

“The Lord is my God”

Recognizing the Lord

A Sermon by the Rt. Rev. Peter Buss Jr.
Bryn Athyn Cathedral—December 1, 2024

***They will call on My name, and I will answer them. I will say, ‘This is My people’;
and each one will say, ‘The Lord is my God.’” (Zechariah 13:9)***

Recognizing people. We start today by drawing attention to the amazing human ability to recognize the face of people we know. Picture yourself at an airport waiting for a loved one to come through customs. A flood of faces enters through those doors into the reception area and your eyes float past all of them, until that familiar face appears and is immediately identified. Eyes lock, smiles spread across both faces, hugs and greetings follow.

That ability to pick out the face of a loved one is almost uncanny. Isn’t it true that we do a double-take when someone we know well appears in a crowd? It’s a split-second thing, because our brains are programmed to respond to those eyes, that particular makeup of facial features, that expression, that walk.

We live in an age where facial recognition software has caught up with this innate human ability, so much so that our phones open when we look at them, photo editing software can pick out people we ask it to from thousands of pictures, and airport screening systems no longer need us to pull out our licenses.

Amazing as these things are, we know that our power of recognition goes much further than the faces of loved ones or familiar people in our lives. For those in our family, or the one to whom we’re married, there’s a lifetime of memories and experiences that are predictable and familiar. “He always says that.” “That’s what she does.” Mothers can pick out their child’s cry across the house in a crowded family gathering.

This deep recognition can really matter for us. Based on our familiarity, we may be able to discern when an adult child or close friend is struggling, even when many others can’t see it. For any of our close relationships, trust is strengthened or weakened by these kinds of characteristic interactions: “I can count on him because my experience is that he’s honest and trustworthy,” or “I wish I could believe that, but it hasn’t been my experience.”

Recognizing the Lord. Our reason for drawing attention to this ability to recognize is to raise it up a level to the Lord, with the goal of recognizing Him as our Lord. This is a time of year that we focus on prophecies of the Lord’s coming, and I draw your attention to two of them. As we heard in our reading from Isaiah, the time is predicted when people would be able to say,

“Behold, this is our God;
We have waited for Him, and He will save us.
This is the Lord;
We have waited for Him;
We will be glad and rejoice in His salvation.” (Isaiah 25:9)

The second one is stated in an even more personal way. In Zephaniah we hear again the words with which we opened our service today: “They will call on My name, and I will answer them. I will say, ‘This is My people’; and each one will say, ‘The Lord is my God’” (Zechariah 13:9).

It’s interesting to bring together our recognition and familiarity with loved ones in our lives, with our relationship with the Lord. But isn’t that a foundational part of our faith, and isn’t it, when we stop and think about it, one of the primary reasons the Lord came to earth? So that people could know Him and come to understand His characteristic ways of acting? So that we could see what He cares about by the ways He spent His time and how He interacted with people?

Consider His words to Philip, one of the disciples who traveled around with Jesus and was invited to consider who He really was: “Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? (John 14:9). Or think about the way He worked with two of the disciples on road to Emmaus after He was resurrected, where at first “their eyes were restrained, so that they did not know Him” but later, when He broke bread with them, “their eyes were opened and they [did] know Him” (Luke 24:16, 31). Or recall the way He worked with Thomas who doubted that He had risen, coming into his presence and letting him touch His hands and see His pierced side, inspiring Thomas to finally say, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28). Finally, we could reflect on His appearance, again in the resurrection, to several of the disciples after they had fished all night and caught nothing. There was enough in the familiar interaction, with Jesus offering the generative instruction to cast the net on the right side of the boat, to cause Peter to say, “It is the Lord!” (John 21:6-7). So the Lord works, through stories like these and many others, to inspire our recognition and acknowledgement of Him.

The wise men. I’d like to shift back to the beginning of the story of the Lord’s life on earth, to the Christmas story, specifically to the visit of the wise men. There’s much in that story that carries forward this theme of recognition. These men were the ones who recognized the star as a sign that the “King of the Jews” had been born (Matthew 2:1-2; *Arcana Caelestia* 3762:5). They were also responsive to the warning of the Lord in a dream that they should not return to Herod but “departed for their own country another way” (Matthew 2:12).

