

Carried away

Freedom in the Church is about friendship

by the Rev. Jeremy F. Simons, Bryn Athyn, April 25, 2021

“Truly, truly I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish.” John 21:18

Each of the Gospels has a slightly different

story about the way that the Lord sent out the disciples to establish His church. In Matthew He gathered them at a mountain in Galilee sometime after Easter. In Mark He commissioned them in Jerusalem on Easter day before being carried up into heaven, as He also does in Luke. In John He appears to them on Easter in the evening, saying *“As the Father sent Me I also send you”* and breathing the Holy Spirit into them. But John also adds the story of our lesson, which took place sometime later, as in Matthew, but at the Sea of Galilee instead of on a mountain.

The story seems to have little to do with sending them out to spread the Gospel. Whereas Mark ends by saying that the disciples *“went out and preached everywhere”* (16:20), and Matthew ends with clear instructions to *“make disciples of all the nations”* (28:19), with similar words in Luke (24:47), John’s ending is different. Here the disciples seem to have returned home to Galilee to be fishermen. This is clearly just an interlude, because their story continues in the book of Acts, where the church is established and begins to prosper.

Most people see that this story in John tells us something symbolic about the beginning of the church. In the story the disciples fish all night and catch nothing. When morning comes the Lord appears to them unrecognized on the shore and tells them to fish on the right side of their boat. Immediately they catch many fish and realize that it is the Lord. Coming to shore, He serves them a

breakfast of fish and bread by the sea. The



conversation that He then has with Peter about Peter’s future, and also about John, was our lesson.

The breakfast by the sea is reminiscent of the miracle of the loaves and the fishes in John 6, where a large quantity of fish were also miraculously provided by the Lord. It also reminds us of the Last Supper, where He gave bread and wine to the disciples.

The breakfast sets the stage for the Lord’s conversation with Peter. The talk is important because Peter is a leader of the disciples.

The Lord’s organization

We may not realize from reading the gospels how specifically and carefully the Lord created the Christian Church as an actual organization. Not only were the disciples to go out and preach, but He created a hierarchy of leadership among the disciples, with Peter, James and John being an inner circle who would lead the rest. Among these three Peter is the one who says *“I am going fishing”* and all the rest follow. He is also the *“rock”* on which the Lord would build His church (Matthew 16:18). Yet John is the one who is closest to the Lord, the disciple that He seemed to love the most.

The church grew naturally from the cohesiveness of these twelve, and the church was defined as those who followed these leaders and accepted the gospel that they taught.

The Lord not only organized the leadership of the church, He also gave them specifics about what to do. For years with them He modeled what and how they were to teach. He preached and prayed. They were

even able to heal and do other miracles. They knew about baptism and He introduced the Holy Supper to them. Most of all He taught them to love each other, to share among themselves and to support each other.

This defined nature of this church organization was even more true of the Israelitish Church, which was not only a spiritual community but an actual nation, whose fortunes were inseparable from those of the church itself. Christianity was not to be a nation, and was to be spread among many nations, but it was still carefully set up by the Lord as a specific organization with specific leadership and practices.

By contrast, the Lord at His Second Coming did nothing to create a new organization. Swedenborg wrote books, but there were no disciples on whom the Lord conferred legitimacy as church leaders. Swedenborg never gathered any group or did anything to start or recognize any particular body or leadership. There was no group to belong to, and no organizational norms other than those already existing with whoever the readers happened to be, or things specifically written in the Writings themselves. Early readers were not even certain that there ought to be formal New Church organizations.

Worries about the future of the church

All of this is relevant to what happened when the Lord met with the disciples for their breakfast by the sea. A natural question for them was whether anyone would believe them, whether there would be any church, whether they would catch any fish at all. By “*fishing on the right side*” the Lord was telling them that there would be many believers if they taught from love, and if what they taught was about the good of life (*Apocalypse Explained* 513, 600). By the “*fish on the fire*”, that the Lord served them along with the bread, He was giving them the knowledge of truth from good that supported this (*ibid.*).

