

The Tree of Life in the Holy City New Jerusalem  
A sermon by the Rev. Justin Eric Schorran  
Bryn Athyn Cathedral, 6/13/2021

*“Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city.”*

Why does it sometimes appear as though the Lord gives us “hard” truths in the Word? What do we do when we encounter them in our reading or in our conversations? Our lessons today give us a clue as to how we could possibly hold those teachings when we are faced with them. The image of the Holy City and the Tree of Life within it is the key to understanding how.

At this time of year in the month of June, we take time to reflect on the birth of the New Church. And in it we celebrate the Second Coming of the Lord in the Heavenly Doctrine [for the New Jerusalem.] This Coming of the Lord is described throughout the book of Revelation. In this book, we read of many strange, wonderful and terrifying events that take place right in front of the apostle John. We read of the Vision of the Son of Man, the Woman Clothed with the Sun, the great red dragon, the harlot on the great beast and many more. But all these things lead up to a most beautiful and serene vision. John, as we read in our lessons, witnesses the Holy City New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. Let’s take a look at our text to review what he saw.

As John watches the city descend, he sees that it has walls, gates, angels over the gates, measurements and foundations. All these aspects of the city mean something spiritually. In the Word, cities are a symbolic image of doctrine, or teachings from the Word (AE 652). But what makes the Holy City special in *this case* is that its a picture of the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church, or what many of us call “the Writings.” This city is the *Arcana Coelestia, Divine Love & Wisdom, The Four Doctrines, Conjugal Love*, and all the other books of the Heavenly

Doctrine. And the various details of the city mean the various aspects of the Heavenly Doctrine. Its walls and measurement are the truths that protect it, the gates are the truths that introduce it, and the foundations are the knowledges that come from it (NJHD 1). In short, the city as a whole is an image of the entire body of theology for the New Church.

What John sees is a city, but his vision spiritually depicts the way in which the Heavenly Doctrine came down from the Lord and continues to come down to us today.

So, we have this beautiful description of the *outside* of the city, but what is within it? Let's take a look inside. When we walk inside, we will notice that it has streets, houses, parks, gardens and other typical things you would find in a city. But a key feature of this city is the Tree of Life. From our readings in the *Apocalypse Revealed* we may remember that the Tree of Life and its position in the middle of the street and on either side of the river spiritually describes how the Lord's love is present in our lives when we live according to what He teaches in the Word. To quote the passage again describing the position of the Tree of Life, it says that "inmosty present within the doctrinal truths and consequent life in the New Church is the Lord in His Divine love" (AR 933). What an amazing statement. Let's pause on this for a moment.

There are two things that we will focus on in this statement. The first is that the Lord's love is present within the truths of the Heavenly Doctrine. The second is that it is our life according to that doctrine that truly causes the Lord to be present in our lives. Let's talk about the first. We can see how this statement of the Lord's love is visually represented in Revelation. The tree is said to be in the middle of the street and on either side of the river. The street spiritually speaking is the church's doctrinal truths that come from the Word, and the river is an abundance of divine truth (AR 489, 933). So when we put this whole image together we can see how the Lord's love, meant by the Tree of Life is within both the doctrinal teachings of the

church and the divine truth itself, all of which come from the Lord out of heaven. The Tree of Life is in the city just as the Lord's love is in His Heavenly Doctrine. So why is this so important to reflect on?

In some ways, it is easy to see how the Lord's love is intimately bound together with the truth of His Word. There are many easy and pleasant truths that most people will readily accept. For example, an easy truth from the Writings is that the Lord wants everyone to go to heaven and that the goal of Divine Providence is to make sure that all who want to go to heaven can get to heaven (DP 27). Another example of a pleasant truth is that the angels come near us when we read the Word with humility and reverence. It is easy to see the Lord's love shining within those truths.

On the other hand, as we said at the beginning of the sermon, it can also be difficult to see that same love shining in other truths. Consider for a moment the supposed "hard" truths in the Word that are often difficult to accept. Or perhaps think of the truths that you may personally grapple with. [pause] We can use an example from Revelation chapter 21. Consider the fact that the gates of the New Jerusalem are wide open, meaning that the city is open to people of all walks of life. And yet the Lord speaks of those who do not make it into the Holy City. He says,

**I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts. He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son. But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death. (21:6-8)**

It may be hard to see, but the Lord's love is in this truth as well. And we can think of many more truths in the threefold Word that challenge the human proprium, that make us and the rest of the world bristle and cringe. It's not the Lord who makes them that way. It's our response to the truths that make them hard. So regardless of our personal experience with the Word, despite how

challenging it may seem, we must remember that it is these same “hard” truths through which the Lord communicates His love to us. It is within all of these truths that we find His love reaching out to us in a comprehensible and understandable way. In these truths we find the beautiful Tree of Life which bears fruit in all seasons.

But the goal is not only to know this or to change our perspective! The goal is to acknowledge that all the truths of the Word are really here to help us live the life that leads to heaven. They are not given to condemn us to hell, no matter how much we might make it seem that way. The goal is to encourage a life according to the Word.

This brings us to the second point in the statement from the *Apocalypse Revealed*. It says that it is the consequent life *according* to those truths that cause the Lord to be present in us. We are not joined to the Lord when the Word merely sits on a table unread, there is no conjunction with the Word when it simply sits in our memory as facts that we know! Conjunction occurs only when we live according to the Word (cf. SE 5961).

The more we form our lives in accordance with the Lord’s teaching, the closer we come to the New Jerusalem, and the closer we are to the Lord’s love. And, the Lord shows us the clear path that leads right to the city. He teaches further in *Apocalypse Revealed* that,

**This is the case with people who turn directly to the Lord and refrain from evils because they are sins, thus with people who will be in the Lord's New Church, which is the New Jerusalem. For people who do not turn directly to the Lord cannot be conjoined with Him...and therefore they cannot possess the love that comes from the Divine. (933)**

Notice how the path that leads to the New Jerusalem consists in two things: 1. Turning directly to the Lord and 2. Shunning evils because they are sins.

We can imagine our lives here on earth as the slow and faithful walk towards the City. And each step we take towards it represents another evil that we have shunned, and to the extent

that evils are shunned, to that same extent do we draw near the Holy City. We read in the *Doctrine of Life* that,

**[I]n proportion as a person shuns evils, in the same proportion is he with the Lord and in the Lord; and that in proportion as he is in the Lord, in the same proportion he does goods, not from self but from the Lord. (21)**

So today we must ask ourselves what our reaction will be the next time our proprium is challenged by the Lord's Word. Will we shy away from it, make excuses as to why its not true or important? Or will we soften our hearts with the humble recognition that these and all truths from the Word are what lead to a heavenly life in the Holy City New Jerusalem? It is in turning directly to the Lord in His threefold Word and shunning evils as sins that draw us nearer and prepare us to behold the Tree of Life, the Lord's very love that flows into everyone who is willing to receive it.

*“Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city.” (Rev. 22:14)*

*Amen.*

Lessons: *Revelation 21:10-21, 22:1-2; Apocalypse Revealed 933*