

Children's Talk and Sermon Notes
for Sunday, 5 June

Children's Talk: Who are You in the Story?

Revelation 12:1 Now a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a garland of twelve stars. ² Then being with child, she cried out in labor and in pain to give birth.

Revelation 12:3 And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great, fiery red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. ⁴ His tail drew a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was ready to give birth, to devour her Child as soon as it was born. ⁵ She bore a male Child who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron. And her Child was caught up to God and His throne. ⁶ Then the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, that they should feed her there one thousand two hundred and sixty days.

Revelation 12:7 And war broke out in heaven: Michael and his angels fought with the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, ⁸ but they did not prevail, nor was a place found for them in heaven any longer. ⁹ So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.

Revelation 12:10 Then I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, "Now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down. ¹¹ And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death. ¹² Therefore rejoice, O heavens, and you who dwell in them! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time."

Revelation 12:13 Now when the dragon saw that he had been cast to the earth, he persecuted the woman who gave birth to the male *Child*. ¹⁴ But the woman was given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she is nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent. ¹⁵ So the serpent spewed water out of his mouth like a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away by the flood. ¹⁶ But the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed up the flood which the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. ¹⁷ And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.

The New Church: a City and a Bride

A Sermon by Pastor Joel Christian Glenn

5 June, 2022

Every June we celebrate the birthday of the New Church. One way of thinking of this is as a time to commemorate an historical event that happened long in the past and which has ramifications for us sitting here today. We could reflect back on the life of Emanuel Swedenborg and the call that he received to publish the books that are the foundation of the New Church's theology. There is nothing wrong with this approach; knowing where we have come from is important. But there is also something of finality in simply looking to the past: as if the New Church was a thing that happened, as if once it began it was full and complete in the same instance. Yet that is not the case at all! The New Church is not our past, but our future; or rather, our hoped for future. The Teachings of the New Church cast a vision that we can aspire to. As soon as we think we have made it, we have actually lost it; as long as we realize we aren't there yet, there is still reason to keep following the Lord and growing under His guidance.

The Lord's Word presents many images of what the New Church could or should be. Today we are going to focus on two of those images that are closely related yet distinct. They are the images of a city and of a bride. The apostle John was shown visions of the spiritual world, visions of what was to come in due course in spiritual history. He wrote these visions down in what was to become the book of Revelation. These visions, on the surface so bizarre or frightening, and at times wondrous, use symbols to speak of the future of the church. This future is not told in historical events but in spiritual symbols. This is where we encounter that image of a city and a bride:

Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. (Revelation 21:2)

The culmination of John's visions was this beautiful image of a city compared to a bride.

At first glance that's a weird combination of images. A city is impersonal, a thing, with structure and design. You can draw a map of it and describe it in intricate detail in terms of infrastructure and neighbourhoods and city planning. A bride is very different: she is human. By definition the word "bride" is relational. There is no bride without a relationship, and a close one at that. So the Lord's Church, in this one image, is presented both as a structure to be understood, and as a relationship to be lived. Both of those tell us a great deal about what we should aspire to if we want to truly be the Lord's New Church on Earth.

The description of the city presents a metropolis beyond imagining. In great detail John lays out the structure and design of the New Jerusalem:

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls filled with the seven last plagues came to me and talked with me, saying, "Come, I will show you the bride, the Lamb's wife." And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, having the glory of God. Her light was like a most precious stone, like a jasper stone, clear as crystal. Also she had a great and high wall with twelve gates, and twelve angels at the gates, and

names written on them, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel: three gates on the east, three gates on the north, three gates on the south, and three gates on the west.

Now the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. And he who talked with me had a gold reed to measure the city, its gates, and its wall. The city is laid out as a square; its length is as great as its breadth. And he measured the city with the reed: twelve thousand furlongs. Its length, breadth, and height are equal. (Revelation 21:9-16)

The description goes on with even further details, but I'll stop there. This image of a city at first glance has little to say about how we live our lives. But the teachings of the New Church explain that it is an image of the doctrine or teaching of the church:

It was seen in the form of a city because a city symbolizes doctrine (nos. 194, 712), and a church is a church by virtue of its doctrine and its living in accordance with that doctrine. It was also seen as a city in order that its whole character might be described, and this is described by the city's walls, gates, foundations, and various dimensions. (*Apocalypse Revealed* §896)

All the obscure details of the city as described by John have something to say about the doctrine, or teachings, of the New Church. These teachings are the bulwark that defends our minds against the assault of evil; these teachings are the gates that lead to everlasting life; these teachings are the foundation of a good life; these teachings reach into every aspect of life, in all directions. And so these teachings were seen and described as the walls, gates, foundations, and dimensions of a city.

