

Appearance Of The Lord

A sermon by Rev. Grant R. Schnarr

The Lord had appeared before His disciples, most of them rejoiced that they had seen Him again. But He was alive. All the times that He had spoken of, rising on the third day, had come true. They remembered, they believed Him.

And yet there was Thomas who was a very earthly kind of person, known as "Doubting Thomas," who said, "I won't believe in the Lord unless I can put my finger in the holes in His hands and put my hand in His side." What happens? Eight days later the Lord appears before Thomas and says, "OK, Thomas. Reach your finger in my hands. Put your hand in my side. Handle me and see that it is I." Thomas didn't need to do that any more.

He said to Him, "My Lord, my God."

And the Lord said to Thomas, "You have seen. That's why you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed in Him."

Why was it that the Lord appeared to His disciples after His crucifixion? It might have been to show that He was alive, that He had conquered death. That's a great part of Christianity, that He is the resurrection and the life. But even more than this, He appeared to His disciples so that they would worship Him in His risen form, that they wouldn't think back on Him historically, think about His life in the world, but to see that, yes, He is very much alive now. He has risen, He's alive, He's with them still. "Lo, I am with you always even to the end of the age," He said to them. The Lord came on earth to make Himself visible to the human race, to make Himself accessible to people so that they could know Him, so that they could understand Him, so that they could, if they chose, be one with their Creator through that understanding.

Before the Lord had come, what kind of God did they worship at that time? The Writings for the New Church say that they worshipped an invisible God, incomprehensible. After all, if God is love itself, life itself, reality itself, that's pretty incomprehensible for us finite beings. How can the finite comprehend the infinite? It's impossible. Beyond that, though, they had a perception of the Lord within. They could think of His humanity, so to speak-His love and wisdom within-perceive what it was. But there was no external form, no concrete image, to put that into. Again, it was an invisible God, sort of perceiving who God was, but not really being able to grasp Him in their imagination.

And then through the process of time, as people turned away from the

Lord, as the leaders of the church at that time, began to make up teachings, began to lead the people to themselves rather than from God, that picture of the Lord became very clouded. And so we can look at the Old Testament, and we see their concept of God - an angry God, a punishing God, a God who can repent, a God who wants vengeance. This is the way they saw Him because of their infantile state, because of the dark state that they were in.

Where was the relationship with God and man? If you think of God as being love itself and desiring nothing more than to be one with that which He had created, that wasn't taking place and the end of creation was in danger, so the Lord came to her (?) "Jehovah bowed the heavens and came down," the Psalms say. He presented Himself to mankind so that could understand Him, so that they could see Him, so that they could see the infinite God in human form as Jesus. He could set up a new church that had the opportunity to worship Him in truth and sincerity, had an opportunity to be joined with their Creator like never before.

So the Writings for the New Church say the following, "By means of the Human, Jehovah God sent Himself into the world and made Himself seen before the eyes of men, and thus accessible. The Lord made the natural man in Himself Divine in order that He might be the first and the last, that He might thus enter with men even into their natural. He was then able to conjoin Himself to man in His natural, yea, in His sensual. And at the same time to His spirit or mind in His rational, and thus to enlighten man's natural light with heavenly light.

It's not as if the Lord said goodbye, to His disciples and zoomed off a million miles away, or into some other realm of existence. No, He was still right there. He's right here today. He hasn't gone anywhere. In our natural lives we cannot see Him, but God exists around us, within us, in a way that He didn't before His Advent. He came into the natural, He made that natural within Him Divine so that He could be with us, not only from within, from our perceptions, but also without, so that now we can grasp God in a form and understand Him. So now we can have a personal relationship with our Maker.

So how do we have that personal relationship with the Lord? We have to recognize His Humanity, not like many Christian churches have done today, solely seeing His Humanity and sort of separating it from His Divinity and the Divine Father appear in Jesus, my friend and buddy, my pal. If we do that, if we separate it out, then we take away that Divinity of the Lord. And when we take that away we take away some of the respect He had, the admiration, the love, the responsibility that we have to the Lord. We can't see Him as merely being human, we've got to see Him as Divine, life itself, in the Human form.

The Writings say that we should look at God from essence to person, think of His essence first, that God is life itself, that God is love itself, the very reality of these two concepts of God. His essence though, shows itself in the human form

of Jesus Christ. And we can take all these unknowable things and put them down in a form that can be grasped.

And we can see the Lord with His arms open, waiting to take us in. And He will take us in and hold us as long as we want Him to, in our own freedom. That's how we should see the Lord.

So the Lord said, "He that has seen Me has seen the Father." He that has seen that Humanity has seen the Divine within. "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father, but by Me." No one comes to that Divinity but through the Human of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Divine Human.

