

Coming To Rule With The Lord

A Sermon by Rev. Grant H. Odhner

Our general subject today is the importance of service in human society -- what many of us call "doing our jobs." The text that we'll follow is the story about James and John asking Jesus if they could rule with Him in His kingdom, sitting at His right and left hand. The Lord used the incident to teach the disciples about the nature of service and leadership in service:

Whoever desires to be great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave -- just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many. (Mt 20:26-28)

Since the main point of the incident has to do with service, it's not surprising that the brothers "James" and "John" were the ones who came to the Lord and asked to be ranked first in His kingdom. The twelve disciples, Swedenborg says, symbolize the core feelings and truths that make for heaven with us. But "James" in particular symbolizes charity in the heart and "John" love-in-action or useful service from love (cf. AE 820f; AC 7038.3).

To the generally accepted idea of "charity" and "love" the Writings of the New Church a special emphasis. They say that we express genuine love and charity not just through good deeds or shows of loving affection, but primarily through our daily work (AC 4730:3, 4783:5; D.Wis XI:5; Life 114; SE 6105; TCR 422ff). The book Doctrine of Life states:

Christian charity with every one consists in faithfully performing what belongs to one's calling; for by this, if one shuns evils as sins, one is doing goods every day, and by it he is himself his own use in the general body [of human society]. In this way also [both] the common good is cared for, and the good of each person in particular. All other things one does are not the proper works of charity, but are either signs of it, or its kindnesses (benefactions), or its obligations.

The angels' attitudes toward their daily jobs reflects this same priority. We read:

[Angels] have no other idea than that loving the Lord is doing goods which are uses.. By "uses" they understand the uses and good works of ministry, administration, and employment, with priests and magistrates as well as with business-people and laborers. The good works that are not connected with their occupation they do not call uses; they call them alms, kindnesses, and favors. (Divine Love XIII)

From this emphasis on charity as being our daily "uses," we can see that "James" and "John" are closely linked with what the Lord was trying to teach here: unselfish service, "use."

James and John wanted to rule with the Lord. On the personal level we can readily see that they were suffering from delusions. The disciples were obviously grossly ignorant of what the Lord's kingdom was, and of what heavenly service was all about. They were thinking of a worldly kind of kingdom. They expected to be rewarded for following the Lord by enjoying the trappings of power -- wealth and ease and glory (cp AC 3417).

People through the ages have thought that heavenly happiness would consist in living the life of a king. In his book Married Love Swedenborg relates an experience he had in the spiritual world. Some newly arrived spirits were allowed to experience their ideas of heaven? One group had this idea that heavenly happiness was "ruling with the Lord." So they were given thrones and silken robes, crowns and scepters, and were waited upon by servants. From time to time heralds would announce, "You kings and princes, wait a little while longer. Your palaces are now being prepared for you in heaven." Well, after a few tedious hours of this, some angels had compassion on them, and told them that someone was having fun with them. And by that time they were ready to hear what the angels had to say about true happiness -- which was this:

["To reign with Christ"] means to be wise and perform useful services -- [for] the kingdom of Christ, which is heaven, is a kingdom of uses. For the Lord loves all people, and from love wills good to all, and good is use. And because the Lord does goods or uses indirectly through angels, and in the world through people, therefore to those who perform uses faithfully He gives a love of uses and its reward, which is an inner blessedness. And this is eternal happiness. (CL 7:3)

To "reign with the Lord," taken symbolically, means to perform daily services in human society that are of use, because in this way the Lord works and governs in us and through us. So on a deeper level, in our story from Matthew James and John were asking for a role that is in fact given to what they represent. What could be more important to the Lord than charity and love in act (love serving? These are, in fact, first in the Lord's kingdom. They are the way in which He rules and provides for the common good. They sit at His right and left hand!

Now, if this is the case, why didn't the Lord say openly to James and John that they could sit on His right and left when He came into His kingdom?

The reason for this comes down to the Lord's incredible wisdom! He was teaching us through this incident, not only about the nature of true service, but about how we come to it. Our text artfully invites us to see service in a developmental way.

Did you notice how the general tone of this incident is that of a father dealing with children? The disciples behave in a childlike way. James and John's request is spiritually immature, as is the other disciples' reaction.

James and John's request has that childlike quality of being transparently mixed: it's an offer to be of service that is at the same time obviously selfish. They want to help the Lord, but they are clearly hoping for the honor of having a special place in His kingdom. They were asking from a place of incredible ignorance and mixed motives! How was the Lord to answer? If you've ever been asked by children if they could help you do an adult job, you can get some idea of the Lord's position.

