

Sent Out and Sent Out Again

A Sermon by the Rt. Rev. Peter Buss Jr.
Bryn Athyn Cathedral—June 21, 2020

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:19-20)

The next day He sent all of them out to the entire spiritual world to preach the gospel that the Lord God Jesus Christ reigns and that His kingdom will last for ages of ages. (True Christian Religion 791)

Friends, we are amazingly blessed to be able to orient our lives around the truths of the Lord’s Second Coming. Considered against the population of the entire globe, it is awe-inspiring to consider that in the Lord’s providence we have encountered a new revelation declared across the entire spiritual world 250 years ago, which so many in our world simply do not know about. That of course does not make us better than any of our worldwide sisters and brothers. But today maybe we can be re-inspired to live that faith as disciples of the Lord, doing our part to serve.

What will help toward that end? I suggest that it is a function of absorbing anew the impact of the two times the Lord has come to this world, and two of the times that He specifically sent out His disciples. The opportunity before us is to reflect on the ways that the Lord continually comes to us, and continually sends us out.

The coming of the Lord. Let’s begin by calling to mind experiences that many of us have had of seeing live enactments of the Lord’s birth on earth. Earlier in the service, at least in the broadcast of it, you saw some images of the Christmas Tableaux from a couple of years ago here in the Bryn Athyn Cathedral. If you have not experienced these live scenes, perhaps you can call to mind the pageants you have experienced in your home congregation or elsewhere. It is inspiring to think of the many thousands of people who love to revisit those scenes every year, to capture some of the peaceful beauty of Mary and Joseph and the Baby Jesus in the stable.

Let’s ask ourselves too if the power of that central scene doesn’t grow in our minds when we realize that it changed the course of human history. Yes, the Lord was born in Bethlehem some two-thousand years ago, and yes, some shepherds came to visit Him at the behest of an angelic choir proclaiming in song the good news. It actually happened as depicted in these familiar and beloved scenes.

But equally inspiring is why they Lord came. The angels said “There is born to you this day in the city of David a *Savior* who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11). We see salvation in operation in the healing miracles and the principles of living that the Lord taught while on earth. We can allow our minds to be expanded with the realization that He has the same power to heal us of any spiritual disease infecting us from hell, and enlighten us as to how to apply the very things He taught in the situations and relationships of our lives (see *Arcana Caelestia* 8364:6, 6632). We can go even deeper to absorb what the Heavenly Doctrines reveal

concerning the His birth into this world, namely, “Without this no mortal could have been saved, and those are saved who believe in Him” (*True Christian Religion* 2).

Then we can turn our minds to images of the Lord’s *second* coming. Again, earlier in the service some of you were able to see images of a New Church Day pageant that took place in this Cathedral. The woman clothed with the sun, the seven-headed dragon, Michael and the angels—all these are familiar images from the book of Revelation, which stand as prophecies of the New Church which would come.

Those New Church Day pageants can become all the more powerful for us when we let it sink in what is depicted in those scenes. The woman symbolizes “the Lord’s New Church in heaven, which is the New Heaven, and the New Church to come on earth, which is the New Jerusalem” (*Apocalypse Revealed* 533). The Child born to her is “the doctrine of the New Church”—the very revelation given to us through Emanuel Swedenborg—the Heavenly Doctrine upon which we base our entire faith (see *Apocalypse Revealed* 543). That too happened, and it changed the world. New truth is available in *True Christian Religion*, in the *Arcana Caelestia*, in *Divine Providence*, *Conjugal Love*, and *Doctrine of the Lord*, which collectively fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah we heard earlier: “The light of the moon will be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be sevenfold” (Isaiah 30:26). This is the realization that is before us each year as we celebrate New Church Day. The Lord has indeed come again as He said He would.

But the realization is not really complete if we fail to consider what it means in our lives. Why is it important to celebrate Christmas and New Church Day—to commemorate the Lord’s first coming and His second coming? Because in a very real way both of those show that He seeks to come consistently into our lives—every single day.

