

"I saw heaven opened..."

Revelation 19:11

A Sermon by Rev. Derek Elphick

In three days', we will be celebrating the birthday of the New Church here on the grounds of Bryn Athyn cathedral.

We mark June 19th, 1770, as the official date in history when the final volume detailing the Lord's long awaited Second Coming was finished, at which point, we're told, the Lord called together the twelve disciples who had followed Him in the world and the next day sent them throughout the whole spiritual world to preach the Gospel that the Lord God Jesus Christ reigns, whose kingdom shall reign forever (see TC 791).

We celebrate and give thanks on this special day for many reasons.

We have gratitude for:

This church organization, the **General Church of the New Jerusalem**, a human organization which tries to keep the "bar high" by modeling itself as closely as it can to the direct teachings of the Heavenly Doctrines.

We have gratitude for:

Friends and family the world over, going back many generations, which provides a strong sense of belonging, a strong network of like-minded individuals which gives our church organization a sense of unity and purpose, a sense of community in which we support each other by living and sharing the faith with others.

We have gratitude for:

Our **schools**, pouring organizational focus on children, young minds, again by trying to keep the "bar high" by modeling our philosophy and educational practices as closely as we can to the direct teachings of the Heavenly Doctrines.

We have gratitude for:

Our **source material**, the Heavenly Doctrines of the New Jerusalem, which reveal the spiritual sense, the inner meaning of the Bible, which gives us a new kind of "clarity" about the Lord, faith and religion, providence, the afterlife, many things which for millennia have been a stumbling block, a source of skepticism, for people the world over. We celebrate the advent of the modern day "printing press," namely the internet, which has enabled thousands, nay millions, of people around world to discover the teachings of the New Church online.

And we have gratitude for:

The **hidden effects** of this new religious movement. This new revelation is said to "*surpass all miracles*" (Inv. 39) because it has produced spiritual change in two worlds simultaneously, the natural and the spiritual. As a result of the Second Coming of the Lord, there's been a Last Judgment in the spiritual world and a re-ordering of the heavens which means that now there's a "trickle down" effect in that all people on earth can experience and enjoy a new kind of spiritual, religious freedom (see LJ 73-74).

So, yes, we have many reasons for celebrating New Church Day and much to be thankful for.

Today, in preparation for our celebrations, I invite you to consider closely the words of our text, "***I saw heaven opened...***"

What does it mean to see "heaven opened"? Is this a metaphorical expression or is it describing something different?

And if it's more than metaphorical, how might this activity work in us, individually and collectively?

Well, first of all, in our celebration of the New Church, we can't ignore the *means* by which the Heavenly Doctrines were given to the world, namely through the Lord's humble servant, Emanuel Swedenborg.

In a rare reference to himself, Swedenborg said in the final volume of the published works that since the Lord cannot manifest Himself in person again and yet foretold that He would come again to build a new church, that he, Swedenborg, was called by the Lord to "*accept these teachings intellectually*" and then publish them by means of the press (see TC 779).

Today the world enjoys the fruits of this labor, eighteen published volumes which comprise the formal, systematic theology of the New Church, sometimes referred to as the church of "*the New Jerusalem*" (Ibid).

**But is this really what we're doing, celebrating books?
Is this what the New Church is all about, the books?**

Well, the books are obviously *very* important, as are the Old and New Testament, but something else has happened too...

Heaven has been *opened*...

- not theoretically or figuratively, but for real

Heaven has been opened in such a way that...

- **there's now a re-awakening of the human spirit!**
- **a re-awakening to *everything* that touches our physical senses!**
- **a re-awakening to the *connection*, to the thin veil, that exists between this world and the spiritual world!**

Now, we might think that this isn't particularly news-worthy.

Anyone familiar with the Heavenly Doctrines *knows* that heaven has been "opened up" by virtue of what its' pages teach and declare and claim, but what makes this re-awakening *significant, and new, and different* is the access we've been given to a **new tool, a new key**, which has been *lost* for thousands of years and has now been *found*.

Let explore the significance of this discovery a little deeper.

In ancient times, people on earth experienced a *very* close connection to the spiritual world. We read, for example, that...

"...when they saw a high mountain they did not perceive the idea of a mountain but that of height, and from height they perceived heaven and the Lord. When they perceived the morning they did not perceive the morning itself that starts the day but that which is heavenly and is a likeness of the morning and the dawn in people's minds...**For these people...whatever they saw with their eyes was for them heavenly, and so everything was so to speak alive...**" (*Secrets of Heaven* 920).

The people of most ancient times *intuitively* perceived everything around them - the rocks, trees, flowers, meadows, mountains and hills, lakes and oceans, animals and birds, fish and insects - to be "correspondential" in nature, meaning, they knew that everything on planet earth, including themselves, ***gained existence as a result of having a counterpart in the spiritual world!*** (see AC 3422)

The term for this "causal" relationship is *correspondence*. We read about it in our lesson today...

"I have shown in my book, *Heaven and Hell* (87-105), that every single thing to be found in nature corresponds to something spiritual, and likewise every single part of the human body corresponds to something spiritual...No one has known until now, however, what correspondence is. In the earliest times, correspondence was very well known. To the people who lived at that time the study of correspondences was the supreme field of study..." (TC 201, HH 356).