When my children ask if they can help cook, it's a "mixed bag." They are full of a wonderful "can do" attitude. They have no fear of failure. And they are woefully ignorant and untempered by manual dexterity or good judgment. Undoubtedly angels are with them in their urge to help. But many levels and kinds of desire are clearly present. They are simply curious. They want attention and recognition; they want to be a factor in what's going on. They want to gain favor by helping; they want to be praised and thought well of. They want to lick the beaters! One indication of some of the primitive, selfish affections at play is that, if

another child gets too close, there's often an immediate show of jealousy or some kind of turf-defending behavior.

Reflecting on this can give us an idea of what we are like when we set out to be of use in the Lord's kingdom, and how the Lord must see us. Our motives are mixed and we are not very wise. Innocence is working in us; we have a kernel of genuine desire to serve the Lord. And yet our drive to serve our self and to provide for our own happiness is also very great. And we don't see what is moving us very clearly.

When James and John came with their mother and asked Jesus if they could sit on His right and left hand in His kingdom, where were they coming from? What were their thoughts and motivations? Did they feel that they had a special call from within to be leaders (or even leaders of leaders), to minister at that high level? Did they feel that they had the talents to do this? How much were they thinking of service, and how much of their own gain, glory and honor?

Judging from Jesus' response, there was definitely a lot of this last motivation. But how gently the Lord treated them! He didn't confront them in such a way as to leave them feeling exposed and shamed. Like a wise parent, He noted the innocence that was there, and the potential, and responded honestly, but in such a way as to help them grow. First He pointed out to them:

You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? (Mt 20.22)

Clearly He's implying that James and John were not worthy at that point to sit at His right and left hand in His kingdom. They were not ready. They were not coming from the right place. They were not chastened or wise enough. Nevertheless they answer, "We are able"!

(I can't help feeling that the Lord must have been a bit amused at this reply! It reflects the same endearing mix of ignorance and innocence that children show when they want to help with an adult task! "We are able!")

Again the Lord could have crushed them with His response. But affirming their "can do" attitude and their potential, He says, "You will indeed drink My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am

baptized with..". "But," He adds, "to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared by My Father" (v. 23).

Gently the Lord tells them that they would become more worthy. Their motivations would be purified, through struggling against evil and overcoming. This is what "drinking of His cup" means and "being baptized" -- namely, temptation and spiritual cleansing. Then He adds that their place in His kingdom could only be given by His "Father."

What did He mean by this? If He was really one with the Father, why couldn't He have given James and John a clearer answer? The Writings for the New Church point out that the Lord always spoke according to what people could accept. As we mentioned earlier, the disciples were grossly ignorant of what the Lord's kingdom was, and of what heavenly service was all about. They were thinking of a worldly kind of kingdom and a worldly glory. And they had no idea that He was God almighty. If He had said "Yes, you can sit at my right and left hand in My kingdom" He would have misled them. They would have mistaken their present feelings and ideas (connected with heaven and service) for the real thing. If He had said "No," or if He had tried to explain to them what His kingdom was really about, they would not have understood and He would have crushed the very affections and hopes that were keeping them growing in the right direction. Instead He said:

To sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared by My Father. (v. 23)

The Lord's wise answer lets James and John keep hoping and striving, and yet secretly contains the message that their place in His kingdom would not be a matter of truth as they understood it now (symbolized by Himself, the "Son of Man," whom they saw in their present state). Their present ideas would not bring them heaven! Rather, their place in heaven would be a matter of how much they were "prepared" through time to receive the Divine love (symbolized by the Father). Their place would be a matter of growth in heart and life.

In summary, James and John represent our inner charity and our service from it. They represent our love and its daily activities for others in the network of human society. These things are what will bring us closest to the Lord in His kingdom. They are the things in us that what

will enable us to sit at His side. They are what will bring us a sense of heavenly fulfillment and happiness.

The clear and compelling message of this story is that the Lord calls us to serve one another unselfishly, even as He came "not to be served but to serve, and to give His life.. for many." So far as we make it our business to be useful in our daily lives -- using our God-given opportunities and talents, using what insight we have, looking to the good of our family and neighbors, to the common good of society and our country, to the good of the church and the Lord's kingdom -- so far as we do this, we will find the Lord's joy, because we will be participating in it! This is the clear message.

The more hidden message of this story (uncovered through a knowledge of correspondences) is that we must grow in our wisdom and ability to serve. Like James and John we are not "there" at once. We must tread the path patiently, avoiding evils, being willing to "drink" of the "cup" of temptation when necessary. We must welcome a baptism of truth, again and again, so that our minds and hearts might be bathed and purified, and become wise and skilled in following the Lord's inner leading. When we acknowledge our spiritual life as a growing thing, we won't expect to find our place in heaven guaranteed to us based on our present sight of truth (the "Son of Man"). Rather, we will look to the Divine love (the "Father") to fill our life with happiness as we are "prepared" through time for a life of eternal usefulness in His heavenly kingdom.

Amen.

Lessons: Ps 24; Mt 20.20-28; AC 3796.2-3 or DP 233.5-6