

Children's Talk and Sermon
Sunday, 19 December

Children's Talk: Walk in the Light

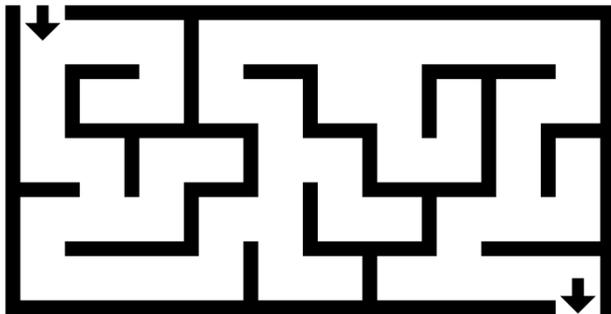
Light is something that is very useful to us. Without light we could not see anything. One of the ways that the Lord uses of talking about Christmas is to say that it was like light coming into a dark world. In place of the prophets He says this:

The people who walked in darkness
Have seen a great light;
Those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death,
Upon them a light has shined. (Isaiah 9:2)

Later, in the Gospel of John, He talks about the life that is light for people:

In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. (John 1:4-5)

So let's talk a bit about light and darkness. One of the things that light helps us do is see where we are going. Now it's so bright that we couldn't make it dark in here if we tried. But I thought of a way of demonstrating how light helps us see our way. So I need a volunteer, someone who is willing to draw while blindfolded. What I want you to first do is take this marker and draw the solution to this maze:



That was fairly easy, right? Well now we'll take away all the light. Now do it without any light to help. That was a lot harder! Imagine if it weren't a question of drawing the maze, but walking through it.

So how is the Lord like light in our lives? He is like light because He teaches us how we are to behave. Going through life without any truth from the Lord is like trying to complete a maze without being able to see anything.

Think of getting into a fight with someone without knowing anything about the Lord and His truth. You might think you can fix it by fighting with your fists. But that just makes it worse! So you tell lies about the other person to make them look bad, but now people don't trust you! So you ignore it and nothing gets fixed, and that doesn't work either! That's like going through a maze without light, and getting more and more lost.

But when you learn of the Lord, He will give you ways to get out of the bad situation. He says to forgive, so you forgive. But of course, He also says to not let

evil go unnoticed, so instead of ignoring it you try to fix it. And He says there is good in everyone, so you try to see the fight from their point of view. By following the Lord's teachings, it's like being guided by light out of a maze.

And that's why Jesus came into this world. People, not even adults, knew how to love each other properly. So He came to show them how they might live a good life, full of wisdom and truth to guide the way.

Light and Life

A Sermon by Pastor Joel Christian Glenn
19 December, 2021

Christmas is a time of lights and brightness. Partly this is because of Christmas traditions from the northern hemisphere: as the daylight wanes and the days grow shorter, people feel a need to push back the darkness and welcome in the light. Of course, down here that doesn't apply so much. But Christmas is about light for other, more relevant reasons. Jesus came into the world in a time of spiritual darkness with the purpose of shining the light of His truth into the world. Today we are going to explore the meaning of this light and what it means for our lives.

As in the past couple of Sundays we will look to the Gospel of John. John has a lot to say about light. Here is one way that he presents the Christmas story:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. (John 1:1-5)

Our focus will be on the phrase, "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men." The first point to make is not in fact about the light itself, but its source. It does not simply say that the Lord came as the light; but rather that in Him was life, and that life was the light.

In the Word light stands for truth or wisdom. In one passage for example, we read,

Oh, send out Your light and Your truth!
Let them lead me. (Psalm 43:3)

And in fact we use the idea of light this way in modern English. If we understand someone's point we say, "I see what you mean." If someone is intelligent we say they are bright. Bringing something to light means making it known. When someone finally gets it we talk of the lightbulb switching on. A wise person is enlightened. We'll come back to the meaning of light as truth or wisdom in a moment; but I want to emphasize that it was *life* that was in the Word, it was *life* that was the light. In the Lord wisdom or truth is not mere dead knowledge, not just facts or bits of information; it is not neutral or objective. In the Lord all wisdom and truth is from life: and that life is the life of love and goodness. The Teachings of the New Church put it this way:

Because Divine wisdom and Divine love are united, and were united in the Lord from eternity, therefore we are told as well that "In Him was life, and the life was the light of people." Life means Divine love, and light Divine wisdom. This is the union meant by the statement that the Word was in the beginning with God and that God was the Word. With God means in God, for wisdom is present in love, and love in wisdom. (*Doctrine of the Lord* §1)

What this means in practice is that every teaching or truth that the Lord gives us is for the sake of love and goodness. In some cases this is obvious: the Golden Rule,

loving the neighbour, doing good, not to judge others, and helping the less fortunate clearly are truths motivated by love. But for other teachings from the Lord it can be easy to forget that they too are all from and about love: do good to those who hate you; repent of your sins; if your hand causes you to sin cut it off; hell is real and influential; and all of the “Thou Shalt Nots.” But even these are all from the Lord’s love. They are designed to lead to better, happier, more joyful and useful lives. They are designed to have this impact not just for the righteous, but for everyone; He gives His light to every individual who comes into the world (John 1:9). Not a single truth from the Lord is isolated from His love; in others words, His light always shines forth from life; and the goal is to uplift every human being into His love.