It is in the central vignette of them “[falling down and worshiping] Him” and “[opening their treasures and presenting] gifts to Him—gold, frankincense and myrrh”—that we see the core message for our purposes today (Matthew 2:11). Falling down and worshiping, in this case by people who themselves were considered important, is a sign of “adoration from genuine humility” and of worship (*Arcana Caelestia* 5323). Gold represents our love to the Lord, sometimes called celestial love; frankincense represents our acknowledgment of the Lord from a knowledge of Him through His Word; and myrrh represents our willingness to put our faith and knowledge into practice in the actions and choices of our lives (see *Arcana Caelestia* 9293, 10,252, *Apocalypse Explained* 324:10). There is deep recognition within these attitudes of heart and the faithful actions that are implied. The wise men were among the few who recognized the Lord without being told directly by an angel. They knew what to look for, and when they saw it, they responded.

So for us there is great wisdom in coming to know our Lord, to the point of willingness to bow before Him, learn of His goodness, and build our lives around His guidance. I love the teaching which captures this in terms of “the four essentials of a Church” or we might say essential components of a spiritual life. They are: “the recognition of God, the recognition of the goods of charity, the recognition of the verities of faith, and a life in accordance with them” (*Canons of the New Church* 24). This amazingly lines up with the gifts of the wise men, symbolically understood. There’s the recognition of the Lord that is our central focus for today, and it extends beautifully into what He asks of us: to embrace a loving and charitable attitude, to learn the Lord’s will for our lives in His Word, and to put our love and faith into practice.

A mirror. I’d like to pull out two of those for a moment, namely the “verities of faith, and a life in accordance with them.” There’s a teaching which says:

For all who have acquired their state of mind from God, the Sacred Scripture is like a mirror in which they see God, everyone in their own fashion. This mirror is composed of the truths which they learn from the Word and absorb by living their lives in accordance with them. (*True Christian Religion* 6)

I hope you hear the recognition theme again. In this case, it relates to the things we know about the Lord and incorporate into our relationship with Him. The Word, being the story of the Lord’s interaction with His people, shows that He is the Creator and Preserver of the world, together with all its beauty and majesty (Genesis 1,2). He is the one who causes the generations in our families to multiply as He did with the Israelites (Genesis 22:17). He brings us also out of states of slavery and misery (Exodus 3:7-8), and causes us to discover a way forward where we thought none was possible, as He did when He parted the Red Sea (Exodus 14). He calls people to His service, as He did Moses, Deborah, Elijah, David and Daniel, and as He did with Peter, Andrew, James, John and the rest of the disciples. Closer to Christmas He leads people to discover their purpose and calling, as He did with Mary and Joseph, Elizabeth and Zacharias. He is the One, the only One, who can heal the deep sadness of death, as He did with the raising of Lazarus (John 11), and the restoring of a sick young girl to her parents (Mark 5:41). He is the One who can say to the raging stormy winds of worry, fear and anxiety that besiege us, “Peace, be still” and there is a great calm in our spirits (Mark 4:39). He can heal the blindness of our spirits and cause us to know the personal help of our Lord, as He did with the man born blind who came to confess Him saying, “‘Lord I believe!’ And he worshiped Him” (John 9:38).

We know that these and so many other parts of the Word which reveal the nature and goodness of our Lord are ennobled by the teachings of the Heavenly Doctrines, as for example the following:

- “The Lord, being mercy itself, forgives everyone his sins, and does not hold even one of them against a person. For the Lord says, ‘They do not know what they are doing.’” (*True Christian Religion* 539)
- Also: “In His love, which is infinite because it is Divine, the Lord wishes to draw a person all the way to Himself and by doing this to bless him in every way with glory and happiness.” (*Arcana Coelestia* 6645:2)

All these are the truths of the Word which act as a mirror within which we see our God each in our own fashion. They help us to know our God—what He does and how He regards us and how He works with us no matter what—so much so that we come to the peace and confidence spoken about in another teaching that some of us could quote from memory: “Peace has in it confidence in the Lord, that He directs all things, and provides all things, and that He leads to a good end” (*Arcana Caelestia* 8455).

