

## Approaching the Lord

by the Rt. Rev. Brian W. Keith

*Then He said, "Do not draw near this place. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground" (Exodus 3:5).*

It was in the wilderness that Moses received his commission from Jehovah to lead the Sons of Israel out of the land of Egypt and into the promised land. He was no more than a Hebrew who was wanted for murder in Egypt. To convince him to return would surely take a great deal of persuasion. And so it was that Jehovah appeared to him in a burning bush. Although Moses had been raised in the very sophisticated Egyptian court, the sight of a man standing in the middle of a burning bush, with neither he nor the bush being burnt, must have been awesome. Yet, Moses did not avoid it or run away; instead, he approached the bush to get a closer look. The natural curiosity that Moses felt is like the innate desire that we all have to view what is miraculous. For Moses, it was a drawing near unto a voice that called his name, a being with supernatural powers. For us, we have a yearning to also discover a supernatural being, our God.

Throughout virtually every culture, in every era of history, people have related to a Divine presence. This being, or beings, has been conceived of in many different ways, but there is a remarkable human need to have some type of God. It is either a basic need to postulate some super powerful creature, or force, to protect against irrational fears, or there is a Divine presence that inspires all to look above themselves. If there is no god, then there is no purpose in nature, there is no eternal worth of any individual, and there is no reason that human beings should be anything more than animals. Yet there is a God; a Divine Being who is a Creator. A Divine Being who has purpose, who has love and has wisdom. A Divine Being who would have all born for an eternally happy goal, heaven. A Divine Being who so created people that we can stand up and return with additional bounty that love which has been received. In recognizing our own limitations and weaknesses, and in realizing that there must be a Divine Being for this purposeful life to exist, we have a desire to approach our Creator, our God. Such was the desire of Moses, and such is our desire to draw near to the source of our life, the cause of our existence.

Yet there is the question of who or what we are meant to approach? The tremendous variety in concepts of God could lead one to feel that there is no one Supreme Being that can be approached. But this variety is the result of differences in people. If God created people, and is concerned about them, God will reveal Himself to us in a form that we can accept. For the ancient Jews, Jehovah was a very hard and vengeful God. He embodied all their concepts of a fearful ruler. They projected on Him all their own weaknesses. So Jehovah appeared to them as a warrior, or one who could be bargained with, usually remote and uncaring. Jehovah could not be seen, and could only be approached in the ritualized sacrifices and offerings. To the extent that this concept of God was impersonal, the people could feel that they could give Jehovah His due, and then ignore Him with the rest of their lives. Right and wrong were only so because of impersonal commands, that could often be avoided with sufficient cleverness.

It was to change this concept of God that Jesus Christ was born on earth. As He said, "I have come as a light into the world, that whoever believes in Me should not abide in darkness" (John 12:46). The limitations that the previous concept of the God Jehovah had, needed clarification. A

new light was shining in the world, a light that would illumine God as a human, the true Human. This was why He claimed to be “the Way, the Truth, and the Life” and said “No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6). The unknowable Jehovah could not be approached, but the humanity of Jesus could. This was why Jesus was born on earth, as a visible God whom people might see, understand, and eventually love. With the record of His actions and His teachings we can visualize Him and approach the ideals He presented. And He invites us to do this. “He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst...and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out” (John 6:35, 37). He thus indicated His openness to humankind, an openness that welcomes all to come to Him, to approach Him.

But even with the knowledge that we are to approach the Lord Jesus Christ, how can we do this? In what way can our hunger be fed, our thirst satisfied, and our presence with Him be gained? We might think that the first disciples had an easier time approaching God, because Jesus was there before them. Actually this made it more difficult for them, and many could only see Him as a man like themselves. We should not look to approach a material God, one with flesh and bones as we have. “God is Spirit; and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:24). And as is taught in the New Church, “A person cannot approach the Divine with the body, as a man approaches a man, but with the mind, thus with the thought and will...by these a person can approach the Divine” (*Arcana Coelestia* 6843). By approaching Him with our minds we are freed of material limitations. We can see Him wherever and whenever we wish. Also our idea of Him can change and grow. We can see the many many aspects of Him as are ready, as our minds develop in their understanding and love of Him. In addition, by viewing Him with our minds we are never compelled to accept Him, or be near to Him when we do not wish it. Thus is our freedom preserved so that when we do turn to Him, it will be with a willing acceptance of Him.

