

Parallels between the First and Second Advents

a sermon by the Rev. Michael Gladish
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As we prepare for the Christmas season it can be helpful for us to reflect a little on how the prophets of the Old Testament anticipated the coming of the Lord into the natural world and how they described what would happen then. For although we don't often think about it, many of the *same* things were said in the New Testament, looking forward to the Lord's *Second Coming*, and so if we understand what happened the first time we might be able to get a better grasp of what *will* happen, or in fact already *has* happened the second time.

Key to this understanding is the knowledge that most of the prophecies in both cases were never literally fulfilled, nor could they ever *be* fulfilled, for they involved catastrophic events that would have brought the universe as we know it to an abrupt end. Instead they were all written in the language of parable and symbolism to describe the *spiritual* circumstances that would exist when it was necessary for the Lord to come, and also to describe the spiritual changes that would take place in human minds when He did come.

After all, as we noted in our lesson from the book, *True Christian Religion*,

“The Lord is present with every person, urging and pressing to be received. And when a person receives Him, which happens when he acknowledges Him as his Creator, Redeemer and Saviour, then is His *first Coming*, which is called the dawn. From this time the person begins to have his *understanding enlightened* as regards spiritual matters, and to advance to more and more inward wisdom” (TCR 766).

Again, “The Lord is constantly with every person, evil as well as good, for without His presence no one can live. But His *Coming* is only with those who receive Him, and these are they who believe in Him and keep His commandments...” (TCR 774).

In short, the “Coming of the Lord” in its broadest sense is the revelation of Divine love and wisdom so that we can receive and accept it (see AC 3900:9, 9807:4, 8427:4). And the purposes of the Lord's Coming are accomplished when we do receive and accept it, not just in thought or understanding but in affection and life.

But let's think about what actually happened when the Lord first came into the world. As it is explained in the Writings, when He was born of Mary He assumed (or took on) the finite, material form within which the miracle of human consciousness could work to confront this corrupt and sinister world on its own terms, so that He could overcome the power of hell, restore order in the heavens, and establish a new church – a new spiritual standard for human life on earth. For Him to have addressed the evil and falsity of this world in any other way would have resulted in the complete annihilation of the race, since direct contact with the intensity of His pure, infinite love and wisdom would have consumed all that evil and the people who were in it with it.

But what God accomplished in His Human form on earth was hardly understood at the time, and the little understanding there had been was quickly lost as the church He established became politicized and His teachings applied primarily to natural, worldly causes. Therefore, in order to facilitate real enlightenment in these things so that we could appreciate His work, have faith in it and benefit from

it, the Lord promised that when the time was right He would come again. But how? Certainly not by doing the same thing He had already done – and done most perfectly! Rather John's Gospel makes it clear that this *Second Coming* would be as the *Spirit* of Truth, the Holy Spirit, in revelations that would provide the power to understand and live according to His Word.

This is what we have in the Writings for the New Church and this is why we consider them to be the outward form and expression of the Lord's Second Coming.

Of course many will not believe this, saying it does not literally fulfill the prophecies in the New Testament, but remember, the prophecies of the first Coming in the Old Testament were not all literally fulfilled, either. Yet when we understand the metaphors and symbols in both sets of prophecies we can see what really did happen. The parallels are striking.

Let's begin with Isaiah. We discussed this prophecy last week: –

“Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; the crooked places shall be made straight, and the rough places smooth; and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together...” (Isa. 40:3-5).

Everybody knows this refers to the Coming of the Lord, but look again: where was the highway? What valleys were filled in and built up? What mountains and hills were made low? What crooked places got straightened out, and what rough places were smoothed over when the Lord came? Surely this is NOT referring to the construction of those famous Roman highways! And how come “all flesh” did NOT see it together? The answers to all these questions are that the literal images were *metaphors* and *correspondences* for spiritual states within people who were willing to receive and accept the Lord's *teaching* when He came. So the metaphors and images of the New Testament must not be taken too literally, as the Lord Himself said in Luke when He bluntly told the Pharisees, “The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, ‘See here,’ or ‘See there!’ For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:20-21).

Several prophecies from Isaiah and Joel in the Old Testament and from Matthew in the New Testament confirm this point. Working the other way around this time, note that Matthew quotes the Lord, saying,

“Immediately after the tribulation of those days (days of war and lawlessness and desolation), the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory,” and so on (Matt. 24:29-30).

The appearance from a literal reading of these verses is that everybody in the world will see the Lord when He comes again, and that the time of this appearance will be obvious from the total chaos in the solar system – chaos which incidentally would have resulted in the immediate destruction of the earth. But Isaiah said almost exactly the same thing around 600 BC in reference to the first Advent:

“Behold, the day of the Lord comes... For the stars of heaven and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be darkened in its going forth, and the moon will not cause its light to shine.... I will shake the heavens, and the earth will move out of her place...” (Isa. 13:9-10).

Joel repeated this warning (Joel 2:31) and also said that when the Lord came He would gather “all nations” in the Valley of Jehoshaphat for judgment, and that then Israel would prosper. Some may say that the darkening of the sky was literally fulfilled at the time of the Lord’s crucifixion and that the moving of the earth was the earthquake after His burial, but such answers hardly begin to resolve all the difficulties with a literal reading of this prophecy. For “all nations” certainly were never gathered into that valley, nor was Israel restored to glory at the time of Christ.

