

## **Guarding Spiritual Freedom**

### **A Sermon by Rev. Kurt H. Asplundh**

"Along the bank of the river, on this side and that, will grow all trees used for food; their leaves will not wither, and their fruit will not fall. They will bear fruit every month, because their water flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food and their leaves for medicine" (Ezek. 47:12).

The final chapters of the prophecy of Ezekiel recount a great vision of a new city and a new temple in Israel. Our text, taken from this vision, describes a river of healing waters coming from the sanctuary. Along the banks, on both sides, grow wonderful trees that bear fruit every month and whose leaves never wither. "Their fruit will be for food and their leaves for medicine."

There is an unmistakable similarity here to John's vision of the Holy City in the final chapter of Revelation. Both tell of a river of life-giving water flowing from the throne of God; both tell of trees with fruit and leaves, fruit for food and leaves for medicine, the "healing of the nations." The visions of the great city and temple with its river and trees of life should be an inspiration to us all. These are visions of the New Church. Both picture the vitality and importance of the New Church. Through it there is to be a healing of all the nations.

When we look at the world in which we live we see a desperate need for healing. Many evils are plainly evident. False ideas abound. We can look inward too. There is a world that lives in us as well as a world around us. We would have to admit that there are evils and falsities in this personal world of ours. Our responsibility to heal ourselves is immediate, and our influence in this private world is greater than elsewhere. Here again the New Church is vital for a healing.

But what is it that the New Church has to offer the world which is so vitally important? What does the New Church provide for each one of us that is unique and powerful?

One answer may be found in the symbolic meaning of the text, especially what is said of the leaves of the trees that they will be for "medicine." The same is true of the Tree of Life which John described. Its leaves are for the healing of the nations. What is meant by these

leaves? What do they have to do with the New Church or with us? These are questions we will answer presently, but first a word about the Last Judgment, what many people call the Judgment Day, which preceded the establishment of the New Church.

One of the unique teachings of the New Church in the Christian world is that the great judgment promised in the Scriptures has already taken place. It was not the end of the world as some believe. It was a judgment and a reckoning in the spiritual world. The prophecies of the overthrow of kingdoms, the darkening of the sun, the falling of the stars of heaven were fulfilled in the spiritual realm where all people are together after death. These pictures of the Last Judgment were symbolic of a reordering of the heavens and the hells by the Lord. The Last Judgment was an exposing of the real nature of hidden evil loves and false teachings by which people had been held captive for centuries. When the Lord revealed these, finally, people could be free from them.

One way we can imagine the nature of this great change is to think of the effect of a new discovery or a scientific breakthrough in the scientific community. Traditional thinking is shaken, overturned, perhaps completely rejected. Everything has to adjust to the new evidence. Schools of thought that have held sway become discredited. Beliefs and practices have to change.

The Last Judgment was this kind of change with regard to religious truths and deep-rooted religious beliefs. It was not, as most had assumed, a reordering of the political and ecclesiastical structures of this world. So we are taught, "the state of the world hereafter will be altogether similar to what it has been heretofore, for the great change which has taken place in the spiritual world does not induce any change in the natural world as to the external form ... " (LJ 73). In other words, the world will continue after this judgment much as it has before. There will be divided countries, war and peace, various religious sects teaching different interpretations of doctrine and practicing distinct rites. Since this judgment took place in the middle of the 18th century, we have more than 200 years of history showing that life in the natural world has continued unchanged.

The great change is an internal one. The Last Judgment has effected a new state of spiritual freedom. We are told that the people of the church

will be "in a more free state of thinking" on matters of faith and about spiritual things.

What is the significance of this? This is far-reaching. To have spiritual freedom is the greatest and most precious of life's treasures. We can compare it only to having natural freedom a much less important gift. Yet we prize our natural freedom. We fight for freedom and may be willing to die for it. The ability to choose what we shall do, where we shall live, and how we shall live is important to us. How much more should we prize the inner freedom that allows us to know what is true and right and to love what is good and useful. It was such a gift that Solomon, the king, chose when the Lord said: "Ask! What shall I give you?" And he said, "... give to Your servant an understanding heart ... that I may discern between good and evil ..." (I Kings 3:5-9).

