

The Bread of God Through the Ages

A Sermon by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith

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Readings

John 6:26-35, 41-43, 45 (Kempton Translation, modified)

²⁶ Jesus answered them, and said, "Amen, Amen, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the bread, and were satisfied. ²⁷ Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give to you; for the Father, God, has put His seal on Him.

²⁸ Then they said to Him, "What shall we do that we may work the works of God?"

²⁹ Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent."

³⁰ Therefore they said to Him, "What sign do You perform then, that we may see and believe You? What work will You do?" ³¹ Our fathers ate manna in the wilderness, as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.' "

³² Then Jesus said to them, "Amen, Amen, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but My Father gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ For the Bread of God is He who comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world."

³⁴ Then said they to Him, "Lord, give us this bread always."

³⁵ And Jesus said to them, "I am the Bread of Life; he who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst."

⁴¹ The Jews then murmured about Him, because He said, "I am the bread which came down from heaven." ⁴² And they said, "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How then does He say, 'I came down from heaven'?" "

⁴³ Then Jesus answered and said to them, "Do not murmur among yourselves. ⁴⁵ It is written in the Prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God' (Isaiah 54:13). Everyone therefore who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me...."

Arcana Coelestia 1480

Celestial food consists in every good thing of love and charity received from the Lord, while spiritual food consists in every truth of faith; these are the kinds of food angels live on. From these comes the food... of a lower angelic degree that angelic spirits live on. And from this again comes celestial and spiritual food of a still lower degree, which has to do with reason and therefore with factual knowledge. This is the food that good spirits live on. Last of all comes food for the body, which is the proper food for people while we live in the body. All these foods correspond to one another in a miraculous way.

Introduction: Levels of Delicious Things

- Let's talk about things that are delicious at different levels.
 - The passage we read from the teaching for the New Church started at the highest and went down to the lowest; we're going to do the opposite.
- The lowest level of delicious thing is physical food.
 - Mmm-mmm! Yummy.
 - The Lord created food to be delicious to us.
 - He wants us to enjoy eating food.
 - "Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good" (Psalm 34:8).
- The next level up of delicious things is knowledge.
 - Think of how delightful it is to learn something that you really wanted to know.
 - Learning some more details or facts about some topic that you're fascinated by;
 - learning how to do something new in a hobby that you enjoy.
 - Mmm-mmm! Delicious!
 - When it's something that we have an appetite for, we would happily consume lots and lots of that kind of knowledge food.
- The next level of delicious things is reasoning.
 - That's the ability to take the things that you know and do something with them.
 - It's the ability to think things through, to make connections that you hadn't made before.
 - We sometimes experience the delight of this when we hear someone else make a really good point, or put together a couple of ideas in a sequence that's just so good.
 - Here's an example of some reasoning that may or may not be tasty to you.
 - A man was arguing with his co-worker about religion.
 - His co-worker was an atheist and he was making fun of the idea of Jesus being born to a virgin, saying, "How does that make any sense?"
 - And the man replied, "Well, a person being born to a virgin makes more sense to me than everything in the whole universe coming into existence from nothing."
 - That's a good little bit of reasoning.
 - And if you like arguments that support the idea of the existence of God, then that bit of reasoning might be quite tasty to you.

- Some more levels above reason is what the passage we read called “spiritual food” which consists “in every truth of faith” and, above that, “celestial food” which consists in “every good thing of love and charity received from the Lord.”
 - The passage said “these are the kinds of food angels live on.”
 - To eat and enjoy these foods is to really see, understand, and have internalized some truths about spiritual reality – about the Lord, about heaven, about other people and what they need.
 - And not just the head side but the heart side also – to love the Lord, to love other people, to have mercy, patience, and compassion with other people, to love to be genuinely helpful and useful to other people – to hunger and thirst for justice and to be filled by the Lord (Matthew 5:6).
 - Those things also can be delicious to us – satisfying and delightful at the highest and deepest level.
 - Mmm-mmm-mmm!
- The Lord would like to feed us at all of those levels, but sometimes we human beings are only interested in the lower levels of food.

The History of People Wanting Only Lower Food

- In the story that we read from the gospel of John, Jesus had miraculously fed five thousand people with barley bread and fish.
 - But then He had left that place because He knew that they were going to try to make Him a king.
 - The people eventually caught up with Him because they wanted more natural food.
 - And so the Lord said this to them, “Amen, Amen, I say to you, You seek Me... because you ate of the bread, and were satisfied. Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life” (John 6:26, 27).
- It certainly was not just this group of people that had this problem of being only interested in lower kinds of food.
 - This has been a problem for almost all of the history of the human race.