But if love is the point, then why all the focus on light, or truth? Why not go straight to life, or love? The problem is that while love can be felt, it is hard to see without wisdom or truth to give it shape. Truth is the means by which we understand love, and in turn can learn how to put it into practice. This was crucial because at the time humanity did not understand how to love. They walked in darkness. So the Lord came as light, in order to lead people into life. As the prophet Isaiah said,

The people who walked in darkness
Have seen a great light;
Those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death,
Upon them a light has shined. (Isaiah 9:2)

By teaching truth, Jesus showed people what it means to be loving and what it takes to get there. By teaching truth Jesus also showed people where they had gone wrong and the ways in which they may have pretended to be loving, or even thought they were loving, but were in fact causing harm. Without these truths love would not have had a chance to grow and flourish.

And the growth of love is of course the point for us who hear Jesus’ truths as well. We are not just to observe the light, but to walk in it; we are not supposed to just have faith, but to live it. Imagine walking about in the dark, knowing that there is danger nearby, but not knowing what the danger is or how close you are to it. Let’s say there’s a cliff. To save you from the danger someone switches on a light. With the light the dangers are still there, but can be avoided. Now imagine that when the light switches on, the light hurts your eyes so you decide to keep them closed. Or worse still, you open your eyes, observe the danger, but continue to walk towards it anyway. That would be ridiculous. And yet if we know of the Lord and His teachings, but ignore it in how we live, we are just like the person who plunges himself over a cliff knowing full well that it is there and having had every opportunity of turning aside.

When we think of it abstractly like this it seems obviously stupid to not take heed of the warnings that we are given through truth from the Lord. But when we are in evil we can find that it blinds us to what is right in front of us. The Lord teaches that this is the reaction that people have to the light:

He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. (John 3:18)

This at first makes it seem like belief is sufficient, in other words, that one only need see the light, and that's all that is needed. But Jesus continues and makes it clear that how one responds to the light is actually what matter:

And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God. (John 3:19-21)

People who practice evil do not want to come to the light because it will reveal their evil. Now it would be easy to make this about others: those other people hide their wicked ways because they wouldn't want us (the good people) to see them. But in some sense it applies to all of us: to the extent that we have been committing some evil, we don't want other people to find out; nor at times are we even willing to admit it to ourselves. To use the analogy of the light and darkness again, it is like someone who has confidently declared the rightness of the path he had chosen, and so refuses to deviate from it even when the light exposes the danger, since to deviate would be to admit that he was wrong, and his pride will not permit that.

How many of us have such pride when it comes to how we live our lives? We have become set in our ways, our habits, and have even let them define us, and to change is to admit that what has defined us has been in fact evil. Take even pride as an example. Take a man who his whole life has been proud of how stern he has been, how devoted to what is right, how unwilling to yield even an inch to do things incorrectly. Then as adults, it comes to light that his children have and continue to struggle with his personality. What he thought was giving a good example has in fact caused immense harm. They feel unworthy and judged by him, and struggle to understand how someone so harsh could have loved them. In order to acknowledge the harm he has caused the man would have to admit that the very things he took pride in for years, the very things that have defined him, are not what he thought they were. The light has been shined on his life; but it will take an immense effort of will to walk according to the light, and allow himself to be humbled, and to turn from how he has acted.

In order for that to happen there needs to be something within him beyond just understanding. The light, or truth, can only be seen when we the recipients are coming from a loving heart, or a heart that desires to live well. It seems strange, in our rationalistic modern world, to say that some idea or truth can only be seen with the right attitude; and it is true that on one level an evil person can intellectually understand truth. But he cannot "get" it in the same way. A wise understanding comes from goodness, and especially from walking the walk. The Teachings of the New Church explain why this is the case, again using the correspondence of light and seeing:

It is plainly evident that the Word is disclosed by virtue of goodness. Everyone looks from the love present in him at the things that belong to that love; and what he sees he calls truths because these are in harmony with it. Everyone's love holds the light of his life within it, for love is like a flame which radiates light. The nature of a person's love or flame therefore determines that of the light of truth with him. Those who are stirred by a love of good are able to see the things belonging to that love, and so to see the truths that are in the Word.

They do so according to the amount and the quality of their love of good, for light or intelligence flows in from heaven, that is, from the Lord by way of heaven. This is why, as already stated, no one is able to see and acknowledge the interior contents of the Word except one whose life is governed by good. (*Secrets of Heaven* §3798)

We call truth that which supports and confirms what we love. If we want to see by the Lord's truth, then we must love what He teaches, and love it in such a way that we desire to put it into practice. We must love it more than we love ourselves and our own pride. When we have that humble heart, then we will see the light to walk in it.

All of us enter states of life like that of the first Christmas: states when we are in the dark, confused about where to turn, ignorant of how to live better, grasping for anything that will lift us up. It is into this state that the Lord then, 2000 years ago, and again now today, comes with light; not light to expose our evil and hypocrisy to judgment; but to show a path out of selfishness into a life of goodness and love. The Lord's light is not just light, but is the light of life. With this light as our guide we have nothing to fear, and may walk into a new life with strength. As we read in the Psalms,

Jehovah is my light and my salvation;
Whom shall I fear?
Jehovah is the strength of my life;
Of whom shall I be afraid? (Psalm 27:1)