

Our Connection to Heaven, part 4: Correspondences

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, August 21st, 2016

“The earth is the Lord’s, and all its fullness, the world, and those who dwell therein. For He has founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the rivers.”
(Psalm 24:1-2)

In the spiritual sense of these short verses “the earth” and “the world” mean the church, that is, those places in the world where the Lord is acknowledged and loved. “The seas” and “rivers” are the truths of faith upon which the church is established. But of course the natural world is the Lord’s, too, and we know that natural life also originated in the seas and rivers, for without water there can be no life as we know it. And what the Lord has created has His fingerprints, so to speak, all over it. In fact every created thing is infused with the love and wisdom of His Divine Humanity and is a form or expression of those two things.

So we read – repeatedly – in the doctrines for the New Church that (to quote) “the whole natural order is *a theatre representative of the Lord’s kingdom in heaven*, and therefore of the Lord’s kingdom on earth, which is the Church, and consequently of the Lord’s kingdom with every regenerate person” (AC 3518:3, *et al.*).

What this means is that everything we see, hear, taste, touch or smell in this natural world is symbolic of something in the spiritual world; more to the point, *it is the physical expression of something spiritual*, and if it is functioning in an orderly way it is an expression of something heavenly.

You can picture this easily in your mind if you think of any particular scene that fills you with a sense of wonder, peace, tranquility or awe: maybe a gorgeous rainbow or sun beams breaking through a cloudy sky, maybe a spectacular waterfall or even just a very placid, beautiful lake or flowery glen in some lush forest. If you’re an animal lover you may think of the endearing qualities of various pets, the fabulous colors of wild birds or even the remarkable intelligence of the great land or sea creatures. Then again, if you’re into science, any of the intricate patterns of chemistry or the permutations of biology may inspire you with a powerful sense of the Lord’s creative energy, His infinite wisdom and even His love. In fact, you can think of anything from the flowers in your garden to the bees that pollenate them, or the mountains of Europe or Asia, and if you have the heart for it you can see the Lord’s hand in every part of it (DLW 351-356).

But it’s all much more than just representative. The reason things in this world can affect us so deeply is that they actually *exist* as a result of spiritual influences – or “influx.”

Our term for this relationship between natural and spiritual things is “correspondence.” In a nutshell correspondence is the cause and effect relationship between spiritual and natural things such that the natural things *actually come into being as visible, tangible forms of the Divine energy focused or determined to specific uses*. The spiritual uses are reflected in the natural forms and processes, and in the relationships between things. For example, water corresponds to truth. Then again, so does light, and so do rocks and minerals. But each thing expresses a particular quality of truth: solid rocks the building blocks of simple knowledge, water the flow of ideas about the truth, and light the more elevated or abstract *understanding* of the truth. (This is all

oversimplified, of course, but serves to illustrate the concept.) What water does for the human *body* truth does for the human *mind*, cleansing, nourishing and refreshing our thoughts – which is why we baptize people with water, signifying the application of truth from the Word to life. What light does for our natural world, allowing us to see, truth does for our spiritual world, allowing us to understand. So when we collaborate on a project we “pool” our knowledge. And often when we get the solution to a problem we say, “Oh, I see!”

The uses themselves are infinite, which is why the natural world is filled with such incredible variety, from the molecular structures of things to the vast expanses of the universe, from the great geological formations of the earth to the mind-boggling array of tiny insects, some of which live in the scales of other insects, which in turn prey on still others. In the heavenly doctrines the instincts of bees and silkworms are often cited as illustrations of the Divine influx and providence (TCR 12-13, e.g.), but you can get the same feeling for God’s work by studying snails or crabs – or lions or sloths. The more you learn, the more amazing it all is.

Specific Examples

And the thing is, ***we can actually be connected to heaven*** by means of the effects and our reflections *on* the effects of all these natural phenomena. Let’s explore a few illustrations.

“Trees, [we read,] according to their species, correspond to the perceptions and cognitions [that is, the conceptual knowledge] of good and truth from which intelligence and wisdom come. For this reason, the ancient people who had a knowledge of correspondences, held their sacred worship in groves [of trees]. For the same reason, trees are so often mentioned in the Word, such as the vine, the olive, the cedar and others, and heaven, the Church and people are compared to them, and the good works they do are compared to fruits. Also the food derived from trees, [and] especially from the grain harvests of the field, corresponds to affections of good and truth *because these affections nourish the spiritual life, as earthly food does the natural life*” (HH. 111).

Think specifically of a fruit tree, an olive, perhaps, or an apple, or a cherry or maybe an almond tree. The roots of the tree correspond to the roots of our character, which have to do with our fundamental attitude or disposition. These roots draw sustenance from earth which corresponds to the good of life. The trunk and branches of the tree correspond to the love and affections that spring from these roots. Wood of all kinds, incidentally, corresponds to various forms of love and affection, and it is mentioned in Scripture, always, to that effect (so the bitter waters of Marah during the Exodus were made palatable when Moses threw in a piece of wood).

The leaves of the tree however represent all the particulars of knowledge that we learn, and just as leaves through the process of photosynthesis use light to make carbohydrates from the air and water, so the things we learn as knowledge synthesize other elements in our spiritual lives to provide for our nourishment and growth. After the leaves come the flowers, which represent the peace and beauty of wisdom, and after the flowers come the fruit, which correspond to the good works we do. Remember, the Lord said, “A good tree brings forth good fruit.”

