

Children's Talk and Sermon Notes  
for Sunday, 6 June

## Children's Talk: Those Who are With Us

Are there more good people or bad people in the world? I think there are certainly more good people. But when we hear bad things have happened, or when we feel bad ourselves, it might seem like there are more bad people or more bad things than good ones. When we feel that way there is a story in the Word that can help us remember exactly how much good there is.

This story is about the bad guys, the Syrians, attacking the good guys, the Children of Israel.

Now the king of Syria was making war against Israel; and he consulted with his servants, saying, "My camp will be in such and such a place."<sup>9</sup> And the man of God sent to the king of Israel, saying, "Beware that you do not pass this place, for the Syrians are coming down there."<sup>10</sup> Then the king of Israel sent someone to the place of which the man of God had told him. Thus he warned him, and he was watchful there, not just once or twice.

Therefore the heart of the king of Syria was greatly troubled by this thing; and he called his servants and said to them, "Will you not show me which of us is for the king of Israel?"

And one of his servants said, "None, my lord, O king; but Elisha, the prophet who is in Israel, tells the king of Israel the words that you speak in your bedroom."

So he said, "Go and see where he is, that I may send and get him."

And it was told him, saying, "Surely he is in Dothan."

Therefore he sent horses and chariots and a great army there, and they came by night and surrounded the city.<sup>15</sup> And when the servant of the man of God arose early and went out, there was an army, surrounding the city with horses and chariots. And his servant said to him, "Alas, my master! What shall we do?"

So he answered, "Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them."<sup>17</sup> And Elisha prayed, and said, "Jehovah, I pray, open his eyes that he may see." Then Jehovah opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw. And behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. (2 Kings 6:8-16)

When Elisha's servants saw the enemy army he was terribly afraid. It seemed obvious to him that there was nothing they could do. But Elisha asked the Lord to open his eyes so he could see the even bigger army of the Lord that was protecting them.

Notice that Elisha did not (yet at least) change anything. The army was there the whole time. The only thing that changed was that the servant could see the army. That's also true for us. The Lord's army of angels is always there protecting us, we just don't notice it all the time.

So what can we do to get better at noticing the good things from the Lord that outnumber the bad things? We won't usually get to see actual angels, but we can see other things. When you feel alone, who are the people that love you, even if they are far away? If you're having a bad day, what are some of the good things that have happened to you recently? If you feel like you can't do anything right, what is something, no matter how small, that you can do right?

The Lord's goodness is everywhere, all the time. We just need to get better at seeing it.

# What is the New Church? Part 1

A Sermon by Pastor Joel Christian Glenn

6 June, 2021

Every year in June we celebrate the birthday of the “New Church,” or to give it its full name, the Church of the New Jerusalem. But what exactly are we celebrating? It is all too easy to fall into a mindset of “us” vs. “them” when we celebrate our church. Here we are in Westville, South Africa, one of a handful of New Church congregations in South Africa. Beyond our borders there are a number of other New Church congregations around the globe. And we can be rightly proud of who we are as a church and the values that we promote. But when we celebrate the New Church Day, we have to remember that it is not *our* church that we celebrate, but the Lord’s, and that His church can be found in every corner of the globe.

So when we say “the New Church,” what are we actually talking about? We might say that the New Church is made up of those groups that read the Word in light of the Writings of Emmanuel Swedenborg. I think this is what most of us mean when we casually use the phrase “New Church.” But if that is the full extent of the Lord’s Church on Earth than the Lord’s Church is woefully lacking. It would make barely a blip among the major religions and philosophies of the world. Either the New Church is spread further and wider than we imagine, or there is an overwhelming amount of work to make it so.

Thankfully I believe that the case is the former: what we see as the New Church, or “our” church, is quite limited compared to the Lord’s Church, or what we might call the real church. The case is similar to what we looked at in the Children’s Talk, so let’s return to that story:

<sup>15</sup> And when the servant of the man of God arose early and went out, there was an army, surrounding the city with horses and chariots. And his servant said to him, “Alas, my master! What shall we do?”

So he answered, “Do not fear, for those who *are* with us *are* more than those who *are* with them.” <sup>17</sup> And Elisha prayed, and said, “LORD, I pray, open his eyes that he may see.” Then the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw. And behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

The servant believed that they were a lost cause. Elisha knew that there was much more going on than could be seen with physical eyes. He knew that the Lord’s army far outnumbered that of the Syrians, in spite of the fact that the Syrians army was visible and the Lord’s was not.

This is often the case for us: the armies of darkness loom large in our minds eye, while the Lord’s army seems totally absent. At times we see this when we despair over the state of the church: people raised in it move away, the numbers are dwarfed by that of other denominations. But it goes beyond just a question of “the New Church vs. everyone else.” I have a pastor friend who laments the small size of his faithful congregation while greedy swindling pastors prosper in certain megachurches. But this mind-set can prevail outside of the context of church altogether. I know some of us are quite good at seeing what is working and focusing on the positive, but all too many of us get swept up in the negative state of our world. The news cycle brings doom and gloom on a daily basis. The economy languishes while corrupt politicians enrich themselves. The powerful become more powerful, the

weak weaker. Again, I wouldn't say that this applies to all of us; but we do at times despair of seeing the world become a truly and radically better place.