You know, many of us who are receivers, wandered away from traditional Christianity because of that very point, that it made Christ too human, that they've made God more of a fable, made God a comic strip character, rather than something real and living.

But we can go too far. We can make God a complete abstract concept in our life. God is life itself. God is love itself. God is impersonal. God is a concept. But what good does that do us in our relationship with Him to do that? We can't worship an It. We can't be conjoined with an It. We can't love life itself, the esse, the first principle. Reality, what does it mean? We can't talk to it. We can't love it. We can't be one with it? Why should we obey what it says? What good is it going to do us? That's the whole reason the Lord came, so that we could see Him in that Human form, see that Divinity, so that we could be one with Him and have a personal relationship with Him, see that He is a very real God, very real person. So, when He appeared before Thomas, that's why Thomas said, "My Lord and my God," to that Divine Human.

One of the ways we form a relationship with the Lord is through turning to His own Word. This book is unlike any other book that has ever been written. Not only does it teach us about God, but it is a living book. If we read the New Testament alone, think of the picture that we get there, seeing God in human form. What a picture that is! What a beautiful picture of who God is, how He presents Himself.

Look at the New Testament. Look at the Lord's life and see how He presents Himself to us, not with preconceived notions, but take a good, honest look. We see the Lord joking around with His disciples. When He was talking to Peter He said, "Peter, from now on your name will be the Rock." He was saying, Petra. "From now on I'm going to call you Petra." That's like saying, "Rick, from now on I'm going to call you Rock." Or saying, "Stanley, from now on you're Stonely." It was a pun. It was comical. And yet it says something deeper.

How about when He appeared, when He was whipped in front of the whole Sanhedrin who were judging Him. And Caiphus says, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Living God?"

He said basically, "You said it. It is as you say," right back to them.

When Pilate said to Him, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

"You said it."

How many times have we heard in pulpits in different churches, "Are you the king of the Jews?" "It is as you say. And they led Him away," in a monotone voice.

The Lord was human. "You said it. Yes, I am."

We see Him laughing, the Scribes and the Pharisees, "You whited sepulchers." "You who strain at a gnat and yet swallow a camel." Human.

When He's in the temple, clearing out the temple. "My house should be a house of prayer and you have made it a den of thieves."

And then we see another side of Him. As He's trying to raise Lazarus from the dead, and all these people don't believe it. He's been with them for three years and no one really understood. There He is. He's weeping. He's weeping because of their disbelief.

When He was in the Garden of Gethsemene, that Human was going through such anguish, knowing what would happen, that it was said that He sweated as if drops of blood.

Remember when He was even riding into Jerusalem, and all the people were cheering, Luke tells us the Lord was weeping at that time. Why was He weeping? Because God had come to the light into the darkness to save His creation, and the darkness comprehended Him not. As John said, "He came to His own and His own received Him not."

A human God, someone we can relate to. He shows us all the different aspects of humanity on purpose, so that we won't see Him as a God afar off, so that we won't see Him as an abstract concept, but we can see Him as someone who has gone through many of the things that we go through, and even worse. We can relate to Him, that we can be with Him, that He understands us, that He's here and now. He's not somewhere else.

Keep that in mind. The Lord is very real. If you picture the Lord as an old man with a beard, holding a scepter, way off there somewhere, you're missing out on a lot. The Lord is very real. He's here and now.

He's there, ready to have a relationship with us, if we are willing to open our minds and hearts to him.

We can see Him in the literal meaning of the New Testament so easily. The Writings also say that there are deeper meanings to the Word, that the whole Old Testament, for example, has a continuous internal sense, a continuous inner symbolic meaning which deals with many different aspects of our lives, which deals with the Lord. So that story of the Israelites coming out of Egypt through the wilderness into the promised land, is also a story of the Lord's life on earth, how He came out of the slavery of that human hereditary evil and worked toward the promised land, His glorification, making Himself Divine. And the Writings lay out a lot of this for us in the *Arcana Caelestia*, 12 volumes. The Psalms, for example, are not just prayers of David, but on a deeper level, a symbolic level, are prayers of the Lord to the Father - that human part of Him - praying to the Divine within, becoming one with it.

And when we read the Word in that sense, study it, and look for the symbolism, the deeper meaning, all of a sudden the Word becomes alive. It's a living book. The Lord is there speaking to us. So, John says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." That's how the Lord shows Himself to us, can talk to us in His Word. It's alive. The Writings say that the Word is the soul medium of conjunction between the Lord and man, the sole medium of communion between the heavens and the human race, that when we read the Word with simple minds and simple hearts that the angels of heaven affect us. Whereas we understand the literal sense, they understand the deeper internal sense. And when we read the Word we are affected by it. The Lord can be with us in a special way to the degree that we can read the Word with the willingness to be led, to understand.

