

The Lord's Secret Presence

Why isn't the Lord's government more transparent?

by the Rev. Jeremy F. Simons, Bryn Athyn, September 10, 2023

*"But when His brothers had gone up, then He also went up to the feast, not openly, but as it were in secret."
John 7.10*

Jesus had told His brothers that He would not go to the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem. But after they had gone, He went secretly. In a similar way, He comes secretly to the feasts of your life, and works with you in mysterious ways that you are not aware of. Why is that? Wouldn't it be better if there were no secrets?

One of the main purposes of His coming into the world was to make Himself visible, to make His government open and transparent, so that we can see, understand, love and obey Him. Yet He remains mysterious, and He operates invisibly in the world.

More than that, many people wonder if the Lord is not actually deceptive, creating a world in which harmful things are often attractive and seemingly harmless, and giving us teachings that sometimes appear to be untrue and misleading.

Our topic this morning is the reason behind these mysteries. Even though the motto of the New Church is that *"Now it is permitted to enter with the understanding into the mysteries of faith"* (True Christian Religion 508), there are still secrets. The answers to the puzzling questions that spring from the Word, and to life's riddles, aren't immediately obvious. Our topic is why this is so.

In our lesson from John, Jesus was in Galilee because in Judea the religious authorities were looking for Him. This was in October, several months before the events of Easter. His brothers

criticized His concealment, saying, *"Show Yourself to the world."* But they didn't believe in Him.



Jesus Walks in the Portico of Solomon by James Tissot

In the New Testament there is a running theme about seeing and not seeing. People who don't believe do not see. The lack of belief causes a lack of awareness. The scribes and Pharisees are therefore called *"fools and blind"* (Matthew 23.17), who *"cannot discern the signs of the times"* (16.3). They can't see because they don't believe. The Lord

sorrowed over Jerusalem, saying to it:

"If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes." Luke 19.41

They are hidden because they did not believe or obey the things that would have made for their peace.

People demand transparency

People who don't believe often demand explanations and proofs. Jesus' brothers said: *"No one does anything in secret while he himself seeks to be known openly. If You do these things, show Yourself to the world."* The scribes and Pharisees demanded signs, but the Lord said:

"A wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah." Matthew 16.3

This sign is that Jesus would be three days in the tomb, just as Jonah was three days in the belly of the fish. Why such an enigmatic response?

The answer may be surprising. Put simply, it is that it is better that things be unknown than that they be seen and denied. You would think that if the answer and reason were clear then everyone would accept it. But there are two things going on here. One is that even if it were clear many would deny it. The other is that denial is a state that often cannot be penetrated by reasons, so that clarity is simply an impossibility. Another way to put that is that evil closes the mind to the truth.

“People who adopt the negative principle (or attitude) towards the truth of anything in the Word say in their hearts that they are willing to believe when persuaded on rational grounds and by facts. But these are such as never believe, not even if they were convinced by means of the evidence of their own physical senses of seeing, hearing, and touch. They would always be producing new reasonings against such things. In so doing they would at length completely destroy all faith.” Arcana Coelestia 2588

This is speaking about people who genuinely do not believe. Others have reasonable doubts and will become ready to accept the truth over time.

The very purpose of secrecy and obscurity is to protect those people, to allow changes to take place over time, to prevent anyone from being forced to choose before they are ready, and ultimately to leave everyone free to choose their own destiny. It is strange that a lack of understanding can be a tool of freedom, when we normally think, as is also the truth, that knowledge brings freedom. Both are true, but in different ways.

The Lord spoke in parables. When the disciples asked Him why, He said:

“Because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear.” Matthew 13.11-13

Commenting on this, the Writings explain that those who are not ready to believe would deny and profane the truth if they saw it (*Arcana Coelestia 5508*), which is worse than not understanding. Meanwhile the stories themselves would be heard, understood and accepted at some level, even by those who did not believe or grasp them deeply.

