

“The Lord’s Hope for Our Future”

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Do not be furious, O LORD, nor remember iniquity forever; indeed, please look--we all are Your people! Your holy cities are a wilderness, Zion is a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation. (Isaiah 64:9-10)

The prelude sung before the beginning of this service and this sermon share a common text. The first verse is a call that the Lord might have mercy on His people. The second recognizes that the holy cities including Jerusalem are a desolate wilderness. For many of us the social distancing of the last six months can leave life feeling emptier than we prefer – too much like a desolate wilderness. The regular interaction with people, both close friends and acquaintances is part of what brings richness, joy and fulfillment to our days. However, what the Word is describing when it talks about Zion or Jerusalem being a wilderness or desolation is a far deeper emptiness. It is an emptiness that the Lord most hopes to keep from our lives because it is an emptiness of the things that brings lasting happiness. It is an emptiness that guarantees that too much of what a person intends, thinks, says and does will be harmful to self and others.

The Lord as the good shepherd wants to lead us to learn what is true. He wants to guide us to care about what is genuinely kind and useful in all situations. The Lord taught: “I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own” (John 10:14). The teachings for the New Church speak about how the Lord can know us with these words.

“Knowing” - when used in reference to God, that is, to the Lord - means endowing with charity [or a quality of wise kindness]. For charity [or this wise kindness] is what joins the Lord and us together and what causes the Lord to be present with us and consequently know us. The Lord, it is true, knows all people everywhere; but He knows none in the way a father does his children except those who are governed by the good things of love and charity. (*Arcana Caelestia* 6806:1)

Sometimes people resort to a simple view expressed in lyrics from more than 50 years ago, “All you need is love.” Repeatedly in the teachings for the New Church we encouraged to realize that all of us have a mindset that is called “spiritual.” The implications of this mindset is conveyed in the following passage.

[Spiritual people are] called spiritual when they were governed by love towards the neighbor, which is charity. But love towards the neighbor, or charity, is implanted by means of truth and in this way they receive a conscience in accordance with which they act, not from an affection for good but from an affection for truth. With them charity looks like the affection for good, but is in fact the affection for truth. Because it looks like the affection for good charity is still referred to as good. But that good is a good arising out of their faith. (*Arcana Caelestia* 2088:3)

The sheep referred to in John 10 are people who are living good and useful lives guided by faith that has love motivating it. This is the life the Lord wants for each of us. This is what His infinite

love, wisdom and power are constantly trying to draw us to. The Lord is drawing us all to the happiness of a heavenly life. For anyone who has some understanding of the differences between the life experienced by those who end up with eternal homes in hell versus those who end up in heaven, nearly everyone hopes for and even tends to think of themselves as deserving heaven. In the teachings for the New Church we have descriptions of people who falsely think they are able to enter heaven.

Many people . . . convince themselves of the idea that one's life is of no consequence at all but that . . . acceptance into heaven is attributable to mercy alone, irrespective of the life one has led. . . [These have been] for the most part the kind of people who have led evil lives. These are told . . . that the Lord never refuses anyone entrance into heaven, and that if they like they can find this out from experience. They are therefore raised up into some community of heaven whose inhabitants have led their lives under the influence of an affection for good, that is, they have led charitable lives. But when those raised up arrive there they begin, being evil, to suffer pain and inner torment because their life is contrary to that of heaven. And when heavenly light shines on them they look in that light like devils that are almost wholly devoid of human appearance. (*Arcana Caelestia* 5057:2-3)

This paragraph speaks of people who have lived evil lives. Perhaps each of us can think of people we have known or learned about who we might consider having lived evil lives. Usually this is because of what we see to be serious breaches of civil law or from actions that strike us as morally depraved. Such people, if their internal motivations and thoughts accurately appear in their actions, may indeed end up in hell. The third lesson today from *Heaven and Hell* raises a different perspective. It makes the sweeping statement that “Almost everyone practices honesty and fairness outwardly, even to the point of seeming genuinely honest and fair, or seeming to act from genuine honesty and fairness (*Heaven and Hell* 530:1). This means that living according to civil law, at least enough not to be caught breaking it, and according to moral principles, at least enough to not offend others, is not in itself a sufficient basis for a life leading to an eternal home in heaven. There needs to be something fundamental underlying our words and deeds for us to prepare to be angels. As the lesson went on to state:

Spiritual people have to [also practice honesty and fairness outwardly] and can do so just as easily as natural people, the difference being that spiritual people believe in the Divine Being and act honestly and fairly not just because it follows civil and moral laws but also because it follows divine laws. (*Heaven and Hell* 530:1).

A person can lead what others see to be a civil and moral life but sadly on the inside be the wilderness and desolation spoken of in Isaiah 64. A person can avoid appearing to be corrupt to most people but still fall far short of the goal. This goal is succinctly described in these words: “Heaven consists in a heartfelt desire that things shall be better for others than for oneself and a desire to serve others and further their happiness, doing so with no selfish intention but out of love” (*Arcana Caelestia* 452). It is these qualities that make our internal nature like a heavenly garden rich with beauty and fruitfulness. Their lack leave us interiorly like a wilderness and desolation. While those who know us superficially may hardly notice this interior lack of life, those nearest to us and who interact with us on a regular basis sometimes see concerning hints of

something fundamentally less than “a heartfelt desire that things shall be better for others than for oneself and a desire to serve others.” When we recognize that this heartfelt desire is too absent from our lives it is a strong reminder to renew our commitment to following the good shepherd.

