

The Value of Mystery

by the Rev. Mark R. Carlson

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, says the Lord” (Isaiah 55:8).

These words from the Old Testament stand in apparent contradiction to a basic truth of the New Christian Church. The Lord is here admitting that people cannot ever hope to think the thoughts of the Lord; they cannot, under any circumstances, know the way of the Lord. Yet, there is also the inscription Emanuel Swedenborg saw over a magnificent temple in heaven which signified the New Church. The inscription read *Nunc Licet*, which means that “it is now permitted to enter with understanding into the mysteries of faith.” How do we reconcile these two statements?

The reconciliation is, in fact, quite simple. It is true that at this day it is allowable for all people to enter into the mysteries of faith with understanding. The means has now been given for people to be able to do this safely. A new revelation of the spiritual sense within the Word has made it possible for people to begin to understand many things which formerly were mysteries shrouded in deepest darkness. But it is important to remember that the inscription over the temple representing the New Church in heaven said only that it is now *allowable* to enter into these mysteries with understanding; it did not say that now all of these mysteries *will* be understood. There is a great difference between approaching an understanding of a mystery and actually solving the mystery. It would be folly for us to believe that we will be able to understand everything about spiritual life, God, ourselves, and the life after death simply because we now possess a guide to help us understand these things. Thus, it is still true for the Lord to say, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways.”

Too often, we may take the inscription over the temple representing the New Church as a command rather than as a statement of fact. Many seem to feel that they must attempt to understand everything, that they must analyze, dissect, reconstruct, and categorize everything the Lord speaks about in his Word, or else they are not being faithful New Church people. But the words over the temple are an *invitation*, not a *command*. We are invited to think about the mysteries of faith with our understanding. We are invited to analyze and categorize, but we are not commanded to do so. And, most certainly, we are not told that we will ever be able to understand it all, or that someday we will be able to fit all the troublesome and difficult teachings into a complete, comprehensible whole.

However, we are *not* invited to withhold our assent to a revealed truth until we have comprehended it all. For such a day will never come, We are not asked to believe anything that we do not see to be truth, but neither should we deny it simply because we do not understand it. Rather we are to remain affirmative to that truth, while not yet wholeheartedly endorsing it. Thus we are told that those who are in the faith of charity never suffer lack of understanding to bring them into doubt, saying that there are but few things they can apprehend, and therefore to think that anything is not true because they do not apprehend it would be madness (see *Arcana Coelestia* 1072).

For, let there be no doubt, the thoughts of the Lord are not our thoughts, and they never will be. In Himself, the infinite grandeur of the Lord, our Creator, will remain forever unknowable to us. He makes every effort to accommodate His thought, His truth, to our puny finite minds and to give us as accurate a picture of His infinity in finite terms as is possible, but the fact remains that His infinity is inscrutable. The mystery of God may seem like a stumbling block to some who take the importance of understanding too seriously. But where would we be without this mystery?

Consider for a moment the value of mystery. If we all knew everything, understood everything, we would have little need for one another; we would have no need for schools or churches; we would have little to offer each other, and little to strive for. Mystery is what keeps us forever growing, forever learning, forever interested in life. Is it not the value of mystery that makes life interesting? (Think about how writers of soap operas keep the slimmest plots going for year after year through mystery, mystery to the viewers and for the characters themselves.) There is always something new to be learned about ourselves, about others, about the world we live in. And there will forever be new things to learn about God.

But there is more to the value of mystery than the fact that it seems to be a powerful motivator for continued growth. There is also a certain freedom preserved by mystery—a freedom of thought and, most especially, a freedom of feeling. When a mystery is so puzzling that no one can claim to have the *complete* answer or even the *right* answer, there is a freedom of thought which would not otherwise be possible. When absolute answers elude us, every person's thought is as valid as every other person's. No one can take the upper hand and say, "Here it is. *I* have it. Listen to *me*." The mystery places responsibility upon each person's shoulders to find answers for himself, while preventing any honest person from claiming to have answers for others.