This explains *why* heaven has been opened to us, and in a way similar to the people of ancient times.

Heaven has been opened to us because the key, a knowledge of correspondences, which was lost, has been found again, and given back to the world.

We sometimes forget that the Word, the Old and New Testament, was written by means of correspondences. When the Lord came on earth, we're told that He "*spoke in correspondences*" (TC 201). This is because, "*Divine ideas present themselves in the world in the form of correspondences; therefore, the Word was written entirely in correspondences...*" (Ibid). And so we learn that...

"the study of correspondences, which allows the spiritual sense to be grasped, has been revealed today, because the Divine truths of the church are now coming into light...[and] the opening of the spiritual sense at this day is meant by John's vision of heaven being opened..." (TC 207).

So, *this* is how heaven is opened to us, by means of correspondences! What an incredible thought.

A practical way to think of correspondences, both in the Word and in nature, is to think of physical objects as being a "**portal**" that opens heaven up to us...

Think about climbing a mountain or drinking a cool glass of water on a hot summer day, or watching the sun rise, or watching bees at work in their hive, or standing by the ocean, or fishing in a lake, or sailing, or pulling weeds in the garden.

These everyday activities have a correspondence and, as a result, connect us to heaven. Again, this connection is not "symbolic" or "metaphorical." It's as *real* as the love we feel for our loved ones, friends and neighbors. This is because a knowledge of correspondences *unlocks* a spiritual, mind/body connection similar to that of the ancients (see AC 920).

Another practical way to think of correspondences is to consider the symbols and signs we see all around us.

Commercial companies will spend a lot of time and money creating a brand or logo because they know symbols engage people's hearts and minds, no matter how frivolous or superficial the product or service might be.

There's also a *hierarchy to symbolism*. The logo or symbol of a sports team, for example, while meaning a lot to the fans is nothing in comparison to a country's national flag or a national monument.

Or think of something as simple as a wedding ring. The ring holds little power or significance to someone who has no knowledge or appreciation of marriage, but wedding rings, those little chunks of gold, are deeply significant and powerful to

those who understand the symbolism. The ring has a correspondence. **It opens heaven to those in love!**

Now think of symbols in the Word - they hold an even greater correspondential power and significance to the person who understands their function and purpose, so, rather than thinking of them as words on a page from religious books we know we should respect and revere, think of them, also, as "keys" that open our hearts and minds to either the dangers of selfish living or the heavenly delights of living for causes greater than ourselves!

And so, this brings us back to the first thing John sees after heaven is opened to him - **a white horse**, and we read: *"He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war..."* (Rev. 19:11-16).

"Horses" correspond to the *power* of the intellect, the understanding. These animals project speed and forward motion; galloping, champing at the bit, charging forward. They correspond to the human faculty of understanding. Our mind, our intellect, has the ability to rise above our feelings and emotions and annoyances, into the light of heaven itself. We can do this whenever we want, regardless of how we might be feeling at the time. **This is the Nunc Licet promise**, to enter with the understanding into the mysteries of faith. To ride a horse, symbolically, is to put your mind on something and not let up.

The other images connected to the vision of the Rider on the White Horse are a bit more disturbing - we get a description of the Lord prepared for war, clothed with a robe *"dipped in blood"* with a *"sharp sword"* coming out of His mouth, ready to *"strike the nations."*

We're told that for a long time, this precious knowledge of correspondences (which unlocks the spiritual sense of the Word) still won't be recognized or appreciated by everyone because the hells, that dragon of old, still wants to "draw blood;" the hells still want to attack and sabotage these powerful, new correspondential connections between heaven and earth that the Lord has re-established in His Second Coming (see TC 207).

It's a cautionary tale because this is how the knowledge of correspondences was lost in the first place. The hells got a grip of human minds so strongly that people

didn't simply lack belief in spiritual things; they became convinced that earthly living was all that mattered and that our connection to a spiritual realm was an illusion and didn't exist at all! (see AC 9011, see also TC 291).

But this is not how the story ends because we have a far stronger and compelling message in this text - John saw "heaven opened" so that he might see the Rider on the White Horse. This powerful image of the Lord, "Faithful and True," riding on horseback with the armies of heaven at his side is a vivid descriptor of how the Lord in His Second Coming is leading and guiding us in ways that have not been possible since the golden age, since ancient times.

Let us rejoice today because heaven has been opened in such a way that the truths of the Second Coming...

...re-awaken the *human spirit*

...re-awaken *everything* that touches our senses

...re-awaken the connection between heaven and earth.

The other symbols in the book of Revelation like the Woman Clothed with the Sun, the Child, the Dragon, Michael and his angels - scenes we will see depicted in our June 19th Pageant - are all correspondential too. They are not metaphorical or allegorical images - they "open heaven" in a very real way, and *connect* our spirit, our mind, to the birth, and the struggle, and the growth of the New Church in us as individuals and collectively as a church.

Our hearts are filled with so much joy and optimism when a child is born. We look at that child and feel the sphere of heavenly innocence pouring into the room - all the excitement, the happiness, the promise, the hope - all that potential. The same is true when we stop to celebrate the birthday of the New Church - we are filled with the same kind of joy and optimism because...

...heaven has been opened again.

Amen.

Lessons: Revelation 19:11-16, True Christianity 201 & 207