

The First Coming of Jesus Christ

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First Lesson—Ezekiel 8:1-4 (NRSV): In the sixth year, in the sixth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I sat in my house, with the elders of Judah sitting before me, the hand of the Lord God fell upon me there. I looked, and there was a figure that looked like a human being; below what appeared to be its loins it was fire, and above the loins it was like the appearance of brightness, like gleaming amber. It stretched out the form of a hand, and took me by a lock of my head; and the spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven, and brought me in visions of God to Jerusalem, to the entrance of the gateway of the inner court that faces north, to the seat of the image of jealousy, which provokes to jealousy. And the glory of the God of Israel was there, like the vision that I had seen in the valley.

Second Lesson—John 10: 31-38 (NRSV): The Jews took up stones again to stone him. Jesus replied, ‘I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these are you going to stone me?’ The Jews answered, ‘It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human being, are making yourself God.’ Jesus answered, ‘Is it not written in your law, “I said, you are gods”? If those to whom the word of God came were called “gods”—and the scripture cannot be annulled—can you say that the one whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world is blaspheming because I said, “I am God’s Son”? If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.’

Swedenborgian Quote—True Christianity 89 (Rose): God introduced his design into the universe as a whole and into each and everything in it. Therefore in the universe and in all its parts God’s omnipotence follows and works according to the laws of his own design...Now, because God came down, and because he is the design, there was no other way for him to become an actual human being than to be conceived, to be carried in the womb, to be born, to be brought up, and to acquire more and more knowledge so as to become intelligent and wise. Therefore in his human manifestation he was an infant like any infant, a child like any child, and so on with just one difference: he completed the process more quickly, more fully, and more perfectly than the rest of us do.

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What an interesting challenge it is to understand the life and teachings of Jesus. What does it mean to be a Christian? Without answering it directly, for the moment, I just want to say that for some it has more to do with what Jesus taught, for some it has more to do with who they

believe Jesus to be, and there are those who believe it is both what he taught and who he is. You might even say that what he taught has authority because of who he is.

How do we know who Jesus is? If we look at verifiable evidence, the more we examine the material we have for the life of Jesus, the more intellectually critical of it we are, the less certain it becomes. We can't be sure of the factual events of his life nor of his exact words. Most of what we know about Jesus comes from second hand sources removed by a number of years and recorded in the Bible. We tend to give authority to source material, and if the source material is unreliable, we become uncertain. If we equate truth with fact, and we don't have facts, then we might be tempted to think we don't have any truth.

Now, various Christian Churches and theologians over the time since the life of Jesus have tried to deal with the problems of who Jesus is, and what are his teachings through doctrine and theological explanation. I think it is important to ask, "Is all of this theological discussion relevant to me?" and if it is, "What does it mean to me in my daily life?" First I would like to say something about what Emanuel Swedenborg says about Jesus, then I want to look at answering those two questions.

All three of our readings today say something about the manifestation of God and what it means to be human: God appears to Ezekiel in a human form, which is one of the ways that we are asked to look at Jesus, God in human form. Jesus adds an interesting element: In a way he is asking, if scripture says we are made in the image of God, as the Psalmist says, "ye are gods," he is saying that we all share something of the divine, so why shouldn't he be considered in the same way? Another way of looking at that is to say that it is the divine in us that should be able to see the divine in Jesus. Swedenborg says "yes," God became human. Jesus came into the world and took on what it means to be human. What does that mean? How many forms of

suffering could he have experienced? Humility, shame, hunger, thirst, sexual desire. But, he completed the whole process faster and more perfectly than we do. To quote from *Heaven and Hell* (p. 48, *Heaven and Hell Portable Edition*): “The Lord made his whole human nature divine—both its inward and outward constituents.”

Swedenborg gives quite a long description of the process of regeneration for Jesus, and he states very clearly: the awareness Jesus had of his divine potential was not present at the beginning of his human life, it came later (Swedenborg’s *Theology*, Kirven, page 149), and complete transformation of his intellectual and emotional nature took all of his life.