Of equal importance to the freedom of thought that mystery provides is the freedom of feeling it allows for. When we are overly analytical, or severely rational in our approach to religious matters, we may observe that the room for feeling is diminished. For instance, if someone states, in rational language, that the Lord came into the world to subjugate the hells and glorify His human, you probably would not experience the same freedom of feeling as if someone reminded you of the mystery of the tiny Child, born of a virgin, and laid in a manger. There is always an element of knowing that is necessary to keep us on the right track, but there is also a need for not knowing, for mystery, so that we may be free to fill in the gaps with our own thought, our own imagination, our own *feeling*. No two of us have exactly the same idea of God, or the same picture of Him in our minds, nor should we. The mystery of His infinity allows each of us the greatest freedom of thought and of feeling, while at the same time our thoughts and feelings are directed (but not dictated) by His Word.

The literal sense of the Word is an obvious example of the use of mystery in the church. On the surface the stories of the literal sense are just what they seem to be—histories of the Jews, prophecies, stories of the Lord's life and teaching on earth. Yet within all of these things we know there is an inner meaning, in fact, infinite depths of meaning. Reading the Word can be compared to the experience of someone swimming in a deep, clear lake. The water is clear and blue all around the swimmer, but only darkness stares up at him from the bottom. The swimmer may have a feeling of great depth and wonder at what lies below shrouded in that darkness. The

Heavenly Doctrines tell us that the Word in the literal sense was written for both people and angels, and that angels see the internal sense clearly while people read the literal sense. People on earth can only be given glimpses of the spiritual sense, but for the most part it, like the lake's depths, is shrouded in darkness. Only three books of the Word have been extensively explained by the Lord, and even those explanations are on a comparatively superficial level. What mysteries lie within such books as Samuel and Kings? What depths of meaning are yet to be gleaned from the Lord's own words in the New Testament? What new understanding will be given to the church from the many pages of the *Arcana Coelestia* or *Heavenly Secrets*, which currently remain a puzzle to church scholars?

And what of that great mystery which captivates us all, the mystery of our own future? Somehow, the Lord knows our future, and yet His foreknowledge does not destroy our freedom—a mystery indeed. Part of each of us wishes to know the future, especially our lot after death. But such knowledge, we are told, would be supremely destructive. If we were to know now what the Lord knows—what He knows we must face, what He knows we must endure, what He knows He must give us to experience—we would deny Him immediately and rush away in horror. The process of our rebirth is not a smooth road into the future; rather it is a twisting and often tortured trail filled with tremendous obstacles of our own making. Yet the Lord foresees what is necessary for us to be led out of evil loves into heavenly ones, and every moment of our life is calculated in His providential care to contribute to our potential salvation. Anxiety about the future may sometimes weigh heavily upon us. Yet we are to know that there is a paradise at the other end of that road; there is joy and peace after the battle is won. It is true that this joy awaits us all. We were born for it. We are all predestined to heaven by the Lord; we simply have to accept His offer and allow things contrary to heaven to be removed.

“My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, says the Lord.” How certain we may be that the Lord's thoughts are not our thoughts, and how thankful we should be that He is not limited in His view of what is good for us by our own considerations. When some disaster befalls us and we cry out to the Lord, “Why me?” let us reconsider the wisdom of the Lord's omniscient care and instead say to ourselves, “Why not me?” Are we to think that we are so special, so different, so untainted by evil, that we do not need any traumas to be shaken out of our complacency? It is so easy to second-guess the Lord, and to question Him with our puny, finite, self-centered intelligence. It is often so difficult just to accept that everything that happens under the sun contributes to the eventual happiness and welfare of everyone, ourselves included.

The wisdom, the love, the supreme majesty of the Lord—these things we understand, and, yet, they remain a mystery to us. Let us not make the mistake of thinking that the Lord is *only* what we understand about Him. He is so much more than we can ever know; the mystery of His infinity is truly awe-inspiring and truly liberating. We must not box the Lord in by our own limited view of Him, our own beliefs about Him, our own prejudices, our own thoughts about what He should or should not do.

O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is Your name in all the earth, You who set Your glory above the heavens! When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained, what is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him? (Psalm 8:1,3-4)

When we consider the greatness, the majesty, the infinity of the Lord as reflected in the expanse of the starry heavens on a clear night, when we sense His power and wisdom in creating and governing the billions of stars and planets, their motions, their life forms, and when we see the nature of His love by His life and death in our own world, how can we doubt for a moment that He has our eternal welfare at heart and that He knows what He is doing in every least thing of our life? Surely our Father knows us. Surely He knows our pain, our suffering, and surely He knows what is necessary and what is not. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, says the Lord.”

Amen.

Lessons: Isaiah 55; Luke 21:1-4; *Arcana Coelestia* 1072:1,2