

Joy in the Coming of Our Lord

Excerpts from a Sermon by the Rev. David C. Roth

"Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the east and have come to worship Him.... And when they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy" (Matthew 2:2,10).

How often have we been in the same position as the wise men, or maybe the same situation as the shepherds? We are in a position similar to theirs when we are told of the Lord and the message of His Word. As He did for the wise men and the shepherds, the Lord has made Himself known to each of us in different ways, and now it is up to us to respond. Both the shepherds and the wise men were told in different ways about the coming of the Lord and then given guidance to that special place where the Lord chose to be born. Although both were present to see the newborn Savior, they received the message of the Lord's birth in different ways.

Most likely each of us has a favorite story in relation to the Lord's birth. We may even ask ourselves whether it was the wise men or the shepherds who responded in a more favorable way to the announcement of the Lord's advent. But this question is not really very important when we realize that the essential observation is the one that points to the fact that both the wise men and the shepherds did respond. They both heeded the Lord's call, but in different ways, each according to his own state—different states, yet states which were acceptable to the Lord. How can we then apply the responses of the wise men and shepherds to our own lives on this Christmas day? As we examine the stories of the shepherds and the wise men, the spiritual sense shows us clearly of their application to our lives.

The first thing, however, that we must understand is the importance of the Lord's birth. Without His coming we could not be in freedom to be regenerated by Him. His coming has redeemed mankind; that is, He put the hells back where they belonged, put the heavens in order so that they could be safe from the attack of the hells, and began a new church where people could love the Lord and their neighbors (see *True Christian Religion* 86). By His birth and fulfilled life here on earth the Lord is now present with us fully and powerfully in His Word; we are not left alone. It was this message involving all this wonderful work to be done by the Lord which the shepherds were told of, and which the wise men sought to see fulfilled. As the angel of the Lord proclaimed to the shepherds, "Fear not, for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10,11). The message was clearly one to pay attention to, one to be happy about. A Savior had come, of whose kingdom there would be no end.

When we consider the call of the shepherds we see a unique response. The shepherds at this time of the year lived out in the fields with their sheep day and night, always keeping a watchful eye on their tender flocks. Perhaps we envision it being cold and dark, with the shepherds staying close to keep themselves warm. This is illustrative of the type of world into which the Lord was born—cold from the lack of charity and love, and dark because of the false understanding in which the world had engulfed its minds. Yet even in all this cold and darkness there were a few who possessed an innocence and a willingness to be led and taught by the Word. We can see this

in the story of the shepherds. A shepherd represents one who teaches the truths and goods of faith. A good shepherd, that is, one that guards and protects his flock, shows us a picture of someone who is learning, protecting and storing up goods and truths. This is a picture of a basically good person, yet one who believes that life is his own, and that most power is from himself. He has been working hard to learn the truths of the Lord's Word; however, he remains in a state of darkness as to how it all applies to his life, and how it leads him closer to the Lord and away from self. But with this learning of truth and innocent willingness the Lord is able to come to us and be born in our hearts.

The first thing which the appearing angel said to the shepherds was, "Fear not." This represents a renewal of life, meaning that the Lord will create a new heart within us, a heart that acknowledges the Lord as our Savior and not ourselves. This actually can be a real cause for fear. We read, "For all who come suddenly from self-life into any spiritual life are at first afraid, but their life is renewed by the Lord" (*Arcana Coelestia* 80). It can be a difficult and scary thing to give our life over to the care of the Lord when we feel so strongly that life is our own and that we have the power ourselves to conquer evil. When the Lord draws near, the result is temptation, and if we are good we will fear for the loss of good and truth. His nearer presence makes it feel as if we are losing what good and truth we have. But it is when we do follow the Lord, when we listen to the angel's good tidings, that He can truly care for us. The manger in which the shepherds found the Lord represents spiritual nourishment. It is here in the presence of the Lord that we are nourished and instructed. The Lord does not lead us to Himself and then starve us; He will fill us to overflowing. The Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes means first truths, truths of innocence from the Lord's Divine Love. When we come to the Lord He nourishes and instructs us in those things which will make us ready for His kingdom, a kingdom of innocence, love, and use.