The Lord’s conversation with Peter is about what would happen in the future. He asks Peter three times whether he loves Him. The three questions represent a progression that the faith of the church would follow, from infancy to old age. The Lord urges him to feed and tend the faith of the church when it was as innocent as a lamb and also when it was old. But the real question is whether Peter’s faith loves the Lord. His prediction is that eventually it would no longer be about that love, even though it continued to preach faith.

This takes us to the words of our text.

“When you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish.”

“By these words are meant that the faith of the church in its rising is in the good of innocence like an infant; but that when it is in its setting, which is in the end of the church, faith would be no longer in this good, nor in the good of charity; and that then evil and falsity would lead, which are meant by “when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another shall gird you, and lead you where you do not wish.” Thus from being free it would become enslaved.” *Arcana Coelestia* 10087

This is an amazingly sad prediction about the future of the church, coming at the very time when they are being sent out to begin it. The Lord was telling them that there would be many believers, but that the danger that they faced would be about being “*carried where you do not wish.*” All of it would depend on whether they really did love the Lord and whether they really did love their neighbor.

Peter dismisses John

The story then continues with a discussion between the Lord and Peter about John. Peter is apparently irritated. He says:

“But Lord, what about this man?”

²² Jesus said to him, “If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you? You follow Me.”

Our lesson comments:

“As regards John’s following the Lord, this was a sign of the truth that those who perform the good deeds of charity follow the Lord, are loved by the Lord, and do not leave Him, whereas those whose faith is separated from charity not only fail to follow the Lord but are also angered by that truth, as Peter was then.” *Arcana Coelestia* 10087.4

That is, Peter is dismissive of John, just as the future church that the Lord is predicting here would be dismissive of the need to turn away from evil and live a good life.

Those represented by John, who live good lives, follow the Lord, and turn away from evil, will “*remain*” until the Lord comes. That is, the church will remain with them. But it is Peter who represents the majority of the church, who will separate faith and charity, and fail to actually follow the Lord.

We lose our freedom

It is interesting that the Lord's prediction here about the end of the church focuses on its loss of freedom. It will be carried away or taken where it does not want to go – just as the Children of Israel were carried off into captivity in Babylon.

One of the characteristics of the loss of freedom that this describes is that the free person is interested in the truth, thinks about it deeply, and chooses what to believe and do.

“At the beginning, when people are in the good of charity, they then think about the truths of the church from the spiritual man, which is to think from their spirit, thus from the spiritual affection of truth, that is, from freedom.” Apocalypse Explained 195

But the person who is not free is uninterested in the truth, simply goes along with the crowd, and is dictated to by others.

“They then think nothing about the truths of the church from themselves, but from others, thus from doctrine only and not from the Word, which is relatively a servile state. For to believe what another says is servile, but to believe what oneself thinks from the Word is freedom.” Apocalypse Explained 195

In the end the person is taken where they do not wish to go. They will look around at a world that they do not recognize as their own. They will not know what to believe, and they will wish that things were different.

Notice that, as it is put here, believing what others tell you is “*servile*” and not free, but believing what the Word teaches leads to freedom.

Belonging

The friendship among the disciples, and the resulting cohesiveness among them were key to the beginning of the church. They didn't just believe the Lord, they loved Him and they loved one another. This is the kind of harmony and mutual support that enabled the church to overcome early challenges and thrive.

This same kind of friendship and agreement is often present at the beginning of organizations, and keeping it going is vital to an organization's

success. This is John's role, as the disciple that Jesus loved. He is the life of charity and kindness, leading to feelings of belonging and harmony, that ties people together. He can be dismissed, as Peter seems to do, but the feelings of belonging that come from both agreement and acceptance are the strength of any organization. The Writings describe how important it is to be with kindred spirits:

“(In the spiritual world) kindred souls gravitate toward each other spontaneously, as it were, for with each other they feel as though they are with their own family, at home, while with others they feel like foreigners, as though they were abroad. When they are with kindred souls, they enjoy the fullest freedom and find life totally delightful.” Heaven and Hell 44

In this world finding kindred souls is not always easy, and this is especially true when there is confusion about what we believe and what the Word teaches.