Again, the point is that when we know the correspondences we can sit, as the hymn says, “in awesome wonder” and reflect deeply for a long time on the amazing work of the Lord’s Divine

providence *not just in the tree, but in our own lives as reflected in the tree.*

“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night. He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither; and whatever he does shall prosper” (Psalm 1:1-3).

Of course a lot of nasty things occur in the world, too, and they may correspond to things in hell rather than heaven. But they are still connecting us with the spiritual world, and that connection is also necessary to preserve the freedom we have to choose what is nasty for ourselves. Remember, though, there isn't always a direct connection between our personal choices and the environment around us – either the blessings or the ills that plague us. These things come about as the result of *many* people's choices, even choices made in total ignorance of their consequences, which often makes it impossible to assign individual merit or blame. Still, we can be thankful for the laws of order that result in *precise, inevitable consequences*, since these laws provide stability in the world and invite us all to take responsibility for our actions. We can also use our painful, nasty experiences to explore how we can make things better – for ourselves and others.

Correspondences in the Word

Now let's turn our attention to the literal sense of the Lord's Word. You know that the literal sense is the basis, the containing vessel and the support for the spiritual sense within it, and one reason for this is that it is built on the imagery of physical places and events, which all exist as concrete expressions of spiritual life. But the Word is much more than just such imagery, because it is organized and written in a form that communicates the Divine love and wisdom *in an instructive, narrative form*. So when you read the Word you actually get a *three-fold blast* of information: you get the lessons implicit in the correspondences AND you get the direct teaching about what's good and evil in your life – *and you get all this on two levels!*

What's more, when you read it you associate yourself with specific communities, or societies, of heaven, because the Word is written in such a way that it presents or manifests the affections of angels who especially (and specifically) identify with the concepts that are there expressed.

Let's think about this. A skeptic or an atheist reading the Word might see it as just an elaborate history, full of myths and exaggerations. But when we are familiar with correspondences and the symbolic, spiritual sense of it all we will be able to (a) see some spiritual aspect of ourselves in every object or event that is described, (b) learn a direct lesson about what contributes to or detracts from true prosperity and peace in this world, (c) translate that into a spiritual lesson for eternal life, and (d) actually feel the affections of angels in heaven who are, as it were, reading along with us but on a much higher plane (actually reading our minds as we grasp what we read).

This is, frankly, amazing. And it's why so much of what is written in the doctrines for the New Church is about correspondences. Yes, it can get a little tedious if you're not “into it.” *This means that, so-and-so represents such and such, etc.*, but when it starts to feel this way all we really have to do is focus in reverently on a few words or phrases and the whole thing will come alive, sometimes in a shocking way, and sometimes with a most rewarding inner tranquility.

Take, for example, the story of Abraham going to sacrifice his only son, Isaac on an altar he built with his own hands on Mt. Moriah. What a ghastly episode! And how heart wrenching it must have been – for both of them! But it's not just a story; it's about each one of us and the temptations we all face in our efforts to follow the Lord. The mountain itself represents an elevated state of the mind, specifically a state of love and commitment. Incidentally, this is the same mountain on which Solomon later built the Temple in Jerusalem! And since this is where the Lord suffered His most awful temptations it also represents a state of temptation for any of us.

Abraham himself represents the Lord, and of course whatever is from the Lord in each of us, especially His infinite love. Isaac, on the other hand, represents the rational faculty in the Lord and in each of us. The donkey and the two other boys Abraham took with him represent the natural intellectual processes that support – or potentially challenge – true rational thought, but without much depth of understanding. And here's the lesson in a nutshell: if we are going to become truly spiritual, truly rational beings, we are going to have to submit and subordinate that rationality to the higher principles of spiritual love and wisdom – even to the extent that it may seem as if we are sacrificing that rationality on an altar of mere obedience. But the outrageous beauty of it is that when we do that – when we do submit our rational thought to spiritual principles of love and wisdom from God, that is, from the great truths of the Word – miraculously the Lord intervenes, provides a ram as a substitute for the sacrifice, and Isaac is set free. At that point we are *truly rational*, truly free, and our spiritual future is secured.

The ram in the story, the wood that Abraham laid on the altar, the knife he raised to kill his son, every element corresponds to something in our own spiritual development and so ***connects us to heaven and the Lord*** if we are attentive. Of course we can't review it all now, but we can read and reflect on it forever, and the more we think about it the stronger the connection grows.

Some stories are more difficult for us to understand than others, but that's no reason to be discouraged. Every one is a bridge to the heavens; every one can connect us in the four ways mentioned earlier; every one resonates in some profound way with things we will experience on our spiritual path *because every one represents some spiritual influence affecting our lives*.

Correspondence as we understand the concept is not just a fun, clever way to see deeper meaning in life or in the Scriptures; it is a lifeline through the heavens to the Lord Himself and a gateway to understanding our own hearts and minds. It is the *reason* things exist and the universal means by which the Lord reveals Himself no matter what faith or doctrine we follow – if we will only have eyes to see and the heart to feel His presence.

No, we will not learn the doctrine of genuine truth just by contemplating nature; that is why the Lord has given us the Word, carefully scripted to communicate the truth in a way that speaks to our conscious, rational minds and our specific needs. But once we get that we can see the Lord and the heavens *everywhere* working to redeem and save, to comfort and to bless all people.

Amen.

Lessons: *Psalm 1*
Children's talk on Parables, e.g., on Being Like a Tree

Mark 4:26-34 & True Christian Religion #201

