

### **God's Coming Into The World (3) - The Lord's Birth in us**

Few stories are more beautiful or more moving than the Christmas story as it is recorded in the first and third Gospels, in Matthew and Luke. You will, I'm sure, know it well. "And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be enrolled. (And this enrolment was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria). And all went to be enrolled, everyone unto his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, unto Judaea, unto the city of David; to be enrolled with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn".

As I've said, a beautiful, and also a very important story; and it treats of two things. The first is the most obvious, for here of course is described the coming of God Himself into the world in order that He might meet face to face, and overcome, the forces of evil which were then threatening to destroy mankind. The second thing treated of, though perhaps less obvious, is the coming of the Lord into our individual lives. Both of these things are described in the Christmas story. On the one hand we have the description of an historical event; of something which happened at a given point in time, and of an event which profoundly affected the whole of mankind. On the other hand, we have the description of something very personal to ourselves of the Lord's Coming to us, and His being born into our hearts and minds, today. And it is this - this coming of the Lord into our individual lives - which I would like to focus on now.

It was, in fact, ever intended, of the Christmas story, that as well as being a description of the actual coming of the the Lord into the world, it should also describe the coming of the Lord into our own minds and lives; into the microscopic world which our minds are, and in which can be found those same elements of welcome and opposition which existed in the world when the Lord was born. There were, as we know, those who welcomed the coming of the Lord and worshipped Him at His birth. There were others, notably Herod, who violently opposed Him and went all out to destroy Him. So too, in our own lives. The Lord is welcomed on the one hand and violently opposed on the other. There are qualities in our make-up which worship the Lord and acknowledge His sovereignty over us. There are also other qualities and other feelings which would destroy Him because they will brook no rivals.

Our minds are like the world into which the Lord came. Then it was people. Some in favour, some opposed. In our case it is certain qualities: certain thoughts and certain affections within us – some in favour, and some opposed. We bring to mind Mary and Joseph, Elizabeth and Zacharias, Simeon and Anna, the shepherds, the wise men, and the crafty Herod and his merciless soldiers. These all denote or represent characteristics and qualities in our minds, both those which aid the coming of the Lord and those which fiercely oppose it.

In this regard Herod the king who ruled in Jerusalem at the time, represents (or, is a symbol of) the dominant quality or love which rules in our lives prior to the Lord's Coming to us. Just as there was a man, Herod, so too there is a Herod in us which is the love of self, or the essential selfishness and selfcentredness of all of us before religious principles begin to have a genuine impact on our lives. No man clung to his throne more tenaciously than Herod, and nothing clings more tenaciously to its position of dominance over our lives than the love of self; a love into which we are born and which spreads its tentacles throughout the whole of our lives.

But Herod and the frightening manner in which he ruled did not constitute the total picture of that time. It was not entirely darkness. There were other people, as indeed with us there are other elements in our hearts and minds, far less prominent and more in the background though they may be. Every person has a conscience. Everyone of us has some understanding of right and wrong, and of what is just and fair. And the Lord appeals to this. For all that the love of self is in control; for all that Herod rules our lives; the Lord strives to get through to us, and to awaken us to the realities of the condition in which we are. And this awakening is pictured in the coming of the angel Gabriel to Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist; an awakening which opens our eyes to better things, and which prompts us repentance and reformation.

You will have noticed that the Christmas story speaks of the coming of John the Baptist first of all. He was to call on people to repent and to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. And so it is in our lives. The Lord doesn't come to us suddenly and unannounced. There has to be real repentance and re-ordering, of our lives and values. And this is what is meant by John. We must look at what we have done and ask ourselves why we have done it. There has to be frank acknowledgement of where we have committed evil and let the Lord down. We have to face up to the nature of certain things we think and desire, putting excuses on one side, and resolve to rid these things out our minds in future. Such is what is meant by repentance and, like John the Baptist, this must come first of all. As has been said "Unless the idea of repentance and its importance to spiritual life is conceived in the mind, and the actual

practice of repentance is brought forth" the Lord can't possibly be born in us.

Mary was of course the means by which the Lord came into the world, and, in us, she represents that which makes it possible for Him to be born in our lives. Mary represents a deep affection within a person; a longing for something deeper and better, for a life less selfish and self-centred; for thoughts which are more wholesome; a longing that comes to us in the light of what self-examination and repentance has revealed about our natures. We look at ourselves as in a mirror and see much that we don't like. We feel remorse and sorrow for many things we have said and committed. The stark reality of our selfishness and self-centredness hits us. And we wish it were otherwise. We almost despair it can be otherwise. We long for better thoughts, kinder actions, far less selfishness. And this longing is what is meant by Mary.

Her name in Hebrew means "bitterness". Mary denotes a longing in our lives born of bitter struggles with ourselves; born of disappointment in ourselves; born of sorrow that we are as we are, and done the things we have done. This is what is meant by Mary in us. And it is this particular quality, where it is genuine, that enables the Lord to be born in us.

But what in fact is born in our lives? Throughout this talk I have spoken of the birth of the Lord in us, but surely it is possible to be more specific. And it is. What is meant is the birth in us of unselfish love; the birth of self-less regard for our fellow men and women; the birth of a spiritual outlook on life; and the beginnings of regenerate thoughts and feelings about others and about life. The birth of the Lord, in other words, represents the dawning of regeneration, of that spiritual re-birth of which the Lord spoke about in His conversation with Nicodemus. It represents the commencement of a process whereby the whole of our lives and our outlook will be transformed.

It is, please note, a beginning only. And like the Lord, when a baby, such a beginning is fragile and vulnerable and will need to be protected, even guarded. Soon after Jesus was born Joseph, you may remember, was warned of Herod's intention and told to take the young child and His mother to Egypt where, it is estimated, they probably remained for something like six years. Only after Herod died was it safe for them to return to Nazareth. There, preparation continued and in time the Lord set about a public ministry of teaching and healing.

Every new effort we make to be less selfish, to be more tolerant, compassionate and forgiving; each new beginning; will attract opposition, in exactly the same way as the Coming of the Lord on earth attracted opposition. We must not despair about this. If we nurture and, like we said, protect, guard, and hold on to, principles, ideals and values we have newly come to see are important, in time the old dominant forces and attitudes which have ruled our lives will in time die away, just as Herod died, making way for the Lord to set about a saving ministry in our life.

Swedenborg wrote that but for the Lord's Advent into the world evil and iniquity would have become widespread throughout the world. So too in regard to ourselves. But for the Lord's Advent into our lives, evil and iniquity must in time come to control us. As the Lord was, at a point in history, the Redeemer of mankind, so He must become our individual Redeemer, vanquishing the power of evil in and over us; setting us free, that we may serve His purposes and be a channel through which joy and blessing may come to our fellow men and women.

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