

The Road to Emmaus

by the Rev. Christopher R. J. Smith

Now it came to pass, as He sat at the table with them, that He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they knew Him... (Luke 24:30-31).

The men in the story of the Road to Emmaus had a remarkable experience on that evening. It changed them and changed their whole outlook on life. Why? Because they had been given visible proof that the crucifixion had not ended the life of Jesus Christ.

For them the day had begun in sadness. They felt lost, aimless, very unsure of their future. By the end of that day, however, they found something special. They found a goal. They knew what they had to do.

The sadness, the loss of a sense of direction in their life, came after they witnessed the crucifixion. They had seen the chief priests and rulers crucify “Jesus of Nazareth, who was a Prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people” (Luke 24:19). They could not believe or understand how this could have happened because, as they said, “We were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel” (Luke 24:21). These two men were probably feeling very sorry for themselves. They had expected Jesus to redeem Israel—to become their King and deliver them from the hated Romans. It did not happen.

They had heard, yes, but really they had not listened. They had seen, but really they had not understood what Jesus Christ had both taught and demonstrated. The result was that they would not accept the news from the women who had been to the sepulcher and had reported seeing angels who said Jesus was alive. It made no difference. They had made up their minds to leave Jerusalem and walk to Emmaus, an obscure mountain village in the west. They turned their backs on what had been the center of their lives.

But leaving Jerusalem and walking the road to Emmaus brought them no comfort. In fact, they continued to discuss the disaster that had just taken place. They were sadly realizing that there was now no meaning in their life. As this state hung heavily upon them, the Lord came. He asked, “What kind of conversation is this that you have with one another as you walk and are sad?” (Luke 24:17). They stopped, stood still. “Then the one whose name was Cleopas answered and said to Him, ‘Are You the only stranger in Jerusalem, and have You not known the things which happened there in these days?’” (Luke 24:18).

In total disbelief that someone could not know what had happened, the two companions explained the subject of their discussion and sadness. Of course, the Lord already knew their thinking. But it was only after they had expressed their thoughts that He could show them that the real cause of their unhappiness and confusion was in their own stubborn attitude.

And He said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?” And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He

expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself (Luke 24:25-27).

“O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe.” This was the same state of mind, the same attitude shown by John the Baptist when he was in prison. He sent messengers to the Lord, asking Him if He really was the promised Messiah or if they should look for someone else. The Lord’s answer was patient and understanding. He did not answer John “Yes” or “No”, but rather showed His desire to reason with us.

The Lord’s answer was: “Go and tell John the things you have seen and heard: that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me” (Luke 7:22-23). Consider the facts and draw your own conclusion, because you will not believe anything that you do not understand for yourself.

The Lord did much the same thing for the two men on the road to Emmaus. After gently reprimanding them for their stubbornness, for not believing what had even long ago been taught about the promised Messiah and how He would die, the Lord patiently instructed them. “And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.”

The whole of the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church tell us about the Lord God Jesus Christ, who is our Father in the heavens. When we read them, He speaks to us. And if we do not hear, truly hear, then it may be because a proud heart and a stubborn attitude have got in the way. That is why we have to pray, implore, and even beg the Lord to have these mental barriers removed.

When we read the Word with a sincere desire to know the truth for its own sake, not for the sake of confirming our own opinions, not for the sake of going through the motions of piety, and certainly not for the sake of loading up on doctrine so as to impress others; then and only then is the Lord able to teach us something, something about Himself, and we are able to actually learn. When this happens, we may sense a gradual change—something like spring following winter. Pride and stubbornness melt away as a certain warmth comes into our hearts. This was the experience of the two men walking to Emmaus.

After the Lord disappeared again from their sight, they reflected on what had happened and remembered: “Did not our hearts burn within us while He talked with us on the road, and while He opened the Scriptures to us?” (Luke 24:32).

It is a real warmth that we feel—the spiritual sun of heaven shining upon us—when we see something living in the Word and are affected by it. It is something we see as being very worthwhile, something we want to take home and use.