After seeing the Babe, "the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them" (Luke 2:20). This response by the shepherds signifies a true confession and worship, which comes when we acknowledge in our hearts that there is nothing of good in ourselves, and that we can do nothing of ourselves—and, on the other hand, that all good is from the Lord, and that the Lord can do all things (see *Arcana Coelestia* 1210). The Heavenly Doctrines say further of this response, "When man is in this acknowledgment he puts aside what is his own, which belongs to the love of self, and opens all things of his mind, and thus gives room for the Divine to flow in with good and with power" (*ibid.*). The shepherds heard the Lord's call and followed it. We can be like the shepherds ourselves when we make the same sort of acknowledgment regarding the power of the Lord. He will call us in His Word, but if we are looking to ourselves for strength we will not hear Him. We may celebrate the Lord's advent, but not with the same conviction for the Lord as we would if we humbled ourselves and gave glory to the King of Glory.

From this beautiful picture of innocence as seen in the story of the shepherds we now turn to a different scenario: one of wisdom and perseverance—the story of the wise men. The wise men seemed to have a special quality about them. They knew about the advent of the Lord because they had a knowledge of the Word and its prophecies. We read concerning them, "The knowledge of correspondences survived among a number of the Orientals, even until the Lord's Advent, as is evident from the wise men of the east who came to the Lord at His birth" (*The*

Doctrine of the Sacred Scripture 23), "and that they knew of His Advent by a star which appeared to them in the east" (*Arcana Coelestia* 10177).

In the spiritual sense, the east represents love, and the star that went before them signifies knowledge from heaven (see *Arcana Coelestia* 3762, *The Doctrine of the Sacred Scripture* 23). The wise men traveling eastward to the land of the east was representative of those who in their life are moving toward the good of faith. This, the Writings teach, is nothing else than charity toward the neighbor, or a life according to the Lord's commandments (see *Arcana Coelestia* 3249). In this spiritual picture we can see that it is the knowledges of good and truth found in the Lord's Word, represented by the star, which guide us to a life of charity or love, that is, which guide us to the Lord Himself. This paints a beautiful picture for each of us. We see that it is through the learning of the Lord's truths and commands that we can be led to Him.

The most beautiful aspect of the wise men's response to the Lord's Advent is seen when they departed from Herod for Bethlehem and the star reappeared before them. "And behold the star which they had seen in the east went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. And when they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy." Exceeding great joy! What kind of a feeling did they have? It must have been an overwhelming feeling of excitement and internal peace over having embarked upon the last leg of the journey to their Savior, the star's reappearing to assure them that the Lord was with them as they continued their trek. Can we ever have such feelings of great joy in our religious life? We certainly can, and we must! Talking to a person who has recently become aware of the wisdom and love found in the Heavenly Doctrines can certainly emanate exceeding great joy. Or a newly engaged or married couple show it to a certain degree. Perhaps we can even relate it to the expression a young child shows on Christmas morning. However, if we are raised in the New Church, do we lose this excitement, or never let it show? If we do, how can we regain this feeling or bring it out so that others can share it? One answer is to be like the wise men, to seek out the Lord in His Word and then come to Him when we see the star, that is, the knowledges from heaven contained in the Word. We may not find the Lord right away. Even the wise men thought they would find the Lord in Jerusalem, but He wasn't there. They could have given up, but they asked others where He could be found. It is essential to talk to others about our beliefs and our quest for the Lord. They can add to our understanding and love for the Lord, and perhaps our picture then becomes clearer for us, which can eventually lead us to Him. Notice, the star showed itself again until it came and stood over where the young Child was. It led the wise men right to the Lord. We need the truths and goods represented by the star to lead us, and to keep leading us throughout life.

It is important to realize that truth will lead us to the Lord and make us happy, but the real joy for us in our spiritual lives will be when we come to the Lord offering gifts to Him, as the wise men did. These gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh were more than just earthly treasures. They represented testifications of the heart or will, the heart found in a person that is truly thankful for all that the Lord has done for him, and shows it by following His Word. These gifts represented things pleasing to God, because their origin is in love and faith toward Him—the love represented by gold, and our faith by the frankincense, and by myrrh is represented our love and faith grounded in things external, which is a life in obedience and love to the Lord and to our neighbor. These are the gifts which the Lord is asking us to bear on Christmas day and beyond. But more importantly, they are the gifts which He gives us and wills to give each of us when we

respond to His coming. So on this Christmas day let us ask ourselves the following question with the earnest desire to find the answer: "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?" Let us then search diligently for His star in the east and come to worship Him, that is, live a life of charity and faith in Him, because it is in this kind of a life where we too can share the vision of the shepherds and the excitement of the wise men. "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the east and have come to worship Him.... And when they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy." *Amen.*

Lessons: Luke 2:1-20, Matthew 2:1-12, Apocalypse Explained 661