Rather, all these terrible signs are representative images corresponding to the spiritual desolation that precedes the coming of the Lord (and makes it necessary), when people are so desperately confused that they can’t see any truth in its own light or feel any genuine love for God or the neighbour without something doubtful or negative being attached to it.

On a more positive note, again in Isaiah, we read concerning the Advent of the Lord that

“...He will destroy on this mountain the face of the covering cast over *all people*, and the veil that is spread over *all nations*. 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*... 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’” (Isa. 25:7-9).

This sounds remarkably like the book of Revelation, predicting the descent of the Holy city, New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:1-4). But again, it is obvious upon reflection that these things are not all meant in a literal sense, nor were they so meant in the Revelation. The point is that where the love and wisdom of the Lord are seen, acknowledged and accepted, there is a wonderful new dawn of spiritual light and life among those people.

So we read, again in Isaiah,

“Arise, shine; for your Light has come! And the glory of the Lord is risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and deep darkness the people; but the Lord will arise over you, and His glory will be seen upon you. The gentiles shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising...” (Isa. 60:1-3).

We naturally associate this prophecy with the birth of the Lord into the world, but let’s remember that when He came the Lord did not glow with natural light! True, He called Himself “the Light of the world” and He said, “Whoever follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life” (John 8:12), but everyone knows that this means the spiritual light of truth and understanding. So it is when the Lord comes *again* in the clear, bright, wonderfully enlightening doctrines of the New Church, His light will shine again – even more brightly, as He said in John where we read,

“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. However

when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak, and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is mine and declare it to you..." (John 16:13-14).

(Notice how the Spirit of truth is described here as if it were a person. This is simply a poor translation arising out of the old English custom of referring to neuter nouns as if they were masculine. It's not wrong, for the Lord Himself is "the way, the truth and the life," but technically the "Spirit of truth" here is the power of truth in the understanding. When *this* comes, *IT* will guide us into all truth, for *IT* will tell us things to come, and *IT* will glorify the Lord. How else could He have said to the disciples, "YOU are the light of the world," or again, "Let YOUR light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven?" (Matt. 5:14-16).)

One of the most compelling passages in the whole Bible on the theme of the Second Coming is the one in Acts, chapter 1, verse 11, where Luke describes the Lord's rising into heaven after His resurrection. There we read that two angels appeared to the disciples saying, "You men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven," that is, "in the clouds of heaven." But really, what sort of seeing, and what sort of clouds are meant here?

Spiritual sight is the sight of the understanding, and "the clouds of heaven" are the stories and teachings of the literal sense of the Word. The point is that by the time the Lord finally rose up into heaven after all His work among the disciples they had at last come to the point where they were able to "see" Him as the incarnation, the very Human form of the Word itself. But their understanding was still limited, and so it is said that He "ascended out of their sight."

Now, today, thanks to His renewed teaching in the Writings - in a more enlightened age - He is Coming again, returning with even greater power and glory, not in another *physical* body but in the *body of wisdom, the body of knowledge* that appeals to our spiritual eyes so that we can *see* His light and *feel* the warmth of His encouragement every day.

Of course, we may or may not see it. But remember, only a few in all the world saw the Lord when He was first born, and they had to be led and taught specifically how to find Him. Again, many "saw" the Lord throughout His life on earth, *but only a few saw His true nature*. Finally, the disciples were the only ones who saw the Lord after His resurrection, and even then they had to be convinced. *Now* the truth itself of the Heavenly Doctrines can convince anybody who is willing to be convinced of His powerful presence – in Scripture, in nature, and in all things of human life. For the spiritual sense of the Word is now fully explained, the whole natural world is set in the context of the spiritual, and all the details of human life are accounted for under the marvelous laws of His Divine Providence. "This was the Lord's doing; and it is marvelous in our eyes" (Ps. 118:23). Indeed, this is the Lord working, breaking through the clouds, *coming again*.

The First Advent certainly is the foundation for the Second. One builds on the other. And they are different. But the objectives of both are the same, as we can see in the doctrines and in the comparison of the prophecies. In the end, when we consider it's impact and the way the human mind works to receive it, the Lord's Coming is always a deeply personal, spiritual and human experience. Hopefully, it is also an experience that makes us *more human* as we grow in understanding,

acknowledgment, will and commitment to do what He teaches. After all, that is the reason He comes, and that is the reason we celebrate His Coming.

- Amen

Lessons: Isaiah 40:1-5 & 9-11
 Children's talk on the Lord's Coming - Why

 John 16:1-15
 True Christian Religion #766 & 774

A prayer for this service:

Heavenly Father, as we focus on our preparations for Christmas we pray that You will help us to hold a special place for You in these preparations - in our thoughts, in our affections and in the things we do.

We thank You for the beautiful teachings of Your Word, through which Your Divinely Human love and wisdom shine forth for all to see. And today especially we thank You for Your revelation of the *spiritual sense* of the Word, that we may truly understand it and apply it to our lives.

Lord, we know that You are with us every moment of every day. Yet we acknowledge that we do forget, and often misinterpret Your Divine Providence as lack of care or concern. So as we turn to You again this day we pray that You will help us to remember and more truly understand Your presence among us, that You will strengthen us in our commitment to Your Word, and that You will more and more fully *reveal Yourself* to us according to Your Word.

Amen.