Spiritual freedom involves being free from false ideas, seductive theories and perverted thinking. Spiritual freedom involves the ability to discern evil affections, destructive loves and selfish motives. To discern and identify these allows us the freedom to decide whether or not we will be swept up by them and carried away by them to certain unhappiness and slavery.

Spiritual freedom was what the Lord meant when He said to those Jews who believed Him, "If you abide in My word ... you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:31, 32). He added: "Whoever commits sin is a slave of sin" (Ibid. 34).

The Last Judgment has released the world from the grip of false doctrine; it has given each of us the opportunity to know the truth and to throw off the bonds of spiritual slavery.

This is where the New Church comes in. After the Last Judgment the Lord established a New Church in which the spiritual sense of the Word has been disclosed and interior Divine truths revealed. This church is pictured as the Holy City, New Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven. That city signifies the doctrine of truth, foursquare, solid, and beautiful. Within its walls, straddling the river of water from God, is the tree of life, bearing its fruit every month and having luxuriant leaves said to be "for the healing of the nations." Let us focus on those leaves.

We are told that the leaves of the tree signify "rational truths." In the Word, a man is often compared to a tree, its fruit meaning his goods of

life, its leaves his rational thoughts. So in the first Psalm the man who loves the law of the Lord is said to be like a tree by the water which brings forth fruit and whose leaf does not wither (see AC 885).

The leaves of the trees in our text were said to be for "medicine," as the leaves of the Tree of life were to be for a healing. "Here [the word] `tree' denotes the man of the church in whom is the kingdom of the Lord, its `fruit' the good of love and of charity, its `leaf' the truths there from, which serve for the instruction of the human race and for their regeneration, for which reason the leaf is said to be for `medicine.' Further concerning this, we are taught that the leaves for the healing of the nations signify "rational truths ... by which they who are in evils and thence in falsities are led to think soundly and to live becomingly" (AR 932:2).

Here, then, is a vital function of the New Church both for us as individuals and for the world in which we live. We have a mission to preserve and extend the state of spiritual freedom which was brought about through the Last Judgment and assured by the establishment of the New Church. The doctrine of the church delivers the spiritual rational truths which can bring about a healing. These truths are the necessary basis of that healing process. Without them, the hells will prevail, for we will not even know that we are in spiritual slavery. Listen to this teaching: "One reason why man does not ... desire to come out of spiritual servitude into spiritual liberty is that he does not know what spiritual slavery is and what spiritual freedom is; he does not possess the truths that teach this; and without truths, spiritual slavery is believed to be freedom, and spiritual freedom to be slavery" (DP 149).

It is vitally important then that truths should be known and believed; "for man is enlightened by truths," we are told, "but is made blind by falsities" (AC 2588:8). "Truths make evils manifest ... but from evil none can see what is good and true ... " (HH 487).

Every New Church person should follow the example of Solomon and ask of the Lord a wise and understanding heart. It will be the unique capacity of those who love and study the Heavenly Doctrine of the New Church to discern the quality of their states and the quality of the civil, moral and natural states of the world around them. This is the special intelligence and the special use of the church. How can spiritual freedom be preserved and extended without some ability to see through appearances, to make critical analysis and practical judgment? This is

not from us or according to our degree of knowledge. As Joseph said when they called him to interpret the dreams of Pharaoh, "Do not interpretations belong to God? It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh an answer of peace" (Gen. 40:8; 41:16). The "truly human mind," we are told, "acknowledges that God alone thinks from Himself, and that man thinks from God" (DP 321).

That we should think from God and not from ourselves is the key to understanding the nature of the truly rational thought that will characterize the New Church. Only such thought can be a medicine for the healing of the nations. The doctrine describes true wisdom. "All have the capacity to understand and to be wise," we are told, "but ... they who ascribe all to the Lord are wiser than the rest, because all things of truth and good, which constitute wisdom, flow in from heaven, that is, from the Lord there ... " (AC 10227).

