



Parallels Between the First and Second Advents

Rev. Michael Gladish



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Readings

John 16:7, 12-15 (NRSV)

Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.¹

Emanuel Swedenborg, *True Christianity* §766

The Lord is present with each and every human being. He exerts insistent pressure on us to receive him. When we do receive him, which occurs when we acknowledge him as our own God, Creator, Redeemer, and Savior, his First Coming occurs [in us], which is the twilight before dawn. From then on, we begin to be enlightened intellectually in spiritual matters and to grow into deeper and deeper wisdom.²

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² Swedenborg, Emanuel. *True Christianity*. Translated by J. Rose. West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2008.

Now that we are celebrating the coming of the Lord into the natural world, it may be helpful for us to reflect a little on how the prophets of the Old Testament anticipated this event, and how they described what would happen at that time. 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. So if we understand what happened the first time, we might be able to get a better grasp of what will happen, or indeed, already has happened, the second time.

Key to this understanding is the knowledge that most of the prophecies were never literally fulfilled, nor could they ever be fulfilled. 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.

Still, we refer to the First and Second Advents of the Lord in the more specific terms of his human appearance. So we say that when he was born of Mary he assumed (or took on) the lowest material form within which the miracle of human consciousness could work to make sense of the world, to overcome the power of hell, and to restore order in human affairs.

In doing this, he took the only form in which people at that time could to see the truth in its own integrity. At the time he made this appearance, there was so much cynicism and confusion about spiritual things that any other form of revelation would have failed. People simply had to see the wisdom of prior revelations come alive and work its miracles on the level of their natural senses: sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell. So the infinite God came and revealed himself in person.

Today, of course, things are different. With our more sophisticated knowledge of the world around us and our deeper understanding of human psychology, we are not likely to be convinced about the goodness or the truth of God by any outward appearance, personal or otherwise. Just imagine someone saying--as many have done--that he or she is the incarnation of God! At best we would find the suggestion amusing, at worst extremely dangerous. Or reflect on the skepticism with which we view any supernatural claims.

Yet the Lord promised that he would come again. How, then, would he do this? Why of course--as we read in John's Gospel--as the Spirit of truth. This has long been misunderstood as a third Person in the Divine Trinity. But it is really the power of understanding that comes with rational and loving explanations of the mysteries of faith.

This is what we have in the writings of the New Church, and this is why New Church people consider them to be an outward form of the Lord's Second Coming. Many will not believe this, saying it is not consistent with the prophecies of the Second Coming in the New Testament. But one of the things we need to "get" in this context is that the prophecies of the First Coming were not all literally fulfilled, either. Yet when we understand their deeper meaning, we can see the fulfillment clearly.

So it is with the Second Coming as a revelation of truth to the understanding. In fact, the parallels are striking. Recall the prophecy of Isaiah:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

(Isaiah 40:3-5)

Everyone knows this refers to the coming of the Lord. But 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? And why is it that "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 all the people who were willing to receive and accept the Lord's word 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 Matthew in the New Testament, confirm this point. Matthew quotes the Lord as saying:

“Immediately after the suffering of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of heaven 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 on the clouds of heaven’ with power and great glory.” (Matthew 24:29-30)

From a literal reading of these verses, it appears that everyone 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 result in the immediate destruction of the earth. But Isaiah said almost exactly the same thing around 600BC in reference to the first Advent:

“See, the day of the Lord comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the earth a desolation, and to destroy its sinners from it. For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light.”

(Isaiah 13:9-10, 13)

Joel repeated the warning (Joel 2:31), and said that when the Lord came he would gather all nations in the valley of Jehoshaphat for judgment, and that then Israel would prosper (Joel 3:9-21).

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, 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 neighbor, without something doubtful or negative being attached to it. On a more positive and familiar note, again in Isaiah, it is written concerning the Advent of the Lord that:

“He will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.

It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”

(Isaiah 25:7-9)

This sounds remarkably like the book of Revelation predicting the descent of the Holy city, New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:1-4). But again, it is obvious upon reflection that these things are not all meant in a literal sense in either passage. 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 has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.” (Isaiah 60:1-3)

We naturally associate this prophecy with the Lord's birth 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 said, "Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). But everyone knows that this means the spiritual light of truth and understanding. Just so, when the Lord comes again in the clear, bright, wonderfully enlightening doctrines of the New Church, his light will shine again--and 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. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you.” (John 16:12-14)

When we compare the prophecies of the First and Second Advents, over and over again we find tremendous similarities. Isn't it right, therefore, to expect that the Lord will appear the second

time just as he did the first time? To my knowledge, the most compelling passage on this theme in the entire Bible is Acts 1:11, where Luke describes the Lord's ascension 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 come in like manner as you saw him go into heaven"--that is, "in the clouds of heaven," as it says in Matthew. But we forget that the Lord by then was not appearing in a physical body! He had already glorified that body, and at that point was appearing to the disciples in spirit--that is, to their spiritual eyes.

Spiritual sight is the sight of the understanding. Thanks to the Heavenly Doctrines, we also know that "the clouds of heaven" are the teachings of the literal sense of the Word. By the time the Lord finally ascended into heaven after all his teaching, preaching, healing, crucifixion, resurrection, and further teaching, the disciples had at last come to the point where they were able to see him as the personification, the very Human form, of the Word itself. But they didn't understand how this could or would remain with them. So it is said that he "ascended out of their sight."

Now, thanks to his renewed teaching in the revelation for the New Church, he is coming again, returning with even greater power and glory, not in another physical body (that was just a means to the end) but in the love and wisdom that opens 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 the shepherds and wise men saw the Lord when he was first born, and they had to be led and taught specifically to find him. Again, many did "see" the Lord throughout his life on earth, but only a few saw his true nature. Finally, the disciples were among the few who saw the Lord after his resurrection--and even then they had to be convinced.

Today, the truth of the Heavenly Doctrines can convince anyone who is willing to be convinced of the Lord's wonderful presence in Scripture, in nature, and in all things of human life. The spiritual sense of the Word is now explained; the 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 divine providence, which preserve human freedom and rationality so that we can be saved and go to heaven. "This is the Lord's doing, it is marvelous in our eyes" (Psalm 118:23). Indeed, this is the Lord working, breaking through the clouds, coming again.

The First Advent 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 its impact and the way the human mind works to receive it, the Lord's coming is always a deeply personal, spiritual, and human experience. It is also an experience that can make us more human as we grow in understanding, acknowledgment, will, and commitment to do what the Lord teaches us. After all, that is the reason he comes, and that is the reason we celebrate his coming.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, as we move in our thoughts from your first Advent to your second Advent among us, we pray that you will help us to keep a special place open for you to 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.

Amen.