There’s a wonderful passage in the Heavenly Doctrines that describes this energy of the Lord. By His influx it says:

He gives us the power and the desire to receive Divine goodness and truth and to act on them. He never takes this away from anyone. It follows from this that the Lord perpetually wills that we receive what is true and do what is good and therefore become spiritual. (*True Christian Religion* 481; cf. n. 766)

This lines up with what the Psalmist reminds us, namely that “The Lord is near to all those who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth” (Psalm 145:18). Also “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (Psalm 46:1). And to His disciples, as we will focus on shortly, He said, “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20).

Let’s take to heart the *response* that is required here. The Lord is always present, but we do not experience that presence unless we turn to Him and welcome it. We do so by consistent and ongoing effort to open ourselves up to the influence of the Lord. That is why we are instructed to engage in worship, to listen to sermons, to partake of the sacraments, and all the other things of external worship, “for it is by external worship that internal things are aroused, and by means of external worship external things are kept holy so as to enable internal to flow in” (*Arcana Caelestia* 1618). This is also why we are to pray, and to engage in

conversation on spiritual matters, and to read the Word as a daily discipline, and to take time to contemplate the promptings of our conscience. It will always be vital that there is a church which calls us to turn to the Lord in worship and inspires these spiritual practices. It will make all the difference to the specific situations we face, and to the overall trajectory of our lives, to consciously draw on the Lord's love and wisdom—to let Him come in to us, and dine with us, and we with Him (Revelation 3:20).

Disciples of the Lord. Let's assume that we are successful in doing just that—remaining open and responsive to the Lord in our lives. What would we expect to experience? We would expect to be prompted in how to act and interact with others. We would expect to be called to live in an authentically New Church way in all that we do. Today we consider all of that as our calling to be disciples of the Lord.

In this we can call to mind two of the times that the Lord sent out His disciples. The first is what is called the Great Commission. It records the time in the resurrection when the Lord brought home for those men what He had been preparing them for: to “make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things [He had] commanded them” (Matthew 28:19-20). The second is what signals the birthday of the New Church: the calling together of those twelve disciples who had followed Him in the world, now angles in heaven, to go throughout the entire spiritual world to preach the new gospel that the Lord God Jesus Christ reigns, whose kingdom shall be for ages of ages (*True Christian Religion* 791). Again, we can let it sink in that those events actually happened, and they were pivotal in establishing first the Christian Church and then the New Christian Church.

But again, the power of that realization can grow when we come to see that we are called. We are disciples of the Lord. That can mean an array of things. There is no doubt a teaching and announcing function—a sharing of the truth that we know. Each of us can decide the level to which we are willing to share what we know from the Word, believing it will be helpful to those who may not know it. One passage in the Heavenly Doctrines speaks to this, honoring the need for those “who teach the truths of the church” and calling them apostles (*Apocalypse Explained* 100:2). It goes on to say, “By apostles in the *spiritual sense* of the Word are meant not the twelve apostles who were sent by the Lord to teach concerning Himself and His kingdom, but all those who are in the truth of the church” (*Ibid.*). That's you and me.

This is further clarified in another passage which talks about disciples as followers of the Lord. You will recall that the Lord said to the people He called to be His disciples, “Follow me” (Matthew 4:19, 9:9, Mark 1:17, 2:14). We read, “To follow the Lord'...means “to acknowledge, to obey, and to act and live from Him and with Him” (*Apocalypse Explained* 864). Again, that's us—or at least an invitation to be a disciple in that way. I love how that passage concludes: “For the Lord draws after Him the person who from freedom wills to follow” (*Ibid.*). As with His desire to come into our lives, our level of willingness or our response is key.