How then, can we use our minds to see Him? “The Lord is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth” (Psalm 145:18). We must begin with a knowledge of who the Lord is. If our concept of God is so distorted by erroneous ideas and misconceptions, then we will be unable to see Him, or what we see will be repugnant. If we imagine Him as but a silent force like the wind, then He cannot be real or personalized to us. Indeed, He becomes but one aspect of nature. If we imagine Him as a punishing God, who uses natural misfortunes to exact vengeance upon those who have sinned, then we must think of him as exceedingly cruel, allowing innocent parties to suffer miserably, and allowing those who have done evil to avoid any retribution. These thoughts about the Lord are not truths that reveal Him, but distortions that obscure thought of Him. They are like the shoes that Moses wore when he began to approach the burning bush. He was commanded to take them off so that he could come closer. So with us, our false ideas prevent us from coming closer to the Lord, and can even turn us away from Him. It was for this reason that the Psalmist said, “O send out Your light and Your truth! Let them lead me; let them bring me into Your holy hill and to Your tabernacles” (43:3). Our light that would truly reveal God to us so that we might approach Him is found in His Word. In His concern for us He has provided us with a way of seeing Him in our minds. In the Old Testament is recorded His operation in history, and in the deeper, spiritual, level the mental processes that took place within His mind while on earth. In the New Testament we have a record of His visible concern for mankind and moral teachings. And in the Heavenly Doctrines of the New Church are the reasonable explanations of what has gone before, and what may come to pass. By these teachings He has shown us Himself, and how we may draw near to Him.

But we should not think that merely knowing about Him enables us to be near to Him. We could memorize every last iota of revealed truth and still be no closer to Him, or to truly understanding Him, than before. The reason is that knowledge alone does not change what we are. There is really no difference between the genius and illiterate who commit adultery. Although there may

be differences in the modes and justifications, the actions have the same hellish effect. To approach the Lord we must become like Him. As the apostle John wrote, "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him" (I John 4:16). It is in love that two people are drawn closer to one another. We know many people; wishing to spend time with those who share similar feelings, and avoiding those with whom we do not. So with the Lord, because He is good, if we do not love what is good, we do not love Him and wish to be near Him. Where we make use of the truth that we find in His Word, then we acquire a love of what is good and thus draw nearer to Him. The person who is a petty thief is separate from God in each act of stealing. But when that person sees that taking the goods of others is wrong, and gradually acquires a love of being honest, he comes closer to the Lord, for the Lord is the source of honesty. It is as the Psalmist says, "Who may ascend into the hill of the Lord? Or who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not lifted up his soul to an idol, nor sworn deceitfully" (24:3-4).

What primarily prevents us from coming closer to our Lord is our own selfish natures. To the extent that we focus upon ourselves, there is no room for Him to be seen or loved. To the extent that we think that our needs are to come before all others, to that extent we do not seek the good in others, the Lord is not there. In order for us to approach the Lord, our first steps ought to be to remove false ideas and evil loves from our minds and hearts. In this way we can cleanse our hearts and purge our minds of what is hellish and a stumbling block to nearing the Lord, we can put the shoes off our feet.

At times this may seem like an impossible task. Because the work of removing evils is ever with us while in this natural world, it may seem that we never get any closer to the Lord, and perhaps are continually slipping back. But this is probably not the case. In the first place we are not alone in the work. By ourselves we could not defeat one single evil within us. The Lord comes closer to us in every effort we make to come closer to Him. The Heavenly Doctrines teach that, "it is a sure and immutable law, that so far as a person approaches the Lord so far does the Lord approach the person" (*True Christian Religion* 100, 89e, 126). Every effort we make to approach the Lord He equals in His approach to us. He does not stand afar off to see if we can make it to Him. He has not set up an obstacle course that we must cover before we get near to Him. Because He is love, He reaches out to us. Each effort we make is an invitation to Him that He warmly accepts. In one sense He is always present with us at our doors, knocking to be let in. All we need do is answer the knock and He does come in.

But we may not know that He is near, for when we are struggling to remove our selfish and worldly habits we are immersed in them and can see nothing else. It is like someone attempting to scare off underwater animals in a pond by wading through it. He probably meets with some success, although it is difficult for him to tell, since his movements have so stirred up the muddy bottom that he can no longer see clearly. When we deal with our own faults and less than desirable traits our struggles dirty up the water, so that we cannot always see if we are successful or not. But we are given assurances by the Lord, that when we try to put off those shoes, *He* will succeed. Did He not say, "Come unto Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30) Indeed, if we will but put the shoes from off our feet, then we can draw near to our Lord. We can

be led by His truth, and affectionately respond to His life giving love. We can draw near to the Lord, for our every effort enables Him to draw closer to us.

*Amen.*

Lessons: Exodus 3:1-14; *Divine Providence* 33