How did these two men come to feel this way? Consider what the Word teaches us. All its truths form one heavenly voice urging us to love one another by finding and doing things that are useful—things that show concern for not just our own but other people’s lives as well. The two

men showed something of this concern, this love for the neighbor, when they pleaded with the stranger who had walked with them to accept their hospitality: “And they drew near to the village where they were going, and He indicated that He would have gone farther. But they constrained Him, saying, ‘Abide with us, for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent.’ And He went in to stay with them” (Luke 24:28-29).

By this small token of love and care for the neighbor who was a stranger to them, the two men were able to be conjoined with the Lord. That is why we are told that He broke bread with them, letting Himself be recognized (see *Arcana Coelestia* 3863:14). “Now it came to pass, as He sat at the table with them, that He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they knew Him” (Luke 24:30-31).

We are taught in the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church that since ancient times, breaking bread and eating it together has been a sign of mutual love (see *Arcana Coelestia* 5405). When bread is offered by the Lord Himself, it is a sign of conjunction or friendship with Him (see *Apocalypse Explained* 617:21). Breaking bread with the Lord surely must be an amazing, wonderful experience. Who is able to do it? Any person who wishes to receive the bread of life—to receive its spiritual nourishment and then let it work in one’s life.

Who is this person and how does he know if he is being spiritually fed? It is the person who wants to be of service, to be useful, who has a clear idea of the meaning of charity. Such a person’s heart warms when he hears the Lord say, for example, that “the life of charity is to wish well and to do well to the neighbor, to act from what is just and fair, and from what is good and true, in like manner in everything we do; in a word, the life of charity consists in performing uses” (*Arcana Coelestia* 8253). He understands that “He who loves his neighbor as himself perceives no delight in charity except in its exercise, or in use; and therefore a life of charity is a life of uses.... The more noble the use, the greater the delight” (*Arcana Coelestia* 997).

Showing mutual love in our uses to each other is symbolized by breaking bread together. And when this bread is broken and eaten in the holy supper, it expresses our desire to be with the Lord, receiving and returning His love. As this bread of life—the goodness and love He offers—is received, we change. We become very sure of His presence, realizing that the Lord’s is alive and with us, providing for all our needs. This is all that really matters.

It is a changed person who knows in his heart that without the Lord he can do nothing, nothing at all. “Abide in Me, and I in you.... I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing” (John 15:4-5). Such a person is able to live his life without any fears or worries. He is able to walk through the valley of the shadow of death and fear no evil, simply because he knows that his life has meaning and purpose in the presence of his Lord and God.

The change in one’s life that replaces a sense of confusion with a sense of purpose is shown when Cleopas and his friend immediately returned to Jerusalem. The Lord had disappeared from their sight. But now they had lost their doubts and confusion. That is why we are told that “they rose up that very hour and returned to Jerusalem, and found the eleven.... And they told about the things that had happened on the road, and how He was known to them in the breaking of

bread” (Luke 24:33,35). It was a journey during the night, some seven miles on a mountain path. But they did it gladly. Their hearts were burning and they wished to share their joy with the eleven disciples still hiding in Jerusalem.

These two men had left Jerusalem earlier that same day, frustrated and confused. They left for the obscure village of Emmaus. Is this state not common to us all? Are there not times when we feel very unsure of ourselves? Have we not all felt the frustrating experience of indecision? The very process of making it from one day to the next can seem a muddle!

Whenever we do not have a living knowledge of the Lord and His presence with us, we are like the two companions who left Jerusalem, walking to Emmaus, very disillusioned. But He draws near to help us change. Then we can understand and believe. We put aside a foolish heart, so that we hear, with crystal clarity, when He says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

He says to each of us, “Where I go you know, and the way you know” (John 14:4). And if we do know the way, shall we not follow it?

Amen.

Lessons: Luke 7:11-23; Luke 24:13-35; *Arcana Coelestia* 3863:14-15