A wilderness and desolation can describe an individual and it can also describe groups of people small and large. Specifically the inner meaning of Isaiah’s prophecy: “Your holy cities are a wilderness, Zion is a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation” (Isaiah 64:10) refers to the reality that the group of people who were supposed to support the Lord’s Church on earth were failing. They had in their fundamental quality become so corrupt that the direct effect of the teaching and leading of that Church didn’t lead to worship of the Lord and living a wisely kind life. It actually led away from these goals. Within the group of people who are part of this Church there can still be individuals who are being led by the Lord to heaven, but it achieved in spite of the teaching and leading that is occurring around them. In the teachings for the New Church we are led to see that this corruption of the Church has occurred a number of times. Jesus pointed out with brutal clarity the corruption of the scribes, Pharisees, and other religious leaders of the church during His life in the world. The book of Revelation describes a time when Church had so little understanding of what the Lord truly taught and the life He calls us to, that symbolically “the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became like blood. And the stars of heaven fell to the earth” (Revelation 6:12-13). These images describe how “all goodness of love was corrupted among those people, and every truth of faith had been twisted into a false idea” and “that all concepts of goodness and truth were cast away” (*Apocalypse Revealed* 332-333).

What qualities of the organizations and groups of people we are part of strike us as supporting “a heartfelt desire that things shall be better for others than for oneself and a desire to serve others” (*Arcana Caelestia* 452). The others we are called to serve include both future generations and people today who we will never meet. I hope you see some things that give you hope and I suspect you also recognize others that bring you concern. We live in a far from perfect world. To the extent that each of us is inspired by what is true and good to follow the Lord as the good shepherd He will be leading us individually to become angels to eternity in the next life. This “life that leads to heaven is not one of withdrawal from the world but a life in the world” (*Heaven and Hell* 535:3). This means our lives will inevitably work to be a force for good within our families, friendships, at work and in the causes large and small we give our time, talent and resources to support. As more and more individuals who are willing to be led by the Lord work together, the welfare of all will benefit. People won’t be looking primarily to what will support just their own welfare and those with whom they most identify. They will be guided by “a heartfelt desire that things shall be better for others than for oneself and a desire to serve others.” Such collective efforts help to bring something of the Lord’s kingdom to this world. It creates a rich environment that nurtures the spiritual development of any willing to be influenced by it.

May we individually and collectively seek to be led by the Lord. May we fight the thoughts and motivations that would create a spiritual wilderness within our lives. May we be blessed now and forever with the light and warmth of heaven and the angels who invite us to join them there.
AMEN.

Lessons: Isaiah 64:5-12, John 10:1-11, *Heaven and Hell* 530:1

Isaiah 64:1-12 (NKJV)

⁵ . . . You are indeed angry, for we have sinned-- In these ways we continue; And we need to be saved. ⁶ But we are all like an unclean *thing*, And all our righteousnesses *are* like filthy rags; We all fade as a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, Have taken us away. ⁷ And *there is* no one who calls on Your name, Who stirs himself up to take hold of You; For You have hidden Your face from us, And have consumed us because of our iniquities. ⁸ But now, O LORD, You *are* our Father; We *are* the clay, and You our potter; And all we *are* the work of Your hand. ⁹ Do not be furious, O LORD, Nor remember iniquity forever; Indeed, please look--we all *are* Your people! ¹⁰ Your holy cities are a wilderness, Zion is a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation. ¹¹ Our holy and beautiful temple, Where our fathers praised You, Is burned up with fire; And all our pleasant things are laid waste. ¹² Will You restrain Yourself because of these *things*, O LORD? Will You hold Your peace, and afflict us very severely?

John 10:1-11

¹ "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber. ² But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. ⁵ Yet they will by no means follow a stranger, but will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers." ⁶ Jesus used this illustration, but they did not understand the things which He spoke to them. ⁷ Then Jesus said to them again, "Most assuredly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. ⁸ All who *ever* came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. ⁹ I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have *it* more abundantly. ¹¹ I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep.

Heaven and Hell 530:1

What follows will make it possible to see that it is not all that hard to lead a heaven-bound life. Who can't lead a civic and moral life? After all, we are introduced to it in infancy and know it from living in the world. We do in fact lead this kind of life whether we are evil or good, since no one wants to be called dishonest or unfair. Almost everyone practices honesty and fairness outwardly, even to the point of seeming genuinely honest and fair, or seeming to act from genuine honesty and fairness. Spiritual people have to live in much the same way and can do so just as easily as natural people, the difference being that spiritual people believe in the Divine Being and act honestly and fairly not just because it follows civil and moral laws but also because it follows divine laws. In fact, since they are thinking about divine [laws] when they act, they are in touch with heaven's angels; and to the extent that they are, they are united to them, and their inner person-which is essentially a spiritual person-is opened. When this is our nature, the Lord adopts and leads us without our realizing it, and whatever things we do that are honest and fair-the deeds of our moral and civil life-come from a spiritual source. Doing what is honest and fair from a spiritual source is doing it from genuine honesty and fairness, or doing it from the heart.