The Garden of Eden

- In the Garden of Eden, "Jehovah God made every tree grow that is pleasant to the sight and good for food," including the tree of life (Genesis 2:9).
 - And eating from those good trees corresponds to how the earliest people received goodness and truth from the Lord at all levels.
- But, the one tree that they were not to eat of, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, was also in the garden.
 - Eating from it represented people wanting to just use their own knowledge and reason as the way of living their lives, instead of looking to the Lord to receive goodness and truth from Him (*Apocalypse Explained* 617:15).
 - They only had an appetite for the lower levels of food.
 - And so they ate what they shouldn't have and were exiled from the garden.

Manna in the Wilderness

- If we fast-forward to much later in the story of the human race, we find the children of Israel in the wilderness.
 - They had been led out of slavery in Egypt and were theoretically on their way to "a land flowing with milk and honey," but, at that moment, it seemed like there was nothing good to eat in the wilderness, and they longed to go back to the fleshpots of Egypt.
 - You might remember that the Lord provided them with miraculous food every morning for the forty years that they ended up living in the wilderness.
 - We get some idea of how they thought of this miraculous food from heaven when we know what they called it.
 - They called it manna.
 - In Hebrew that means, "What is it?" (Exodus 16:15)
 - Do you want to eat some "what's that?" or some "whatnot" or some "whatever that is"?
 - They didn't know what it was.
 - And, although they did figure out that they could eat it, they certainly did not have any idea of what it represented spiritually.
 - They had no clue that the manna in the wilderness represented, as one passage puts it, "love and charity, together with the goods and truths of faith... [which] the Lord imparts... to angels moment by moment, thus perpetually and eternally" (*Arcana Coelestia* 2838:4; cf. *Apocalypse Explained* 146:3).

- No. They didn't know about any of that.
 - Their experience was more like, "[taste, taste] Hmm... that's not very good" (Numbers 11:4-9; 21:5).
- Later on, when reminding the people of their history, Moses tried to explain to the people what was going on.
 - "[Jehovah] humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Jehovah" (Deuteronomy 8:3).
 - It does not seem as though the people understood.

The Lord in the World

- And so, eventually, the Lord came into the world to help people understand.
- The story we read for our lesson is one of the times that the Lord was trying to explain to people that it was about more than just natural food and that He is the source of the goodness that they need to take into themselves.
 - "...the Bread of God is He who comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world. I am the Bread of Life; he who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst" (John 6:33, 35).
- Another time Jesus' disciples were urging Him to eat some natural food and He said to them, "I have food to eat of which you do not know. My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work" (John 4:32, 34).
- The point of food at any level is to help us be useful – to do the will of the One who sent us and to work on the things He wants us to work on.
 - The teachings for the New Church explain that the spiritual meaning of "food" is "everything that has a useful purpose" because "a person's entire knowledge, entire understanding and wisdom, and so entire will must have a useful purpose as its end in view" (*Arcana Coelestia* 5293:2).

The Reward of "Hidden Manna"

- Some people eventually understood what the Lord was talking about and some did not.
 - What ultimately makes a person able to understand this is whether they are willing to repent and turn to the Lord.
 - In the book of Revelation, the Lord sends letters to seven different churches in which He calls them to repent of their evils and offers them rewards if they do.
 - In His letter to the church in a place called Pergamos, He says this: "To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat" (Revelation 2:17).
 - And the teachings for the New Church explain why it is called "hidden manna":
 - It is called "hidden manna," because the delight of heavenly love, which people receive who are conjoined to the Lord through love, is wholly unknown to people that are in a love that is not heavenly; and this heavenly delight no one is able to receive except a person that acknowledges the Lord's Divine Human; for from this the delight proceeds. Because this delight was unknown to the children of Israel in the wilderness, they called it "manna"... (*Apocalypse Explained* 146:3).

Conclusion

- We're about to have the chance to take the Lord's holy supper.
- As we do, we are part of this immeasurably large group of people who have been fed by the Lord – at all levels – since the beginning of the human race.
 - Maybe, thanks to the teachings for the New Church, we can understand and appreciate a bit more about the spiritual food that the Lord is offering us, while we are being offered natural bread and wine that correspond to that spiritual food.
 - At the same time, there is definitely still so much that we do not understand and do not fully appreciate about the heavenly food that the Lord is offering us.
 - There are undoubtedly still many ways in which the food the Lord is offering us is hidden manna to us – something we do not fully understand and yet that feeds us at the deepest level.

- As you prepare to take the holy supper, you are invited to think about what feeds you at all different levels:
 - The delicious natural food that you get to eat;
 - The things that you delight in learning about;
 - The things you enjoy figuring out;
 - And then maybe pray to the Lord to help you want the even better food – the food for your soul.
 - Ask Him for the goodness that you need that you don't have yet.
 - Ask Him for the love and wisdom that you need that you don't even really understand.
 - Ask Him for the strength to repent and follow through on using the food that He's given you to become more loving and useful.
 - "Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life" (John 6:27).
 - And He who is the Bread of God who came down from heaven will give you all that you need.
- *Amen.*

If you would like to talk more about this topic, get in touch with Malcolm at malcolm.smith@brynathynchurch.org.