciples "When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven." (Luke 24; 50, 51).

Being Easter Sunday, I would like to speak to you of the Lord's life; of what He accomplished and how it affects us. In doing so I make no apologies for radical departure from orthodox thinking on the subject, but ask you to consider what is said as a reasonable explanation of what is involved.

If you are familiar with the teaching contained in Swedenborg's theological writings, a great deal is said there concerning the spiritual world and, in particular, heaven and hell. From both places we are influenced far beyond our realising while we are on earth. Each influences us in equal measure. We receive promptings from heaven. And we receive promptings of another kind from the hells. Swedenborg speaks of us living our lives in the midst of these two opposing influences, neither of which is allowed to act on us more strongly than the other. Each counterbalances the other, and we are in the all important position of being able to decide, freely and completely ourselves, which of those influences we will respond to.

I say all this because it is important to our understanding of the reason for the Incarnation, or Christ coming on Earth. There came a time some two thousand years ago, when the power and influence of hell began to increase over the power and influence of heaven. The influences reaching people on earth from hell began to be stronger than those reaching them from heaven. And a situation threatened where people on earth would have come under bondage to evil. Their freedom lost.

Had this gone on, and irrespective of man's free choice in the matter, evil and iniquity would have become widespread and ultimately the human race would have destroyed itself.

The situation could have been put right by God from where He was. He might have restored order in the spiritual world by more closely approaching the hells. But those in hell would have been annihilated had he done so. It would have been as if the sun of this world were to move closer to our earth making things unbearably hot and destroying all that we find here. And so for this reason God willed to become incarnate.

He willed to veil His Divinity with a human nature taken from Mary. He was prepared to be born into this world, putting on infirm human nature, by means of which He would meet the hells face to face, and seek to overcome them without destroying them.

The hells had to be overcome and their power broken, and in His wisdom this is how God chose to do it. From Mary He derived those fallen tendencies which they would play on. As a consequence, and throughout His life on earth, the Lord was in conflict with them. They seeking to influence Him to do evil, tempting Him through the inclinations He had inherited from Mary. He at all times resisting their promptings and rejecting their suggestions. Swedenborg writes:

"The Lord, from His earliest childhood to His last hour was assailed by all the hells; against which He continually fought, and subjugated and overcame them". (*Arcana Caelestia* 1690).

Of those temptations of the Lord we read of just a few. The temptations in the wilderness, and His agony in the garden of Gethsemane. Indeed there is very little indication from the Gospels of just how important a role they played. But in fact they were going on all the time, most days, month after month, year after year. We do not adequately grasp the extent of what was involved.

The last of those temptations was the passion of the cross. It was the last, and indeed it was the greatest; but at the same time it was only one of countless temptations by means of which the Lord overcame or subjugated the hells.

Many look upon Christ's passion as being that which secured the redemption of the human race. They believe that by this one act things were put right again. The teaching of the Christian Church has been that by suffering death upon the cross Christ effected a reconciliation between the Father and fallen mankind. But Swedenborg writes of it in an entirely different light. Redemption was a process effected by the Lord over the whole of His life in this world, and by means of His victories in temptation conflict with the hells.

It was something achieved gradually, little by little, it wasn't a matter of an angry God needing to be placated. It was the power of evil from hell that had to be overcome. "To redeem, means to liberate from damnation, to deliver from eternal death, to rescue from hell and to take away the captives and prisoners out of the hand of the devil. This was done by the Lord." (*True Christian Religion* 118). It was accomplished by victories in temptation conflicts He endured throughout His life on earth.

We cannot say that as a result of what the Lord did we are automatically saved and that our entrance into heaven is guaranteed on that account. What the Lord did was to reopen the possibilities of salvation. To restore to people on earth their freedom of choice, and to keep us from the uninvited dominion of evil and sin.

You will have noticed that at no time have I spoken of a Son, completely separate from God and sent into the world to do the work we have been talking about. God is One, as is testified throughout the Old Testament and in the New. This one God Himself willed to become incarnate. I spoke earlier of Him 'veiling' over His Divinity as the only means by which He could effectively overcome the power of evil without destroying those in hell who were behind it. Jehovah God Himself descended, for no one else could have turned back the tide of evil which threatened to swamp mankind.

This may surprise and to some extent trouble you, for there are passages in the New Testament which give every impression of separateness between God and Christ, as when Christ prayed in temptation.

What we have to realise is that God the Creator, the Divine Being Itself, which is not in time or space, was inmosty present in the Lord while on earth, as the soul is present in every person. At times the Lord was very aware of this and knew it well, as when He said, "I and the Father are one".

So also when Philip approached Him and asked if they could see the Father. "Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us." Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work." (John 14: 8-10).

At other times Jesus was not so sure, and a sense of separateness intervened. And this was necessary for had it not been the case, temptations could not have come upon the Lord and He would not have had the opportunity to overcome the power of evil. There were indeed two distinct states between which the Lord alternated while on earth. At one time He knew and was completely confident that He and the Father were one, and at other times He felt very alone, very fallible, very human and so subject to the attacks from hell which came upon Him.

But gradually the Divine from within was able to infill His life - and consciousness - more and more. Whereas there was separateness, in the end there was none at all. The Divine completely infilled the human even to the very body of Christ, which is why it had vanished from the tomb by the time His followers arrived there on the resurrection morning.

By His work on earth the Lord redeemed mankind from the uninvited dominion of the power of evil from hell. He reopened the opportunities for people to live the heavenly life. And He who overcame the power of hell at that time is able, if we so wish it, to overcome the power of hell in our lives so that we too might live the life of heaven.

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