

Reflections on Prophecies From the Lord's Birth to His Crucifixion

a brief sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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The service today is unique in that we are commemorating both sacraments of the New Church, baptism and the holy supper. The first is an introduction to the teachings of the church so that a person can know how to live, and the second is a kind of celebration of all the goodness and truth that the Lord provides for anyone who is actively engaged in a spiritual life.

And it's at least interesting that both sacraments include prophetic elements: in baptism there is the hope and promise of a fulfilling experience of knowing the teachings of the Word and so knowing how to live. And in the holy supper there is the hope and promise of an even deeper fulfillment when we actually live according to those teachings. Neither sacrament represents a completed process, but each one offers support and encouragement to engage in the process. So if you want either of these things then you should not worry about being ready, or worthy to participate; rather you should remember that they are gates of *entrance* provided to strengthen and *nourish* that commitment.

In a similar way the prophecies relating to the Lord's life in the world, both those in the Old Testament and those in the story of His birth, are like gates of entrance into the meaning and purpose of His life. "Arise, shine," we read, "for your light has come! And the glory of the Lord is risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and deep darkness the people; but the Lord will arise over you, and His glory will be seen upon you" (Isaiah 60:1-2). This darkness is the confusion, the misunderstanding, the evil and the falsity that obscured all the genuine truths of religion in the ancient world, and the light or glory is the truth *brilliantly* revealed in the life and teaching of the Lord, overcoming that darkness. But in the beginning it is not a done deal, it is the promise that it *will be* done, and the story of the Lord's life is the fulfillment of that promise.

It is the same in what we read about the *end* of the Lord's life in the world. Responding to Pilate as He was about to be crucified He said, "For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth" (John 18:37). Of course He had been doing that for 30 years, but here it appeared as if it had all been for nothing, as if His work was all being undone. And so there is a prophetic element in His words: "Don't worry, I know what I'm doing, and you will see the truth in glory very soon," or, as He actually said, "...The hour is coming, yes, has now come, that you will be scattered, each to his own, and will leave Me alone. And yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me. These things I have spoken to you that you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer (or rather, *have confidence*), I have overcome the world."

Over and over the Lord had predicted His own death *and resurrection*, and the disciples didn't get it; they didn't understand it. But this was all part of His perfect work of preparing them for the best possible outcome, which was that they *would get it*, they *would* understand when He was raised from the tomb. Again, as He told Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world," or, stepping back to a little earlier in that week, "Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you – *not as the world gives do I give to you*. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid" (John 14:27). And for good measure, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. However, when the *spirit* of truth has come, it will guide you into all truth" (John 16:12-13).

These are all prophecies of the new, clear, powerful insight that the Lord would bring, not only to the disciples of that day but also to anyone willing to hear and do what He teaches today. So despite the appearance in some passages this *spirit of truth* is not some new personal manifestation of God but the true *understanding* of the things He Himself taught and continues to teach as we read and reflect on His Word.

Now if you'll recall the lessons from the *True Christian Religion* (#571) there was a comparison of two general states of spiritual life, reformation and regeneration. The difference between these two is directly related to baptism and the holy supper in that they are the two kinds of life *introduced* by the sacraments. In other words, baptism opens the way to the *work* of reformation, and the holy supper opens the way to the *peace and delight* of regeneration. In a way these two states are also the same as the ones introduced by the prophecies at the beginning of the Lord's life, and then again at the end.

With that in mind, what can we learn from the prophecies of the Lord's life, especially those at the time of His birth, that can inform our own efforts to follow Him? And what can we learn from the prophecies at the end of His life that will encourage us as we continue to do so?

In the beginning we have what is called the annunciation to Mary, in the Gospel of Luke (ch. 1), where she is told by an angel that she would "conceive in her womb and bring forth a Son, and call His name Jesus." When Mary expressed doubts about this "the angel answered and said, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you.'" As we know from the doctrines a "Son" represents the truth that informs our understanding, in this case the Divine truth. The name, Jesus, refers to the healing power of that truth. And Mary pretty clearly represents the church, that is, all the people of the church in relation to the Lord. But what is the truth, and how can we know it? The answer is that the Holy Spirit will come upon us, and the power of the Highest will overshadow us.