Jesus said to His brothers, *“My time has not yet come, but your time is always ready. You go up to this feast. I am not yet going up to this feast, for My time has not yet fully come.”* That is, when the time was right, He would force a decision. In the

meantime, however, He would remain concealed.

Secrecy is about survival

Why did Jesus go secretly to the feast, when He said that He would not go? He went because the Lord is never absent. He went secretly because His life was in danger. Similarly, the reason He is hidden in your life is because of elements present with every person that do not welcome Him. If these were not there, you would be aware of His actions, as the angels are.

One aspect of the Lord’s secrecy is that it is not absolute but relative. It is not an all-or-nothing situation. He is never completely invisible and obscure, and neither is He ever completely known, even to the highest angels. Everyone sees and understands in their own way and to their own degree, and it changes over time.

The people in Jerusalem were seeking Jesus and asking about Him. *“Some said, ‘He is good’; others said, ‘No, on the contrary, He deceives the people.’”* Similarly, there is a continual debate in the mind of every person about what is right and wrong. The answers are often hidden, and you go through your life pondering the answers. You reach conclusions in your own way and in your own time.

He works secretly to thwart your desires.

The Lord’s presence and protection with you are not obvious, because in many ways He is protecting you from yourself. If you saw how He works to thwart your desires you would not be happy. His protection is not about saving your natural life, or ensuring your material success, but about furthering your spiritual life and bringing you eternal happiness. Eternal happiness can seem to be at odds with temporal happiness, so the Lord works in hidden ways to foster it.

That is, the Lord does not help people in the way that they would always want to be helped, but actually works to lead us away from much of what we instinctively desire.

“Consequently if a person were to clearly see or feel this withdrawal or diverting, it would anger him, and he would regard God as an enemy, and from the evil of his native character deny Him. Therefore, lest a person become conscious of this, he is kept in a state of freedom, so that he does not know other than that he is guiding himself.” Divine Providence 183

This is why Jesus went secretly to the feast. The

leadership regarded Him as an enemy, just as you would if you saw what He was doing. So Jesus said to His brothers: *“The world cannot hate you, but it hates Me because I testify of it that its works are evil.”* No one wants to be told that their works are evil. Yet everyone is so spiritually distant from the Lord that this would be all they heard if the Lord did not work clandestinely.

Appearances

Another way to see this is described by the word “appearances.”

“The Lord joins people to Himself by means of appearances. For it is an appearance that a person from himself loves the neighbor, does good and speaks truth. Unless these things appeared to people as if they were from themselves they would not love the neighbor, do good and speak truth, and therefore they would not be joined to the Lord.” Divine Providence 219

That is, He doesn’t tell you that your works are evil. He makes you feel that you are basically a kind and decent person, and that you are the one who does what you do. Your distance from Him is hidden from you for the most part, because the more you perceived that distance the more terrible and discouraged you would feel. Meanwhile He works to close that gap in thousands of secret ways, so that you can feel His love for you and enjoy the happiness that this love holds.

The way that the Lord’s providence works to close the gap would also be incomprehensible to us even if we did see it. His work with us is like the work of a builder building a palace: *“He first amasses materials of every kind and piles them in heaps, where they lie in no order at all; and what the palace made from them is to be like exists solely in the mind of the architect.”* Arcana Coelestia 6486

In our lesson we also read that this process is *“like what happens to a person in the company of an enemy who intends to kill him, an intention he is not aware of; and a friend leads him away by unknown paths and afterwards discloses to him his enemy’s intention.”* Divine Providence 211

This is the good news about these secrets. The secrecy is temporary. When the friend discloses to him his enemy’s intention the secret is out and the person understands what just happened – after the fact. Most people enjoy knowing secrets if they can eventually tell them to someone. Telling a secret

can be a sign of friendship and trust. The Lord said:

“No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing. Rather I call you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you.” John 15:14-16

The good news is that when the time is right the secrets are revealed. As you grow in your love and understanding you will see things that you never saw before. Before something is built the plans can seem to be impossible. But if you look back at those plans while looking at the finished product they make much more sense.