Some people read the Word as if it's a textbook and they are going to have a test on it. They look for the facts. If you do that all you're going to get are the facts. If you look at the Word with pessimism as you read, all you are going to get is pessimism. If you look at the Word with preconceived dogmatic notions about what you're looking for in certain doctrines, then all you are going to see are certain doctrines. The Writings say, "Those who approach the Word with preconceived doctrines, it's as if they only read one page and flip it over, they miss this page, they read the next one, they flip that over. They're only reading half the Word." The approach is like that.

To approach the Word with open minds, open hearts, those who approach the Word with a willingness to be led, simply to say, "Help me." To read it, even if you were reading something about David going off and doing this or that, or Saul, or Solomon, you are going to get something from it. Sometimes you will be amazed at the answers you get in the Word. When you ask a specific question about your life, "How am I doing? How can I do better?" the Lord will answer you in an incredible way, an astounding way. You'll see this is a living truth. This is

alive. At other times it's much more subtle. It was pointed out once that a lot of the time it's just a feeling you walk away with, a feeling that we've been somewhere, a feeling that we've been with someone, that they are still with us in a special way. And that someone is the Lord.

The Word is very important to read. But not only to read the Word, but to do something with that.

There is also prayer, the whole realm of prayer, come to know our God, to understand Him. The Lord's prayer is a very special prayer. After all, the Lord gave us that prayer. He says, "When you pray, say this.." He gave us that prayer. The Writings of the New Church say two things about the Lord's prayer. One, that that prayer in its deeper, inmost sense, deals with all the different facets of our relationship with God and man, and when we say that prayer we are saying a general prayer to help us out in all fields. And if we can see that deeper, inner sense we'd understand that it has all kinds of things to do with our life.

But beyond that, we're told that when we say the Lord's prayer, because of the way it's been written, that we can communicate, can have communion with, all of the heavens, all the different societies of the heavens. So that prayer has a special power, a power for good, an effect on our own lives and hearts.

There's more than just reciting prayers. It's funny, it's amazing, many churches haven't picked up on this, especially some of our larger churches. The Lord said, "Do not use vain repetition as the heathen do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Therefore, do not be like them." When we pray, sometimes all we have to do is talk to the Lord. The Writings define prayer as "speaking with the Lord." It's very simple. Talking to Him, "How am I doing today? Help me out in this one. Help me to get through this. Thank you." There's many things we can do, just to talk to Him. At first when we do that, when we are not used to it, it may seem a little strange, talking to the Lord. You remember that Paul Newman movie, *Cool Hand Luke*, after he had escaped for the third or fourth time, in that church he was looking up and talking to God, he looked up seeing if someone was listening to him. We'll feel that way a little bit when we first start. But what happens is, after a while when we do this, we begin to feel the Lord's presence in a very real way. And we begin to feel it's more than what we bargained for. It's not as if we do this and ended up all of a sudden feel it, there's some kind of psychological reason for it. No. The Lord comes into our presence, His presence comes into us even more than it would have at that time, and we can feel Him and understand Him. We will be astounded.

Even more than this probably, the most important thing, we want to have a relationship with the Lord. If we want to bring Him into our hearts and tell Him, we've got to put ourselves in the order of His creation.

We've got to shun that evil and selfishness that we all know we have within, that block out the Lord's life, that block out His love. That's why He's given us His teachings, so that we can use them to get our act together, to put ourselves back in that order, to put ourselves on the right path, that He can flow into us with His wisdom, He can come into us with His love. And with that love comes joy and happiness. It could be sometimes, that we like God to be way up there in an abstract concept because when we want to do what we want, He's not there to make us feel bad or make us feel guilty.

Think about that. How uncomfortable would you feel if you are doing something that really was raunchy, and had that real awareness that the Lord is right there with you, it would be a bad feeling. Sometimes we leave Him way off in the distance. We keep Him close enough so that when we feel guilty we have somebody to turn to, but for the most part in our lives, we keep Him way off there. If we are going to do that, and we have a perfect right to do that, the Lord lets us be free to do that, but if we do, let's be honest with ourselves. We are creating a hell in ourselves, and that after death that's exactly where we will go.

The Lord is not a God afar off. He is here with us. He has His arms open to us ready to receive us into Himself. When we hold the key, we can open that door and let Him into us. We do that by learning of Him in His Word which He has given us, by turning to Him for help, by being aware of His existence, and by following His teachings. When we do that, we open our eyes to Him. We can see Him. More than that, He will be with us. And even more than those disciples, we will know the Lord, who He is even more than Thomas, and we will be able to say at this time with full hearts as we comprehend our God, "My Lord and my God."

Amen.