In this we come to one of the most pervasive tenets of the faith of the New Church—a life of usefulness to others. Whether we focus on the Lord's example—“that we should do as I have done to you” (John 13:15), or remind ourselves that our part of the covenant presented to

the ancient Israelites is to “be a blessing” in all that we seek to do (Genesis 12:2), or turn to a familiar passage in the Heavenly Doctrines that says, “We are not born for our own sake, but are born for the sake of others” (*True Christian Religion* 406)—it’s the same message.

The way we are currently articulating the mission of the General Church is to “live a heavenly live.” That means serving. It means showing up in authentically New Church ways in all aspects of our lives. It could be in life-long or career ways of performing a use; it could be in taking to heart the Lord’s promptings in how to be an honorable parent, husband, wife, or child; it could be the discipline of examining ourselves on a regular basis to ensure that we are attentive to what needs to change; or generosity with the riches with which the Lord has blessed us.

The service before this one included an enactment, which you can watch if you choose to, of some of the concrete ways we can be a disciple. One person took a tray of food to someone who was recovering from surgery—as an extension of the Scripture, “I was sick and you visited Me” (Matthew 25:26). Another person served as an usher because worship is important. A third putting up a sign in their home that says “As for me and my house we will serve the Lord” because orienting the family to the Lord is important (Joshua 24:15). A fourth person is seen preparing a gift to celebrate a 50th wedding anniversary because marriage is important. A fifth carried flowers and a card on the way to visit with someone a month after they’d lost a loved one, because that kind of ministry and reflection on the eternity of life is important. A sixth person took a copy of the Word for Children prepared by our church to read to her younger sibling, because that form of New Church education is important. And there were others.

We call to mind the Lord’s words to those He taught in what is referred to as the Sermon on the Mount:

“You are the light of the world.... Let your light so shine before others, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:14-16)

Letting our light shine is the same thing as being sent out as a disciple. As light radiates from its source, so we can have reach and impact in people’s lives from the Lord.

This service is designed to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the first New Church Day on June 19, 1770. It is a celebration of the faith that we have the privilege of embracing as our own. It can also be a celebration of the opportunity that lies before us to recognize the countless ways that the Lord comes to us and the countless ways He send us out to serve. Amen.

Readings from the Lord’s Word: Matthew 5:14-16, 28:18-20; Isaiah 30:26; Luke 2:1-8; Revelation 12:1-5; *True Christian Religion* 791, 779; *Arcana Coelestia* 68.

You are the light of the world

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. ¹⁶ Let your light so shine before others, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:14-16)

Seven times the light of the moon.

Moreover the light of the moon will be as the light of the sun,
And the light of the sun will be sevenfold,
As the light of seven days,
In the day that the LORD binds up the bruise of His people
And heals the stroke of their wound. (Isaiah 30:26)

Birth of Jesus

And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.... ³ So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. ⁴ Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵ to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. ⁶ So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. ⁷ And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. (Luke 2)

Woman Clothed with the Sun

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. 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 ...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. (Revelation 12)

The great commission

¹⁸ And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28)

Sending out the 12

After this work was finished, the Lord called together the twelve disciples who followed him in the world. The next day He sent all of them out to the entire spiritual world to preach the gospel that the Lord God Jesus Christ reigns and that His kingdom will last for

ages of ages, as foretold by Daniel (Daniel 7:13, 14) and by the Book of Revelation (Revelation 11:15); also that “blessed are those who come to the wedding feast of the Lamb” (Revelation 19:9). This occurred on June 19, 1770. (*True Christian Religion* 791)

Swedenborg as a disciple

This, the Lord’s second coming, is taking place by means of a man to whom He has shown Himself in person, and whom He has filled with His spirit, so that he may teach the doctrines of the New Church which come from the Lord through the Word. (*True Christian Religion* 779)

I am well aware of the fact that many people will say that nobody can possibly speak to spirits or angels as long as he is living in the body, and that many will call it delusion. Some will say that I have spread these ideas around so as to win people’s trust, while others will say something different again. But none of this deters me; for I have seen, I have heard, I have felt. (*Arcana Caelestia* 68)