The antidote is to open our eyes, spiritually speaking, as Elisha asked for his servant. "Do not fear," he said, "for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." And indeed, the Lord's army vastly outnumbered that of the Syrians. If we are willing we also will be able to see that those who follow the Lord in our world are more than those who turn away. As I prepared for this sermon I read a colleague's and I think it expresses better than I could how this works, so I'll simply share his words:

Mr. and Mrs. Happily Married are almost never reported. Mom and Dad Family Man and Woman who get up in the morning, feed their children breakfast and see them safely off to school are never reported. Faithful Servant who goes to work, does his or her work faithfully and honestly, is never reported. Mr. and Mrs. Farmer who get up early to get the farm's necessary chores done are never reported. Mr., Mrs. or Miss Factory Worker who does his or her work competently and well is never reported.... And so on.

Good people, the backbone of the culture, are overlooked. They are not news, because their lives are not unusual. If they appear on television it is as contestants on a game show. Or if they are famous it is because they have died and merit an obituary. Otherwise all those good people who keep the nation going, who are faithful to their spouses and children, who don't make waves (as they say), who are not unusual in what they do or how they live — they do not make the news. They are not reported on. They seemingly don't exist.

But in fact they do exist, and they are more in number than those who deviate from what is expected of them in their lives and actions. (Rev. Bruce Rogers, "Those Who Are With Us")

If we are willing we will be able to see the true scope of the Lord's work in the world, and the innumerable good things that He is doing through ordinary everyday people.

Even though some of us may already view the world this way it is useful to be reminded of it when we celebrate the New Church. Because after all, this is what the church is: it is people looking to God, however they may understand him, and living a good life. It's only when we limit our view of the church to "us" that we miss this truth. Jesus encountered that us-vs-them mind-set as well, and taught that it could not last. At the time that He walked the Earth there were two groups caught in conflict with each other: the Jews and the Samaritans. Jesus was himself Jewish, but in a conversation with a Samaritan woman He moved beyond those kind of group limitations:

<sup>9</sup> Then the woman of Samaria said to Him, "How is it that You, being a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans....

<sup>19</sup> The woman said to Him, "Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship."

Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. You worship

what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” (John 4:9, 19-24)

Jesus did not say to the woman, the time will come when we all worship in Jerusalem, the holy place of the Jews; nor did He say the time would come when everyone would worship all in one place at all: in time all true worshiper would worship in spirit and in truth, regardless of where in the world they were located. All peoples who worship in spirit and truth are part of the Lord’s church.

What then does it mean to worship in spirit and truth? We could, especially when we see that word “truth” fall back to a limited or restricted few. Only people who worship the exact right way are part of the Lord’s truth. But that is not what it means. If we want to see the Lord’s church, the spirit we should look for is the spirit of life, the spirit of goodness and charity, the spirit of love for others. And the truth is the simple truth of what it takes to carry this loving spirit out. Truths like not to murder, steal, bear false witness, commit adultery, or covet. Truths like do unto others as you would have them do unto you and forgive your brother when he sins against you. All people who have this love and the truths and live according to them are worshipping the Father in spirit and truth, and are part of His worldwide church.

This is a humbling thought. Far from our little church being a plucky bastion against the forces of darkness, we are in fact one small part of a greater whole, a whole that encompasses millions upon millions and even billions of people. This is not to say that everyone is a part: there are genuinely cruel and selfish people who separate themselves from this worldwide spiritual communion. Then again, each and every one of us does that to some extent too. The dividing line between the Church and outside the church does not lie between one group of people and another, but within the heart of each individual. To the extent I love the Lord and do good to others, I too am part of the Lord’s church. To the extent I reject love to the Lord and do evil to others, I have left the Lord’s church.

In a few weeks’ time, on June 19<sup>th</sup>, only a fraction of the world’s population will celebrate New Church day. Yet that by no means indicates we are alone in what we celebrate. The Lord weaves us all together through goodness and love into a single community:

[The order that exists in heaven] exists on earth too, but the communities constituting it are scattered all over the earth and are made up of those who are governed by love to Him and charity towards the neighbour. But those scattered communities have been drawn together by the Lord in order that they too, like communities in heaven, may represent one human being. These communities exist not only within the Church but also outside it; and when taken all together they are called the Lord's Church, drawn together from the good scattered throughout all the earth. (*Secrets of Heaven* §7396)

We cannot always feel this unity, but we can see it. And when we see it we can celebrate it. The church is alive and well throughout the world.

But this is also a reminder that the church is the Lord’s, not ours. We have a tendency to spot some idea that resonates with our doctrine or some behaviour that aligns with our ideals and to claim it for the New Church, as if we can claim credit

even if the person in question technically knows nothing about the New Church. There's a kind of honour by association: they may not know it, but we know that they New Church, i.e. us. This attitude undoes the very thing we celebrate: it once again reduces the church to a matter of us versus them. In researching this sermon I was struck by how useful it was to focus on the phrase "the Lord's Church," rather than "The New Church." Again, they are exactly the same thing. But in saying "the Lord's Church" we put front and centre that it is not, by definition, our church. In fact, in looking for the passages that speak of how broadly spread the church is, simply looking for the term "the Lord's Church" bore plentiful fruit.

There is more that could be said about the point of having distinctions at all, if we're all in the same boat, and we will get to that later in this series. But for now, as we begin the focus on New Church Day, let's remember that we are not celebrating us; we are celebrating the Lord, and the billions of people who willingly invite Him into their lives, every day, through love and service to others.