Really? Us? It seems unlikely. We know ourselves, our failings and our limitations all too well. How can we be sure that what we have conceived in the womb of our minds is the truth and not some arrogant assumption? As evidence for Mary to consider, the angel tells her about her cousin, Elizabeth's miraculous conception, and she immediately goes to check it out.

Now if we step back a little to the prophecy of John's life as given to Zacharias in the temple we find that it is all about preparing the way for the Lord as he would teach the doctrine of repentance. This is also affirmed in the speech Zacharias makes at John's birth; it's all about the knowledge of salvation "by the remission (that is, forgiveness) of sins." And so we are reminded that our knowledge (and assurance) of the truth of revelation goes hand in hand with our ridding ourselves of evils in our daily lives. In brief, when we clean up our act we clear the way for a real perception of the truth. And like Mary visiting Elizabeth we can celebrate and look forward with confidence to the realization of this experience even before we are fully engaged in it. In fact, the prophecies encourage us to get on with it; after all, who doesn't want to know the truth? We may have a sordid or unfortunate past but all that can be forgiven if we just make the daily decisions to stop thinking and behaving badly.

All this is reinforced by what the angel said to the shepherds after the Lord was born. "You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger," he said, referring to the innocence of the Lord's presence as we find it in the simple truths of the literal sense of the Word. We

don't need a lot of deep understanding to know essentially what's right and wrong. Even subtle things like conflicts of interest can be pretty obvious if we're *willing* to see them. The question is, do we really want to know the truth, or are we trying to get away with something?

A lot of people today cite this as precisely the reason they don't need the church: they already know what's right and wrong. But the thing that's missing in this logic is that without ongoing instruction in the deeper truths of religion our spiritual growth is stunted and we remain stuck in a relatively worldly life. But that's not going to help us much in the long run. There's a real commitment involved in thinking spiritually, and it begins with the worship of the Lord as expressed by the shepherds, the wise men, Simeon and the old woman, Anna, who "gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all who looked for redemption in Jerusalem."

Turning now to what the Lord Himself said in the last days of His earthly life, among other things He warned the disciples repeatedly that they would suffer persecution for His sake. The references in all the Gospels are too many to cite! But He also counselled them repeatedly not to worry about it because despite everything, "He who endures to the end will be saved" (Matt. 24:13) and "Not a hair of your head shall be lost" (Luke 21:18). Indeed, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words," He said, "will by no means pass away" (Luke 21:33). Yes, "you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy" (John 16:20).

We're born natural and we have to *become* spiritual. There's no regeneration without a struggle. So even after we've entered into a life of commitment to the Lord we have to be prepared for set-backs – not that we should *excuse* ourselves or give ourselves *permission* to behave badly, but we shouldn't be surprised or overwhelmed when it happens. It's a slow process; it needs to be or we would lose our sense of ourselves. Remember, it wasn't just Judas, or Peter who betrayed the Lord. He plainly said, "*All of you* will be made to stumble because of Me... But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee" (Matt. 26:31-32). And so it was.

What does all this mean in relation to the holy supper, that second "gate of entrance" into spiritual life, and that second state called regeneration? What does it mean when we think about who is "worthy" to partake of the sacrament? Clearly it is NOT about being fully regenerated, it's about working the process; it's about *entering into* the blessings of regeneration, getting a taste of it, getting nourished and refreshed for the ongoing effort, and persevering until the Lord reveals Himself in glory, ultimately in the clouds of heaven, in the spirit and power of His Word.

"And these signs will follow those who believe: in My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover" (Mark 16:17-18). All these prophetic signs are perfectly correspondential and refer to our ability with the Lord's help to overcome the influence of evil spirits, to understand and speak the truth, to control our sensual appetites, to withstand the poison of falsity in our lives and to be really helpful to others in their struggles against the evils of this world. But we do need His help. "With men this is impossible," the Lord cautioned, "but not with God; for with God all things are possible" (Mark 10:27).

As the Lord said, "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life" (John 8:12). Let us walk in that light (John 12:35-36). Amen.