

The Gentle Leading of the Lord

by the Rev. Patrick A. Rose

"A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench; . . ." (Isa. 42:3)

Long before the Lord was born on earth, His coming had already been predicted many times by the prophets of the Old Testament. For the people who lived in those days, these prophecies helped prepare them for the Lord's coming. For us today these same prophecies serve another use. They serve to deepen our understanding of the Lord. Within the pages of the Old Testament prophets—in Isaiah, in Jeremiah, and so on—we can come to know and understand the Lord. We can see what the Lord's purpose was in coming to this earth. We can gain a deeper insight into the way the Lord accomplished His purpose—how it was that He drew near to the hearts and minds of sinful men and women, and led them to Himself. And in seeing and in understanding this, we learn something about ourselves as well, for we also need saving. We also are weak and sinful. The Lord comes to us as well. He comes to save us from evil.

The reason the Lord can save us from evil is that He is powerful. He is omnipotent. No person by himself is able to resist the influence—the attacks—of the evil spirits of hell. This is why we turn to the Lord, and pray to Him for His help in resisting what is evil. And in doing this, in turning to the Lord, we turn to someone who has power over the hells. We turn to the Lord, who, when He was on earth, did battle against all of the hells, and conquered them. The mighty power of the Lord at His coming is spoken of many times in the prophets. It was a power that would bring terror and terrible destruction upon the wicked. As it is said by the prophet Joel: "For the day of the LORD is great and very terrible; who can endure it?" (Joel 2:11). So does the power of the Lord appear to those who love what is evil. But to those who desire salvation from evil, this mighty power does not bring dread, but happiness. As is said in the prophet Zephaniah, "The LORD your God in your midst, the Mighty One, will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing"(Isa. 42:3). Though the power of the Lord is infinite, and though this power conquered and subdued the hells by force, it is, in its very essence, a gentle power. When the Lord draws close to us, when He comes to us to save us from evil, He does so with the greatest tenderness and gentleness, and with the greatest patience.

This gentleness of the Lord is the subject of our text from the prophet Isaiah. It is said in Isaiah that "a bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench" (Isa. 42:3). By these words, we are taught in the Writings, is described the way in which the Lord, when He was on earth, would "gently lead and teach" (*PP*, s.v. Isa. 42:1-4). A reed stands, we are told, for Divine truth in ultimates (*Apocalypse Explained* 627:7), truth as it is understood by those who are not yet spiritual, truth that is understood only in a feeble way and so has very little strength—no more strength than a reed (cf. *Apocalypse Revealed* 485). Smoking flax is truth that is only beginning to be applied to life—truth that a person is only beginning to love. He has very little enthusiasm for the truth—the flax which stands for truth may be smoking, but it hasn't yet caught fire (cf. *AE* 951:6, *AR* 674, *AE* 627:7).

Even though a man's understanding of the truth might be feeble, and even though his love for living that truth may be almost non-existent—still, the Lord teaches and leads him. And the Lord teaches and leads him very gently, lest his understanding of the truth be broken, and lest the beginning of a love for this truth be extinguished.

The gentleness of the Lord is evident in many places throughout the New Testament. While the Lord was on earth He indeed did battle with all the hells. At the same time as He lived on earth, He executed a judgment in the spiritual world. With infinite power He cast down to hell countless numbers of evil spirits. But here on earth, in His dealings with men, women and children, He acted mostly with the greatest patience and gentleness. He indeed cast out the money-changers from the Temple, and did so with great zeal. Also, when the time came, He confronted the scribes and Pharisees, and condemned their behavior in the strongest terms. The Lord did not hesitate to act forcefully where force was required. But, mostly, He was gentle. He picked up little children. He healed the sick and the disabled. And when evil men plotted against Him, He would generally seek to avoid confrontation.