Recognizing Providence. This, then, is the final part of our consideration today—the ways in which we can come to trust the Lord’s loving and providential care. We are taught:

People who receive influx from heaven and acknowledge Divine providence, and especially those who by reformation have become spiritual, when they see events unfold in some marvelous sequence, all from an interior acknowledgment see, as it were, that providence and confess it. (*Divine Providence* 187)

If it is true that such acknowledgment comes when we invest time in turning to our Lord and learning about Him, then the message is clear for us. We are called to be among those willing to confess the Lord and honor the ways He blesses us and provides for us. We are invited to look back and see the ways He has brought us to this point in our lives and know deep down that He is indeed merciful and bountiful.

When we see something good happen, in our life or in the lives of others, do we let the thought penetrate that the Lord caused it? We can if we’ve become accustomed to looking for the signs of the Lord’s workings, as the stars in the sky that proclaim His coming. We will see the blessings in each day, and in each relationship precious to us, and attribute them to the Lord. We will perceive His characteristic forgiveness and mercy despite our flawed ways of acting. We will come to know that we can turn to Him in prayer with whatever it is that is on our hearts, knowing that as a result we will feel a sense of “hope, consolation and a certain inward joy” (*Arcana Caelestia* 2535). We will marvel anew that He chose to come to earth to make Himself manifest to all, and that He has come again to lead us into all truth (John 16:13). We will sing our version of the joyful acknowledgment of the angels to the shepherds: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill to all” (Luke 2:14), and echoed by the other multitude of angels we heard about earlier who cried out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God” (*Apocalypse Revealed* 368).

It is this recognition, this acknowledgment, that is contained in the prophecies that have been our focus today—prophecies that can continually come true for us:

- “Behold, this is our God; we have waited for Him, and He will save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for Him; we will be glad and rejoice in His salvation.”
- “Then we too will hear when the Lord calls to us saying “This is My people,” and we will answer from the heart, “This is my God” (Zechariah 13:9). **Amen.**

Readings from the Lord’s Word: Isaiah 25:1,6-9; Matthew 2:9-11; *True Christian Religion* 6, *Canons for the New Church* 21; *Apocalypse Revealed* 368.

Isaiah 25

¹ O Lord, You are my God.

I will exalt You,

I will praise Your name,

For You have done wonderful things;

Your counsels of old are faithfulness and truth...

⁶ And in this mountain

The Lord of hosts will make for all people

A feast of choice pieces,

A feast of wines on the lees,

Of fat things full of marrow,

Of well-refined wines on the lees.

⁷ And He will destroy on this mountain

The surface of the covering cast over all people,

And the veil that is spread over all nations.

⁸ He will swallow up death forever,

And the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces;

The rebuke of His people

He will take away from all the earth;

For the Lord has spoken.

⁹ And it will be said in that day:

“Behold, this is our God;

We have waited for Him, and He will save us.

This is the Lord;

We have waited for Him;

We will be glad and rejoice in His salvation.”

Matthew 2

⁹ When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the

star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. ¹¹ And when they had come into the house, they

saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they

had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

True Christian Religion 6

For all who have acquired their state of mind from God, the Sacred Scripture is like a mirror in which they see God, everyone in their own fashion. This mirror is composed of the truths which they learn from the Word and absorb by living their lives in accordance with them.

Canons of the New Church 24

The four essentials of a Church are the recognition of God, the recognition of the goods of charity, the recognition of the verities of faith, and a life in accordance with them.

Apocalypse Revealed 368

And crying out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (7:10) This symbolizes an acknowledgment from the heart that the Lord is their Savior. To cry with a loud voice symbolizes an acknowledgment from the heart. "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb" means, symbolically, that the Lord is the true salvation, and that the salvation of all people depends on Him, thus that He is the Savior. The one sitting on the throne and the Lamb symbolize the Lord alone – the one sitting on the throne symbolizing His Divinity from which all else flows, and the Lamb His Divine humanity... The Lord many times in the Word is called salvation, meaning that He is the Savior, as for example:

- Say to the daughter of Zion, "Behold, your salvation is coming." (Isaiah 62:11)
- This is Jehovah whom we have waited for; we will be glad and rejoice in His salvation. (Isaiah 25:9)

The word for salvation in the Hebrew is yeshu'ah, the same as for the name Jesus.