

# The Story of the Word

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

Sunday, 10 September, 2023

## Children's Talk: Why did the Lord tell Stories?

All these things Jesus spoke to the multitude in parables; and without a parable He did not speak to them, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying:

“I will open My mouth in parables;

I will utter things kept secret from the foundation of the world.”

(Matthew 13:34-35)

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The Word is told as a story. It is true that within that story there is a lot that is opaque: detailed instructions on how to sacrifice a heifer, long lists of genealogical records, enigmatic prophecies of doom and of rebirth, along with a myriad other topics and subjects. But at heart the Word remains a story. It is a story that, from beginning to end, and in every detail, is about the Lord Himself; and so by extension it is about us. This story lies at the centre of who we are as a church, and the centre also of our individual lives.

The Lord spoke in parables much of the time. In fact, everything the Lord spoke was a kind of parable:

All these things Jesus spoke to the multitude in parables; and without a parable He did not speak to them, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying:

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(Matthew 13:34-35)

There are many reasons that the Lord chose to speak through parables or stories. For one thing there is power in speaking through real, tangible, objects. We never encounter spiritual and heavenly realities apart from something natural: you don't just love abstractly, you love a person; and when you reflect on your love for them you imagine their face, their body, the sound of their voice, the feel of their hand in yours (*Divine Love and Wisdom* §210). Love is most powerful when it is felt even on that physical level; and likewise the Lord's deeply spiritual and heavenly message is most powerful when it is rooted in tangible stories, such as we find in the Word (*Divine Love and Wisdom* §221).

But what is *the* story of the Word? We can point to this story or that, but what holds it all together? These kinds of overarching stories are important because they

shape who we are. Think of the story that a nation tells itself: what was the story of South Africa in 1980? What is the story of South Africa in 2023? They are very different, aren't they? This is true for every nation. And it is true of the church as well. The Word contains our story; and to the extent we understand and embrace that story we too can be changed.

We find something of a summary of the Word's summary in the opening passages of the work *True Christian Religion*:

*The Faith of the New Heaven and of the New Church in Its Universal Form* is as follows:

The Lord from eternity, who is Jehovah, came into the world to subjugate the hells and to glorify His Human; and without this no mortal could have been saved; and those are saved who believe in Him. (*True Christian Religion* §2)

This simple sentence touches on all things of faith. And it is the story that the Word tells. The purpose of the Word is to reveal to us who the Lord from eternity, Jehovah is, and the nature of His Divine Love and Wisdom; how He, the omnipotent God Himself, came into the world and came to grips with the forces of hell that afflicted mankind; how, although drawing on His Divine power, He conquered those hells in His human form, and glorified His Human, and so joined His Divine and His Human that He can forever hold the hells subject to Himself; and how when we believe in the Lord, believe not just with our minds but with our hearts and our actions, then we as individuals are saved from those very same hells that the Lord fought and conquered.

But again, it is not told merely as facts, but as a story. Once upon a time, or rather, in the beginning, Jehovah, the God of the universe created the world and all the things in it. He created mankind and provided everything that the people could ever want, in a beautiful garden. He created all this so that He could have someone to love. But in time the people strove for independence; they wanted to figure things

out on their own, and not have to rely on trust in God, so they ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and evil. In doing so they begin to invite evil and falsity into their lives, until they were so consumed by selfishness that they were wiped out by a flood; but not all of them. Some were preserved, Noah and his family, and from their line perhaps humanity could be redeemed. The Lord chose a man, Abram, to be the father of this line of people. The descendants of Abram however did not have an easy time. They were enslaved in Egypt and forgot the Lord. Even when they were freed they continually turned from the Lord. They saw God only dimly, and attributed to Him all their misfortune. They went through the motions of a spiritual life, but there was no real substance to it. So they brought evil and destruction on themselves and on their kingdom, until they were shattered by empires and reduced to a mere remnant of what they might have been. At last there was so little genuine good left in the human race, that the power of hell threatened to once again overwhelm humanity as at the flood; not a flood of waters but a flood of selfishness, manipulation, control, hurt, and deceit.

