

## Our Sensory Experience of the Lord

An address for the Holy Supper by Rev. Michael Gladish  
December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016

“Jesus said... ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; and from now on you know Him and have seen Him.’

“Philip said to Him, ‘Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us.’

“Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, “Show us the Father”? Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? ... Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father in Me...’” (John 14:6-11).

You might think that the Lord’s original disciples had a big advantage over the rest of us in that they lived with the Lord for three years in this world. They walked with Him, ate with Him, slept where He slept, heard Him speak, and saw His miracles with their own eyes. They touched and were touched by Him, and in just about every other way had the physical experience of His presence among them. And yet they didn’t really know Him.

It was only after the resurrection, when they heard and saw Him again, witnessed more miracles, gave Him food to eat and ate the food He gave them, that they finally *seemed* to realize Who He really was. Certainly, they were filled with new faith in Him, felt the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives, and went on not only to perform miracles of their own in that faith but also to preach and teach about Him despite sometimes ruthless persecution. Yet, we are still left to wonder whether they really understood Him. After all, it was only after the Last Judgment and the Second Coming of the Lord in the doctrines of the New Church that the Lord was able to “call together His twelve disciples who had followed Him in the world, and send them forth into the whole spiritual world to preach the gospel that the Lord God Jesus Christ reigns...” (TCR 791).

What were they doing in the meantime, we may ask? Was the influence of misunderstanding and misinterpretation in the early church affecting them? Or did they not have the intellectual capacity at that time to comprehend the Lord’s Divine Humanity until the Second Coming? We don’t know, but one thing we can conclude from all this is that physical, sensory experience of the Lord, while wonderful and amazing, is not in itself compelling, since that experience can always be interpreted, or even explained away, as we know is routinely done by the religious skeptics of every age. (Note, by the way, that the disciples’ experience of the Lord in the world after His resurrection was *spiritual* and *not physical* as He had risen “with His whole body” (Lord 15), appearing and disappearing without the limitations of time and space.)

In fact, what really convinces us of anything is always a matter of faith and the will, or in other words, our understanding and affection for the truth. What the physical senses do for us is to **confirm** and **support** what we experience *on the mental or spiritual plane*.

Modern psychology makes this very clear, and we also know it from everyday life lessons when we miss something obvious because we aren’t looking for it or didn’t expect it, or again, when we *think* we see something because it’s on our minds, but it really *isn’t* there. For example, there

was that major incident on the road to Emmaus after the resurrection when the two disciples met the Lord on the way *and didn't even recognize Him* – that is, *not until He explained everything to them* and broke bread with them at the inn.

Of course, this is not to say that we can never trust our senses; it's just that we have to be careful. Things simply are not always what they appear to be. And yet our sensory experience is critical for our spiritual lives. In fact the Writings tell us quite plainly that we can't even really think apart from our sensory impressions, since we need that grounding in concrete, natural imagery to provide a foundation for our thoughts and to hold our ideas in some order.

“For,” we read, “without ideas derived from worldly objects a person is unable to engage in thought” (AC 2520:2).

Indeed, “nothing is possible in a person's thought, even as to the deepest arcanum of faith, that is not attended with a natural and sensuous idea, although the man is for the most part ignorant of the nature of it...” (AC 3310:4)

So, finally, “all thoughts which a person has are confined within natural things experienced by his senses, and anything that is said which does not draw on and does not fit in with those natural things is not comprehended but perishes, like sight gazing into some ocean or universe without any object there on which it may focus. Consequently if matters of doctrine were presented to a person in any other manner, they would not be received at all, and so he would have no respect for them” (AC 2554).

This particularly includes our ideas of God, which is why the Lord came into the world in His own natural Human form. Sense experience anchors our thought to specific images – from which we can distill and remember spiritual lessons – hence the literal sense of the Word, the basis, containing vessel and support of the spiritual sense (AC 4733, 7091, 7211, AE 151, etc.), including everything we need to know about the Lord's earthly life. Hence also the doctrine of the New Church, which opens our spiritual eyes to the true nature of the Lord's Humanity.

“This New Church,” we read, “is the crown of all the churches that have hitherto existed on the earth, because it is to worship one visible God in whom is the invisible like the soul in the body. Thus, and not otherwise, is a conjunction of God with man possible because man is natural, and therefore thinks naturally, and conjunction must exist in his thought, and thus in his love's affection, and this is the case when he thinks of God as a Man. Conjunction with an invisible God is like a conjunction of the eye's vision with the expanse of the universe, the limits of which are invisible; it is also like vision in mid-ocean, which reaches out into the air and upon the sea, and is lost. Conjunction with a visible God, on the other hand, is like beholding a man in the air or on the sea spreading forth his hands and inviting to his arms. For all conjunction of God with man must be also a reciprocal conjunction of man with God; and no such reciprocation is possible except with a visible God” (TCR 787).

Here we see the amazing combination of our own ordinary physical experience with the intellectual experience of knowing something from our reading, or second-hand experience. (Wonderfully, modern research has shown that the human mind literally does not distinguish between

what it has experienced in the reading of a book and what has taken place in that person's own outward life, provided the person has been emotionally engaged in the reading.)