In our second lesson this morning we read of how the Pharisees met to discuss ways of destroying Him. The Lord was aware of this. But instead of taking action against the Pharisees, He simply moved on elsewhere. And He did this, it is said in Matthew, so that the words of Isaiah might be fulfilled: "He will not quarrel nor cry out, nor will anyone hear His voice in the streets. A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench, till He sends forth justice to victory" (Matt. 12:19-20). The Lord, when threatened, would generally move on, so that He could not be found. In this way He would avoid confrontation, and simply go about His business of healing and teaching. He did not seek to force Himself on people. He did not desire to break them. Rather, He sought to lead them quietly and gently to Himself.

In the Writings this principle of Divine government is spoken of many, many times. In general, it is said of the Lord that He does not break, but bends. For example, it is said that the Lord "bends all evil into good" (*Arcana Coelestia* 1079e). It is said that "the Lord breaks no one, but bends him . . ." (*AC* 2053). The Lord seeks, in all that He does, to bend us to Himself. Where we are in evil, He will try to bend us away from evil towards what is good. When we are in falsity, He will bend us away from this falsity, gradually leading us closer to the truth. And the Lord works in this way because of two universal principles according to which He always acts. First of all, the Lord desires, more than anything else, to lead us to Himself. No matter how mistaken we are, and no matter how evil we might be, the Lord still loves us. He wants to lead us away from our falsity and evil towards Himself. Second, the Lord, in all that He does, constantly preserves our freedom. He never forces us to turn to Him, for if He did so, we would be conjoined to Him not by love, but by compulsion.

So it is that the Lord is constantly endeavoring to encourage people who love what is evil to turn instead to what is good. And He prepares people who believe in what is false so that later on they might learn what is true. And the only way in which this can be done, if people are to remain in freedom, is by a gradual process, that process which the Writings refer to as "bending." We ourselves are far less patient than the Lord. We look around ourselves in the world and we see evil, injustice, unfairness, suffering. And sometimes we may find ourselves questioning why it is that the Lord does not intervene. Why does the Lord so often permit what is evil? As to falsity, we may wonder why there is in the world so much ignorance about spiritual truth. Why is it that so many people are attracted by beliefs that are based upon what is false? Why is the truth so often scorned and rejected? Why, we may wonder, doesn't the Lord do more?

The Lord works constantly, though, in myriads of unseen ways. He doesn't break the evil hearts of men. He allows them to love what is evil. He will often even allow their attempts at evil to succeed, in the short term. But always He is bending them away from what is evil towards what is good. Whenever evil raises its head, the Lord softens its effects through what is good, trying to lead people towards Himself.

When it comes to what people believe, the Lord is in some ways even more gentle. Gradually He prepares people to receive the truth. But in the meantime, He allows them to retain what they were taught in childhood, and uses whatever is true within their beliefs to lead them closer to heaven. In by far the greatest number of cases, people are only instructed in truths after they leave this world, as they prepare to enter heaven. So gentle is the Lord in this regard that even Divine Revelation itself is composed in such a way as to leave men the freedom to remain in ignorance. Frequently—very frequently indeed—the letter of both the Old and New Testaments is written "according to appearances and according to the fallacies of the senses" (AC 1874). We ourselves might regret that the Old and New Testaments sometimes seem to support ideas we know from the Writings to be false. Perhaps if the Word appeared less misleading, more people would then be forced to accept the truth. But the Lord is not interested in forcing anybody. We read in the Arcana that things in the Word which are appearances have been said "in order that persuasions and cupidities might not be broken, but that they might be bent" (AC 1874).

We have trouble understanding how it is that the Lord can be so patient, because we think in terms of time in this world. The Lord, though, constantly looks towards what is eternal. In the short term He will allow men to remain in their false beliefs, and in the short term He will often allow them to do what is evil, if these things can, in the end, be bent towards what is good. The Lord is interested, not in temporary improvements, not in temporary successes, but, rather, in the eternal salvation of the human soul.