One of the central pillars of the New Church is that we must understand the Lord if we are going to follow Him. We never stop learning, nor should we ever stop engaging our rational minds. The better we get at thinking rationally and wisely, the more able we will be to serve the Lord, and by extension, our neighbour. Our minds without any truth or understanding are like a town with no walls, gates, or foundations. Without these structures a town would be defenceless and disorganized. Likewise the human mind without teaching from the Lord is defenceless and disorganized.

But knowledge alone is not enough. There also needs to be relationship, hence why the New Church is simultaneously described as a bride, prepared for her husband. It goes without saying that there is a stark contrast between a city and a bride. A city is a thing, a bride is a person; a city is structure and layout, a bride is defined by a relationship. We have already read the simple statement that the city was seen as a bride; in other places the personification is even clearer, as the bride speaks:

And the Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely.

He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming quickly." Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus! (Revelation 22:17, 20)

Such a different feel from that of the city! There is an urgent personal appeal, full of affection and desire. The desire to be joined to the Lord is often represented by a bride or a wife in the Word. The Teachings of the New Church explains the reason:

...a virgin symbolizes the church as a bride who desires to be conjoined with the Lord and to become a wife; and a church that desires to be conjoined with the Lord loves truths because they are true. For truths bring about conjunction when people live in accordance with them. (*Apocalypse Revealed* §620)

If we want to be the New Church, we have to embody a profound desire to be joined to the Lord, a desire like that of a bride to become married to the groom.

This joining to the Lord is not something that comes about because we desire it; it comes about to the extent that we live the Lord's teachings. When we do what the Lord teaches and live in a way that is truly loving, the Lord is more and more connected to our lives.

This living relationship with the Lord is what makes our knowledge of spiritual things worthwhile. A city without people living in it is pointless; and knowledge in our minds, no matter how profound that knowledge is, without putting it into practice, is pointless as well. A city exists so that people can live in it. The teachings of the New Church exist so that we can live as well. This unity of structure and life, of teachings and a relationship with the Lord, are presented in the prophet Jeremiah, again using the imagery of both a city and a wedding:

Thus says Jehovah: "Again there shall be heard in this place—of which you say, 'It is desolate, without man and without beast'—in the cities of Judah, in the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate, without man and without inhabitant and without beast, the voice of joy and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voice of those who will say:

"Praise Jehovah of hosts,
For Jehovah is good,

For His mercy endures forever"— and of those who will bring the sacrifice of praise into the house of Jehovah. For I will cause the captives of the land to return as at the first,' says Jehovah. (Jeremiah 33:10-11)

In the cities of Judah, in the streets of Jerusalem, there shall again be heard the voice of joy and gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the bride.

This is what we want to aspire to as the New Church: to be a place where we learn deep truths from the Lord; but always bearing in mind that those deep truths are for the sake of life, so that in them can be heard the voice of joy and gladness, the joy and gladness of being united to the Lord through how we live, and united to one another through the same. All else in the church depends on this life and this love:

This is the meaning of the Lord's declaration that the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments: you shall love God above all things, and the neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:37-40).

Moreover I can assert that a person cannot possess a grain of truth that is in itself true except to the extent that it springs from the goodness of love from the Lord, and so cannot possess a grain of faith that is in itself faith, that is, a

living, saving and spiritual faith, except to the extent that it springs from charity from the Lord. (*Apocalypse Revealed* §908)

This month we celebrate the New Church. We celebrate it, in part, as a thing that was begun by the Lord many years ago. But more importantly we celebrate the New Church as an ongoing aspiration in our lives: we aspire to learn the truths that will guide and protect us; and we aspire to build a relationship with the Lord by living them. To the extent we do that, we become the Lord's Church; and to the extent we do that we will continue to daily celebrate the real meaning of the New Church, as we embody it every day.