Clearly, everyone who has ever tried to describe Jesus, everyone who has ever experienced Jesus, everyone who has tried to live what they believed to be a life modeled after the life and teachings of Jesus has struggled with who he is and what he has taught. What an amazing problem this was for the disciples or anyone else who knew or saw Jesus, they saw many of the changes in Jesus first hand, seeing him at the beginning of his ministry, before his perfection and glorification, and then later in a way that people could only attribute his power and his miracles to divinity. What a different problem it is in the world today. If you want to find out something about scorn, contempt, suspicion, resentment, or ridicule, present yourself to the world as a Christian every time someone asks you who you are for the next several months. You will also find respect, reverence and compassion, its not all one-sided, but you will find yourself face-to-face with most every issue people have with their relationship to God. My own experience is that most people would like their relationship to God to be abstract rather than personal. If we can divide the universe into two worlds, one of spirit and one material, it makes it so much easier for use to think that we are on the material side of things separated from God. We can claim ignorance, lack of evidence, point to the failures of the church, we can be a victim, we

can put all of our issues and problems over in Iraq, or across the street, or in some other neighborhood.

What did Jesus change by his presence in the world? Quite simply, he destroys every notion we, or any person for that matter, may have about being separated from God, he destroys any notion of there being a separation or boundary between spiritual reality and material reality: our identity is linked with the identity of God, we have been anointed or chosen if we are willing to acknowledge it, the kingdom of heaven is present in creation now, we are part of the divine order and pattern of creation. Jesus changes our understanding of the messiah, of kingship, of law.

But there is even more.

How do you talk about something that is in the past, is in the present, and in the future? There is a second coming. There is a curious little statement in Revelation, chapter 21 (21:6). John has a vision of God living among us, the descent of the New Jerusalem. Now many Christians take this to be a future event, but the statement of Christ in John's vision is "It is done." It is already here. If it is already here does that change our understanding of everything that has been said about Jesus? I think it does.

Going back to the questions at the beginning of my message: Is all of this theological discussion relevant to me? Yes it is because of who you are, because who you believe yourself to be influences every decision in your life. That is the model Jesus puts before us with, "I am the way, the truth and the life." It's not an exclusionary statement that consigns people to heaven or hell if you do or don't believe it, it is not a statement that defines being a Christian, it is a statement that recognizes we are all on a path of realizing our own perfection. What we bring to

that path is our truth, and that is our life. “What does it mean to me in my daily life?” It means that if we find truth and don’t figure out a way to live it, we are only going through the motions.

I said earlier that we are part of the divine order and pattern of creation. Creation is a dynamic process, that is part of the pattern. If we look at the perfection of Jesus, a process of glorification, I believe that we see a dynamic pattern, one that grows. Our understanding of it evolves, it changes as we change. If we take Christ as a pattern, the archetypal form of regeneration or individuation, the form of being anointed or chosen, we step into a process of evolution and creation. What is the purpose of creation? According to Swedenborg: To form heaven from the human race. As we form and grow, heaven forms and grows.

Look again at what Jesus says in today’s reading, imagine yourself taking up the way of Jesus, accepting the pattern of the Christ as a pattern of your personal regeneration as a spiritual human being. I’m going to repeat the reading very slowly, as I pause, speak the words quietly to yourself, as a prayer: “If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.’

There is a reality that can break through to our consciousness, it is an understanding of the first coming of Jesus Christ, it is not a reality of facts that can be verified by source documents, or found in the archeology of the Middle East. Maybe we have visions like Ezekiel and we are snatched up by our hair and shown the glory of God. Or, we simply realize who we are. Maybe we get just a glimpse of the great patterns unfolding in life. If we believe the work, not just the work of Jesus, but our work in taking up his way, we will find through the work, the answer to any questions we have about the divinity of Jesus.