The Lord did not remain hidden at the feast. He went up into the temple and taught. Several months later He rode openly and triumphantly into Jerusalem on a donkey, hailed as the King. The time was right.

The Lord predicted that when the time was right He would come again, and reveal *“all truth”* (John 16.13). Swedenborg writes:

“I was once in my spirit taken up to the angelic heaven and into one of its societies; and some of the wise there then came to me and said, “What news do you have from earth?” “This is new,” I said, “that the Lord has revealed secrets which surpass in excellence all the secrets previously revealed from the inception of the Church.” Conjugal Love 532

Conclusion

Life is full of mysteries. Most of what happens in the world is hidden from you. What you observe and are aware of is only the thinnest veneer of reality. The actual workings of both the natural world and the spiritual world are mysteries far beyond anyone’s perception or comprehension.

It is understandable that not everyone will be happy with this situation. It can seem strange and wrong that the truth is not always clear in the literal sense of the Word, and that some things there appear to be unjust and misleading.

At the same time, an open heart can receive a sight from the Lord that unlocks the doors of the spirit, and makes things clear in miraculous ways, when the time is right.

“For there is nothing hidden which will not be revealed, nor has anything been kept secret but that it should come to light.” Mark 4.22 AMEN

Readings from the Word

John 7

After these things Jesus walked in Galilee; for He did not want to walk in Judea, because the people there sought to kill Him. ²Now the Feast of Tabernacles was at hand. ³His brothers therefore said to Him, “Depart from here and go into Judea, that Your disciples also may see the works that You are doing. ⁴“For no one does anything in secret while he himself seeks to be known openly. If You do these things, show Yourself to the world.” ⁵For even His brothers did not believe in Him. ⁶Then Jesus said to them, “My time has not yet come, but your time is always ready. ⁷“The world cannot hate you, but it hates Me because I testify of it that its works are evil. ⁸“You go up to this feast. I am not yet going up to this feast, for My time has not yet fully come.” ⁹When He had said these things to them, He remained in Galilee. ¹⁰But when His brothers had gone up, then He also went up to the feast, not openly, but as it were in secret. ¹¹Then the people sought Him at the feast, and said, “Where is He?” ¹²And there was much complaining among the people concerning Him. Some said, “He is good”; others said, “No, on the contrary, He deceives the people.” ¹³However, no one spoke openly of Him for fear of the Jewish authorities.



Divine Providence 211

The reason Divine providence acts so secretly that scarcely anyone knows of its existence is to prevent mankind from perishing. For a person's native character, which is his will, never acts in accord with Divine providence. A person's native character harbors an innate hostility to that providence... For a person's own prudence is continually raising its head, and Divine providence is continually pressing it down. [2] If a person were to be conscious of this, he would be angered and enraged at God and would perish. But as long as he is not conscious of it, he may become angry and enraged at people, or at himself, and at fortune, too, without perishing. For this reason the Lord by His Divine providence continually leads a person in freedom, and freedom appears to a person no otherwise than as his own.

Moreover, to lead someone opposed to oneself in freedom is like raising a heavy and resistant weight from the ground by jackscrews, whose power causes the heaviness and resistance not to be felt. It is also like someone's being in the hands of an enemy who intends to kill him, of which he is at the time unaware, and having a friend lead him away by secret passages and afterward disclose the enemy's intent.

Arcana Coelestia 6486

I have listened to angels talking to one another about the Lord's Providence, but although I did indeed understand what they said, little of it can be described because, tied up constantly with their conversations, there were heavenly representations, which for the most part are indescribable. They spoke with wisdom, saying that the Lord's Providence is present in the most specific details of all that takes place, though He does not act according to any plan such as a person sets before himself, because He both foresees and makes provision for things to come. It is, the angels said, like someone who builds a palace. He first amasses materials of every kind and piles them in heaps, where they lie in no order at all; and what the palace made from them is to be like exists solely in the mind of the architect.



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