But then something miraculous happened. A tiny infant was born in the little village of Bethlehem, on the outskirts of Jerusalem. On the surface there was nothing special about this little boy. But within His soul He was Jehovah Himself, the very source of the creation of the universe, the Divine Love from which everything had been made and for the sake of which everything exists. Like anyone, He was taught and He grew and He faced challenges and temptations. But unlike anyone else, from His own power He resisted each and every temptation that came His way. Unlike anyone else, He allowed Himself to come to grips not just with one or two evils at a time, like you or I, but He let the entirety of Hell flood into His life, and yet faced each one from Divine Love, by means of Divine Truth, and so was victorious.

Although the world hated Him, and crucified Him, He conquered every hell that ever has or ever could exist, and upon rising from the dead once again unified Himself with His own Divine Soul. And He remains, eternally keeping hell in check by means of that very Humanity that He took on in the world. When we have faith in Him, and trust Him, and in having faith in Him such that we live a life based on His teachings, it is His power that allows us to resist and to grow. Through Him we have the opportunity to be different from what we are, to be transformed into people who are loving and wise, as we were intended to be from the creation of the World.

Not everyone took advantage of this opportunity. Some twisted the message, so that faith became more important than charity, and what one believed more important than how one behaved. Hell saw a chance to undo what the Lord had done. So the Lord came into the world again, this time not bodily, but in the form of a new revelation, a revelation so crystal clear on what was required of us that it could not be twisted or manipulated into saying anything other than what is true: that we are only saved if we take hold of the Lord's power, and follow Him. The story isn't over. Here we are today, hundreds of years later. How the story continues is up to us: will we take up the challenge, and live as the Lord teaches? This is the story that the Word tells. We are invited to pick up this story and make it our own:

Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me." (Matthew 16:24)

But we also don't just come into it at the end. I'm going to tell another story. It's a made up story, but it is based on real life, and elements could have happened to any of you. There was a young child who had everything he could ask for from his parents. They gave him food and clothing and shelter, as well as love and kindness. But as this boy got older, he developed an independent streak. He was no longer content to rely on his parents telling him what to do. He wanted to figure things out

on his own. He grew distant from them, turning a cold shoulder when they asked about his day. He spurned their advice and chose friends they would have not approved of. He fell in with friends who smoked and swore and got into trouble. He followed his desires, feeling that he was entitled to enjoy life.

But he also noticed that life worked better when he controlled his desires; when he tapped into that part of him that could lift his mind and think rationally about what was best for them. He rode out the worst of things this way. On the surface he even learned how to keep up the appearance of a healthy spiritual life. But as an adult his resentments grew. He failed out of the career that he dreamed of and despised the corporate work that consumed his life and time. Anger, resentment, self-pity became chains that bound him, with an underlying sense of failure. He turned to drinking more and more to numb his mind from his life.

One day he began drinking first thing in the morning. He went into work, and was found out, and nearly let go. He was sent home. In his seething anger and bitterness, he hit rock bottom. And he realized that only the Lord could save him from the chains that bound him. He realized that he needed more than an external life, but that he needed to find a way of welcoming the Lord into his heart. He turned to the Lord's Word, and found the path of repentance, and began to walk it. It was a painful process: it involved the death of things he loved, the death of a view of himself, and the death of habits and behaviour that he had long hidden or denied. But through this dying he was resurrected, born again as a new kind of person. And as he went deeper into this new life he came to fully experience the joy of salvation, and to fully understand the meaning and purpose of life. He came to a fuller understanding of who God was, and why he had been led as he had been by Providence. He came to

be not only free of his past sins, but truly living, spiritually, and enjoying that life to the full.

The story I just told may or may not resonate with your own. But although it is a story separated from the stories of the Word by thousands of years, it is also a story that is identical to the story of the Word. Whatever your story is, the case is the same: your story is the Lord's story. This is sometimes obvious; and sometimes less so. But the Word is written in a way that every verse, even every word, has a spiritual meaning:

If anyone could know how many arcana each particular verse contains, he would be amazed, for the number of arcana contained is past telling, and this is very little shown in the letter. (*Secrets of Heaven* §167)

This deeper meaning tells the Lord's story; and by extension it tells ours. We see as it were a mirror of our life. If we search the Scriptures seeking to find the truths that will set us on the path we need to follow, if we allow what we find to shape us, then we too will have a story that leads to a happy ending, an eternity of joy and happiness with the Lord in heaven.