What makes a person truly rational, truly wise? Again, the doctrine is clear: while many in the world suppose that a rational person is one who can reason acutely about many things, and so join reasonings together that conclusions may appear like truth, "this is found in the very worst of people," we are told, " ... [people] ... who are able to reason skillfully and persuade that evils are goods and that falsities are truths, and the reverse" (AC 6240:2). The Heavenly Doctrine rejects this as the mark of rational wisdom. They state instead that "the rational consists in inwardly seeing and perceiving that good is good, and from this that truth is truth ... " (Ibid.).

Again, we are taught that

"by the capacity to be wise is not meant the capacity to reason about truths and goods from memory knowledges, nor the capacity to confirm whatever one pleases, but the capacity to discern what is true and good, to choose what is suitable, and to apply it to the uses of life. They who ascribe all things to the Lord do thus discern, choose, and apply ... " (AC 10227).

The fact that we must ascribe all things to the Lord is shown and signified in the visions of the New Church we have referred to before. Both in the prophecy of Ezekiel and in the book of Revelation we read of the trees being nourished by the river of living water flowing out from God's sanctuary or throne. It is the man who trusts in the Lord that is like a tree with roots by the river, whose leaf will be green even in the

heat, whose boughs will bear fruit even in drought (see Jeremiah 17:7,8).

In the world today there is little recognition of the importance of spiritual truth. Few realize that wisdom in life is from a spiritual origin, not a natural one. Few realize how vulnerable rational thought about civil, moral and natural matters is to worldly opinions and emotional impulses. Reflect on the current issues and controversies that fill the pages of our papers and news magazines and that find a ready audience on our TV screens. What kind of reasoning do we find? Are justice and morality prevalent? And what about our own lives? Where do we turn to find direction and to make right decisions that affect our marriages, our jobs, our children?

Someone once said that the Writings of the church do not teach us about education. We may smile at that. Do they speak of any of our natural concerns? Do they tell us how to conduct a business? Do they provide legal guidance? Do they instruct us about mental depression? Yes, the Writings speak to all of these areas of life though not necessarily directly. What they provide is a spiritual perspective on every aspect of natural life. With this perspective the New Church person is able to reflect on natural life with rational wisdom, to see what is good and useful, to identify what is false and worthless. Without such a perspective, a person is awash in a sea of natural emotion and opinion, adrift from the basic principles that grant true freedom. This is taught directly in the Heavenly Doctrine. There we are told that "man would have no freedom of choice in civil, moral, and natural things if he had none in spiritual things .... From that spiritual freedom man has a perception of what is good and true, and of what is just and right in civil matters ... " (TCR 482).

It is said further,

"when light from heaven flows into these things, the man begins to see them spiritually, and first to discriminate between the useful and the non-useful. From this he begins to have an insight as to what is true ... From this then man has perception ... Wherefore the knowledges of spiritual things must be with man in his natural in order that there may be spiritual perception; and knowledges of spiritual things must be from revelation" (AC 9103).

What could be more important to our life in this world than the knowledge of spiritual principles of faith? These are not simply theological abstractions. They are the insights that give us true rationality. We live so much of our life indiscriminately, without reflection or rational thought. Or else we respond to it with customary reactions based on previous training or prejudice. In either case, we are not free. We are either spontaneously moved by a natural affection of questionable origin or bound by a rigid traditional response. We have not made a choice, much less a truly rational choice.

The New Church has been established by the Lord that we might be free! free of the urging of natural affections; free of the false attitudes and theories that permeate the thinking of this world. What greater use could we perform in the world and for ourselves than to guard and use our opportunities for spiritual freedom? This is a clear and urgent need. It can be fulfilled only by the wisdom that the Lord has given for the New Church. For He has showed us a

"pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations" (Rev. 22:2).

Amen.

*Lessons: Ezekiel 47:1-12; Rev. 22:1-7; AC 10227:2, 3*