Still, unless we can rise above the sensual and draw spiritual *principles* from what we see, hear, taste, touch and smell, it is all for nothing. Just as we learn words before we can speak in sentences, so we gain experience before we can learn from that experience. But the point is not the experience itself, *it's what it means to us*. And once we get the meaning then the words and the experiences that embody them have more power than ever.

So now, let's think about the holy supper. It's a simple enough ritual but it involves every natural sense in the human body. We see the bread and wine being prepared, we hear the Lord's words as He Himself might have said them (though of course in His own native language), we smell, touch and taste the elements as they are presented; and by the way, we are also conscious of a lot of other sensations in this activity, from the act of kneeling to the appearance of the chancel and the awareness of the other people around us. Every one of these experiences gives us an opportunity to reflect on the Lord Himself as He initiated this commemoration with His disciples near the end of His life in the world. Even the white robe and golden girdle of the minister could – if you are willing – remind you of the white robes of the Lord as He appeared in His resurrection in the first chapter of the book of Revelation. (After all, that's why ministers wear these robes and girdles.)

In short, everything about this ceremony is intended to evoke awareness and focus our attention on the Lord's love and wisdom as expressed in the stories of His life on earth – so that we can see His purpose for us and feel His presence among us, not as some abstract entity or force but as a living, breathing, feeling, yearning, zealous HUMAN God, the *Divine* Human who is still with us, *or rather with us now more than ever* since He has fully glorified that Humanity and so made Himself accessible in every age and place, not just one tiny spot in one tiny frame of reference in the middle-east. In the end the truth is that we don't need to see the Lord with our natural eyes as the disciples did; we don't need to hear His voice with our natural ears or touch Him with our natural hands as they did. Rather, based on our experience of all the senses in other human contexts we can have almost the same experience as the disciples had IF we allow ourselves to be emotionally affected by the stories of His life.

In fact we can do even better than the disciples could because we now have the full explanation of what the Lord was doing, why He was doing it, and what it means for us. So we can see Him with our *spiritual* eyes, hear Him with our *spiritual* ears, touch Him with our *spiritual* hands, and most particularly taste and smell what He offers us with our *spiritual* tongue and nose, which have to do with our understanding and perception. This is where all our real sensation occurs, anyway; the organs of our natural bodies only gather in the external stimuli – light waves, sound vibrations and so on – that are then interpreted as having some particular meaning.

So as we approach the sacrament of the Lord's supper today let us use our knowledge and understanding of Him to seize the opportunity before us – the opportunity to connect and be connected with Him through a physical re-enactment of this last dramatic, nurturing event of His earthly life, through which He reaches out to us now, just as He did then, inviting all of us to partake of the spiritual bread and wine He came to provide. And let us be thankful that He can and does provide these things even to those of us who, like Judas, may falter in temptation, for He knows our hearts and just as in the story of His feeding the 5,000, He has compassion for the whole multitude of those who will come to Him.

Amen.

Lessons: *John 14:1-11*  
*True Christian Religion #84 and Arcana Caelestia #5110:3*

The Second Lessons, in order:

“God could not have redeemed people, that is, rescued them from damnation and hell, without first taking on a human manifestation. There are many reasons for this; they will be disclosed step by step in what follows. Redemption was a matter of gaining control of the hells, restructuring the heavens, and then establishing a church. Despite His omnipotence, God could not accomplish these things except through his human manifestation, as one cannot do work without arms. In fact, in the Word His human manifestation is called the arm of Jehovah (Isaiah 40:10; 53:1). By analogy, one cannot attack a fortified city and destroy the temples of idols there without powerful means.

“The Word as well makes it clear that having a human manifestation gave God the omnipotence to do this divine work. God is in the inmost and purest realms. There was no other way He could cross over to the lowest levels where the hells exist and where people were at that time, just as a soul cannot do anything without a body. By analogy, there is no way to overpower enemies who are not in sight and whom we cannot get close to with weapons such as spears, shields, or guns.

“To redeem people without a human manifestation would have been as impossible for God as it would be for someone [in Europe] to take control of people in India without sending in troops on ships. It would be as impossible as growing trees on heat and light alone if air had not been created as a medium through which they travel and earth had not been created in which the trees could grow. In fact, it would be as impossible as catching fish by throwing a net in the air and not in the water.

“Given Jehovah’s inherent nature, despite His omnipotence He could not touch any individual devils in hell or any individual devils on earth and control them or their rage or tame their violence unless He could be as present in the farthest realms as He is in those closest to Him. In His human manifestation he is in fact present in the farthest realms. This is why the Word refers to Him as the First and the Last, the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End [Revelation 1:8, 11; 21:6; 22:13].”

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Furthermore, “...the human being is such that he cannot form in his mind any idea at all of abstract realities unless he associates with them some natural imagery that has come to him from the world through his senses; for without any such imagery his thought becomes lost so to speak in an abyss and is dissipated. Therefore to prevent the idea of the Divine becoming lost in the case of a person immersed in bodily and worldly interests, and to prevent the defilement of this idea, and at the same time of everything celestial or spiritual from the Divine, by foul thoughts in the case of anyone with whom it remained, Jehovah has been pleased to make Himself known as He exists essentially and as He manifests Himself in heaven, namely as a Divine Man.”