We feel like we belong when there is something outside of ourselves that we feel good identifying with and can act in

harmony with. We belong when we feel a sense of involvement in something worthwhile and useful.

Building a community where people feel that they can support its purpose, and where people feel like they belong, is the way that we can work to overcome the lack of freedom described in our text. People will not feel carried where they do not wish to go when they are surrounded by friends who love the truth and live by it.

Society's struggles with racism, issues around sexuality, social isolation and hardship are all related to the Lord's words to Peter about the future. Almost every issue that we face is about nothing more than the harshness that exists when we fail to live by what we all supposedly believe.

Overcoming this is our goal as a church and our contribution to society. The Lord sends us all out as He sent the disciples, to be fishers in our own way, to be good friends to one another, and to follow Him as John did.

“By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another.” John 13:35



Readings from the Word

John 21

So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, *son* of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?” He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.”

He said to him, “Feed My lambs.”

¹⁶ He said to him again a second time, “Simon, *son* of Jonah, do you love Me?”

He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” He said to him, “Tend My sheep.”

¹⁷ He said to him the third time, “Simon, *son* of Jonah, do you love Me?” Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, “Do you love Me?”

And he said to Him, “Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.”

Jesus said to him, “Feed My sheep. ¹⁸ Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry *you* where you do not wish.” ¹⁹ This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, “Follow Me.”

²⁰ Then Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following, who also had leaned on His breast at the supper, and said, “Lord, who is the one who betrays You?” ²¹ Peter, seeing him, said to Jesus, “But Lord, what *about* this man?”

²² Jesus said to him, “If I will that he remain till I come, what *is that* to you? You follow Me.”

²³ Then this saying went out among the brethren that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but, “If I will that he remain till I come, what *is that* to you?”

²⁴ This is the disciple who testifies of these things, and wrote these things; and we know that his testimony is true.

²⁵ And there are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. Amen.

Arcana Coelestia 10087

None can know what the (the Lord's words to Peter and John in this chapter) mean except through the internal sense. This teaches that the Lord's twelve disciples represented all aspects of faith and love in their entirety, just as the twelve tribes of Israel did, and that Peter represented faith, James charity, and John the works or good deeds that flow from charity.

[3] Faith without charity does not love the Lord; nevertheless it is able to teach about things connected with faith and love, and the things that are the Lord's. This was why the Lord said three times, '*Do you love Me?*', and then, '*Feed My lambs*' or '*Feed My sheep*'. Also three means the whole period from beginning to end; consequently, since the Lord spoke to Peter regarding the Church from its early stages to when it was in decline, He said three times, *Do you love Me?*

For the same reason He says, '*When you were younger you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands and another will gird you and lead you where you do not wish*', meaning that in its early stages the Church's faith had possessed the good of innocence, like a young child; but when it was in decline, which is the final phase of the Church, faith would not possess that good any longer nor the good of charity, at which point evil and falsity would lead it.

All this is what is meant by '*when you are old you will stretch out your hands and another will gird you and lead you where you do not wish*', that is, you will pass from freedom into bondage... '*Girding himself and walking where he wished*' means acting in freedom; and people act in freedom when an affection for truth springing from good governs their actions, and they are led by the Lord. But '*being girded by another and being led where he did not wish*' means being in bondage, and people are in bondage when evil governs their actions, and so they are led by hell... [4] As regards John's following the Lord, this was a sign of the truth that those who perform the good deeds of charity follow the Lord, are loved by the Lord, and do not leave Him, whereas those whose faith is separated from charity not only fail to follow the Lord but are also angered by that truth, as Peter was then.

From all this it is evident also that leaning on the Lord's breast or in His bosom means being loved by Him, and that this expression is used in reference to those who perform the good deeds of charity.