

The Laws of Divine Providence

My most recent talks on this programme have been on the subject of the Divine Providence. My starting point, you may remember, was the distinction which exists, for all that it is often obscured in people's minds, between what God wills and what God permits. There was a time, not so long ago, it turns out, when everything, good or bad, was attributed to God. If a person contracted an illness or became an orphan, was brought to bankruptcy or whatever, it was all God's will. The truth is, though, that that's not so. And this is where this distinction comes in; the distinction between what God wills and what He has to permit.

Swedenborg gives us a lot to think about where he writes:

"The Lord provides some things from permission, some from admission, some from leave, some from good pleasure, and some from will." [Arcana Caelestia 1755](#).

And on this question, of permission it is important to realise that it is very reluctant permission. It is the permission of One who has tried everything else possible to prevent it happening but is not able to do so without jeopardising the possibility of that person being reformed and going to heaven. It is, as well, the permission of One who grieves and is saddened by what takes place.

I wonder if, with regard to this particular point, you remember the passage which was quoted from Swedenborg last week?

"It is said that God permits a thing, which does not mean that He wills it; but that He cannot avert it, on account of the end (or, the overall objective), which is salvation." [Divine Providence 234](#).

I suggest we talk about those purposes or objectives, first of all, because if we can come to see how important these are, both to God and to ourselves, we can understand, at least in part, if not entirely, why God does everything to safeguard them, even though it means that He has to be prepared to permit evil and disorder in the process.

We believe that we are created for a purpose. We believe that we are created by a loving God whose whole hope and objective is that we should come to know and love and enjoy the life of unselfishness which is heaven. Every person born into this world, whether in Bulgaria or Brazil, the Soviet Union or Southern India, everyone, has been created by God to find a home in heaven when they die and to be happy there.

One thing is certain though, and that is, as we have previously noted, God will not impose the life of heaven on us. We must choose it for ourselves. And here is how we came to be talking about it last week, as a 'law' of Divine Providence that this freedom to choose be safeguarded and protected in the way it is. If the only way to stop us doing something evil is to take away that freedom from us, God will not do it. There are times, I know, when the price we pay for this freedom seems to be much too high. There are shocking things which take place and which we feel would be better not to have happened.

I remember feeling this way when President John Kennedy was assassinated in 1963. Would it have mattered, I asked myself at the time, if God had stepped in and forcibly prevented the assassin from doing what he had made up his mind to do? Since then I have asked myself what that question implied. I realised that in effect I was wanting God to sacrifice (for this is what it would involve) all hopes of salvation for that person who fired the gun. And this is what He will not do. By my question I was suggesting that someone was expendable. In God's eyes no one, saint or sinner, important in the eyes of the world, or unimportant, is expendable. Even the person locked away in solitary confinement is free to think and will as he or she pleases. And it is that freedom which God protects at every step of His Divine Providence. He is prepared even to place what to us seems like a restraint upon Himself, so that at no time that freedom is infringed upon.

We get back to this point, then, that though All-powerful God works within certain laws knowing that by so doing He has the best hope of bringing us to the happiness with which He wishes to bless our lives.

There is an analogy here where parents and the bringing up of children is concerned. However much we love our children; however much we want them to have what we know is best for them; we can't smother their individuality, take away their freedom to make mistakes, and make them duplicates of ourselves. We do better for them, especially when they are teenagers and young adults, to 'hold back', even to the extent of letting them have their head and even if it means learning lessons the hard way. In fact, by so imposing restraints upon ourselves or upon the expression of the love we feel for our children, we are doing more for them than would otherwise be the case.

We may have a son or daughter who is absolutely adamant that they must have something we feel in our hearts is a sheer waste of money. We are 90% certain they are going to grow tired of it within a month or two, anyway. To us, it's money down the drain. But what do we do? We could, of course, force our will on them or try to do so; or we can, though reluctantly, let them go ahead, learn by the experience and, hopefully, they will grow and become wiser as a result of it. In other words we can opt to work within the realisation that they are better off having their freedom. Their freedom to make mistakes.

This is what God does. He is prepared to work within laws because He knows that, ultimately, we are better off this way. We want our children to become adult and to stand on their own feet. So, for all the risks involved we let them have their freedom. The Lord wants us to come into heaven. So, and here again, for all the risks involved, He lets us make choices and decisions since it is such a vitally necessary part of the process that we do this.

There are other laws of the Divine Providence besides this one which safeguards our freedom to think and will as we please, and which follow on from it. Two, in particular, I would like to talk about tonight.

I know of people who have sighed and said, 'If only I could have some sign that God exists, or that there is a life after death, or whatever, I would believe' 'If God could perform a miracle or come and talk with me, I know I would then believe'. This is what they think. But it wouldn't work out that way. The miracle or the conversation or whatever it was that took place might induce or compel belief for a time. Then, and if it was you, you would start asking yourself whether you had dreamt the experience or whether there was some other possible explanation, until at last you were completely confused or had reached the point of total rejection of what had happened.

Belief cannot be compelled. To the contrary, it is something that grows from within. If He wanted to, and this is completely hypothetical, because He doesn't want to, God could do something here in Sydney which might cause and compel the city's population to believe in Him. But it would only be for a time. It might stun, instil fear, trouble people and fill them with awe, but they would soon come out of it and be worse off after the experience than before it. As Swedenborg wrote of it:

"It is a law of the Divine Providence that man should not be compelled by external means to think and will, and thus to believe and love, the things of religion, but should persuade and at times compel himself to do so."

Clearly, if we are to remain in freedom, it is important that we have no insight into the future, how we will be placed or where we will be a month, or year, five years or ten years from now. The future is, and must always remain, unknown to us. The point is that if we had the slightest indication of what the future holds for us we might as well just let it happen, without any initiative or effort on our part. Moses, you may remember, asked if he might see God face to face. Speaking to God, he said, "I pray thee, show me thy glory". And the reply came back, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But you cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live." [Exodus 33:18-19](#).

Though we sometimes wish it were otherwise, things are arranged that we have no sensation or perception of the operation of the Divine Providence. We are in no way conscious of God close at hand, as He is, guiding and bending and leading us forward. At times we can seem to be entirely by ourselves. And that's the way it is meant to be. That's the way it's got to be. God works with us silently and beyond our immediate consciousness. Once again I refer you to the teaching given through Swedenborg:

"It is a law of the Divine Providence that man should not perceive and feel anything of the operation of the Divine Providence, but still that he should know and acknowledge it. ."

Because it is in our best interests this way, the Lord arranges things so that we feel quite alone, as if it is all up to us and everything rested on us. It is important that we should wrestle with our problems and decisions without any indication of what the outcome will be. We can't see Providence face to face or know for certain what direction He wants us to take. Sometimes we wish that such a responsibility wasn't there. We wish that God would show His hand and show us the way. But it would only be to our great detriment if He did.

I was quite astonished recently to hear this decade of the 1980's spoken of in terms of "a countdown to Armageddon". To be sure, we live in troubled times, but is it "countdown to Armageddon"? Are we really up against the end of the world., or what? This is what I'll be looking at next week.

[Transcript of The Swedenborg Programme – Number 7.](#)

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