

#### **The Lord's Coming Into The World - Part 4. The Lord's Coming to each individual:**

At Christmas I think most of us hope and strive after meaningfulness. We want our celebrations to have meaning. We want the occasion to have significance and for there to be an underlying reality within it all. And as we think about the meaning of Christmas, two main things come to mind. One is the historical event which the Gospel stories describe. Over two thousand years ago now, God became incarnate in order to redeem mankind from the overpowering force of evil. He entered into the human condition by birth of the virgin Mary, meeting face to face, and overcoming the awesome power which evil was beginning to have, not just over isolated individuals here and there, but over all people everywhere.

This is one thing, but there is another. And it is this. The Gospel stories describe the event which took place at a point of time in history, of the Christmas event and the Lord's coming to us individually. They tell of something which can be acted out time and time again in the individual lives of us all. In the talks I have so far given on the Lord's Coming into the world I have spoken of it as an event in history with immense implications, as it had and still has, for all of mankind. In this talk I am going to speak of His Coming to the individual person. For this is also described in the Gospel stories.

This is not altogether unfamiliar, for the obvious symbolism of at least parts of the Christmas story is widely recognised. It has ever moved people, for example, that when Mary and Joseph arrived at Bethlehem on the eve of the birth of Christ, "there was no room for them in the inn" (Luke 2, 7). And that speaks of a life so crowded with other things that there is no room for the Lord. Though He would wish to come to us He often cannot do so because our lives are so jammed up with other things. The circumstance in which Joseph and Mary found themselves is, as we might well otherwise describe it, a 'parable'; something which so obviously carries a deeper, spiritual meaning for us.

But that is only one small segment of the Christmas story. In fact all of the story is a 'parable'. It describes the advent of some new dimension in our lives. It speaks of the coming of something which has not been present previously; something for which people wait and prepare themselves; something for which we should all long for and strive after. And all the characters in that story, Mary and Joseph, Elisabeth and Zacharias, John the Baptist, the shepherds, the wise men, and Herod, all represent elements, or characteristics within our minds, which either aid the coming of the Lord into it, or else hinder and oppose it.

I have just spoken of the Lord's Coming to a person as the advent of some new dimension to their lives. Obviously it is more than that. What is meant is the living Presence of the Lord within us, with all the vast implications this carries for us. It means qualities such as love and unselfishness being brought forth in our lives, hopefully to grow and mature and to exercise an increasing influence over us. And it is this unselfishness, this determination to shun all evils and to live the Lord's way, which marks a turning point in our lives, just as that Divine Advent so long ago marked a turning point for all of mankind.

However genuine love and unselfishness does not come to a person unannounced, either without preparation for it, or in the absence of other factors playing their part. And this is where we must come to terms with what is represented by Mary and Joseph. Mary represents a desire and longing, deeply felt and very real, for something better than the selfishness and worldliness which comes so easily to us. She is an affection within us which looks towards better things and which would have us strive after the Lord's way. And it is through her or, in other words by means of the affection which she represents, that the qualities of which we are speaking are able to descend into our lives from above.

You will note that these qualities come into our lives 'from above'. They are not of our making. They are the result of the operation of the Holy Spirit working within that desire and longing, meant by Mary, and which acts as the medium through which they can come to us. Joseph, necessary as he was, a support to Mary to whom he was betrothed, represents the understanding of truth, the necessity of which cannot be questioned, but which in itself is not the origin of regenerate qualities within us. These always come from above.

Even so, they still cannot come and be a reality in our lives without preparation beforehand. We can speak of the Lord's Coming into our lives and ardently desire it, but we cannot avoid the necessity of the preparation which must precede it. John the Baptist must be born in us beforehand, and he must go and prepare the way of the Lord. "In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." (Matthew 3, 1 and 2).

John the Baptist represents the truths of Scripture working in our minds and calling us to repentance. And there is no mistaking the message they have for us: "wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right!" (Isaiah 1, 16-17). If life is to be changed and the Advent is to take place within us it will only do so in the wake of repentance. The logic is obvious. The Lord cannot come into a situation where the devil is entrenched and in control. We must make it possible for Him to come. By means of self examination we must make ourselves aware of evil within ourselves; pray to the Lord for strength, and at all times afterwards strive to overcome it. And however slow that process may be, however daunting, we must persevere, knowing that it is necessary if the Lord is going to be able to descend into our lives.

The Lord came into the world in far from auspicious circumstances and men ruled who were violently opposed to Him. If Herod could have done so he would have destroyed Jesus. And so it is with us. The Lord comes to us silently and by night. Before regeneration our lives are governed by principles which are opposed to Him and which would destroy Him if they could. There are within us, still holding on even after He has come to us, the love of self and the love of the world represented by Herod and Caesar, and ready to resist any threat to the control they have over us. But under Divine Providence there are other elements and qualities within us which rally to the Lord and welcome His Presence in us. We bring to mind Elisabeth and Zacharias, the shepherds and the wise men: Simeon and Anna who represent good affections and tender thoughts about the Lord which succour Him and are moved by joy at His Coming.

But that Coming is only a beginning, just as the Lord's birth in Bethlehem was only a beginning. Once born in us, hopefully the Presence of the Lord in our lives will grow and mature and increase in influence. Hopefully our willingness to be led by the Lord and to obey His teaching at all times and in all situations will deepen and grow stronger. Once it has made its advent into our lives, hopefully genuine unselfishness will come to pervade our every thought and action.

It is indeed true to say that the Lord is present with everyone everywhere, with the evil and with the good, for as Swedenborg wrote "without His presence no one can live". and as he goes on to say "But the Lord's Coming (which is a different thing from His presence) is only with those who receive Him, and these are they who believe on Him and do His commandments." (*True Christian Religion* 774).

The Coming of the Lord to the individual. This is the thought I leave you with this Christmas. A Coming which takes place with those who 'believe in Him and do His commandments'. Christmas is the time to remember not just the Lord's Coming into the world centuries ago, immensely important though that was, but also a time to remember the possibility of His coming into our individual lives. This can be a reality if we wish it to be and, in the year to come, I hope it really begins to become so.

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