There is comfort in this. We need to remember that the Lord is patient and gentle, not only in the way He leads others, but also in the way in which He leads us. A person needs to remember that, in a very real way, the Lord is more patient with him than he is with himself.

We must, of course, be careful not to misunderstand this. There are many people who make no real effort to live their religion, and argue that it doesn't matter, because the Lord will still love them, no matter how they live their lives. Such an attitude leads to hell. But, given that somebody is trying to live his religion, given that he is trying to put into life what the Lord teaches, then it is useful for him to remember that the Lord is indeed patient. We need to remember that we are ourselves in many ways like bruised reeds and smoking flax. Our faith in the Lord is often weak, weak as a reed. And our love for the truths of the Word is often half-hearted—a state represented by smoking flax. So it is that the Lord can lead us to heaven only gradually. And the Lord does this by bending us.

When we physically bend something, we apply force very gently, so as to change its shape. Then, after we release it, it will spring back towards its former shape, but not all the way. Hopefully, it will hold a position somewhere between its original shape, and the shape to which we bent it.

In a way, this is what the Lord does to our spirits. We start in a certain state. The Lord then gently applies pressure to us, so that we might experience another, better, state. He then removes this pressure, so that we might make a choice. Hopefully we will choose to revert, not to our former state, but to something in between.

Now the primary way in which the Lord bends us is by allowing us to undergo temptations. To begin with we may be quite selfish, quite proud. We may think very little about the Lord and a great deal about ourselves. In temptation, though, we are given the experience of feeling helpless. In temptation we realize that we are not as strong as we think we are. We begin to feel disgusted with all the evil things we have done. We turn to the Lord for help. We have begun to think about ourselves and about the Lord in a different way (cf. AC 2272).

Then the temptation comes to an end. Once a temptation is over, people have a tendency to revert to their former state. They return to a state of pride. They return to evil habits. But now there is, or can be, a difference. Through the experience of temptation they have been given to sense a repugnance for these evils. They have experienced their own helplessness, and their need for the Lord's help. And so, even though temptation does not transform them, it can at least encourage them to lapse into a state somewhat better than before (cf. AC 2272). Of course, if a person so chooses, he can decide to remain in his previous state of evil, in which case, the temptation has failed (cf. AC 2273).

But when there is improvement by means of temptation, there can then follow other temptations, until gradually, through repeated bending, the man is led out of evil and into what is good.

The Lord thus leads us very gradually, very gently. When we are in states of temptation, these states might not seem very gentle at all. But this is because evil spirits are then near, and evil spirits are never gentle. But still the Lord gently watches over us. He makes sure that despite the harshness of temptation, our freedom is never broken. And in time He leads us out of the temptation. Later, He will allow us to experience temptation again.

The Lord is very patient. Our tendency often is to be less patient with ourselves. We tend to expect instantaneous improvement. As a state of temptation draws to a close, we vow, with all our hearts, that we will never do evil again. And when we lapse into evil again, we can feel very discouraged, and completely disgusted with ourselves.

We need to keep a sense of perspective. We need to remember that the Lord is indeed very patient, and He leads us to heaven only very gradually. We must of course follow the Lord. We must regularly make a real effort to improve the way we live. But, provided we are making this effort, we need to be patient. We need to have faith in the Lord—have faith that He is indeed leading us closer to Himself.

There will be ups and downs—this is part of that very process by which the Lord leads us. But, despite these ups and downs, despite the fact that evil habits have a tendency to recur time and time again, still, if we are faithful to the Lord, if we continue to work on improving our lives, then, the Lord can gradually bend us.

Gently, ever so gently, the Lord will lead us to Himself. When the Lord was on earth He showed the greatest love, the greatest compassion, the greatest gentleness, as He led men and women towards Himself. This is the way He leads us as well. The Lord is kind. He is gentle. And the Lord is patient with us, for He is our Father. He loves us, and He wants to lead us to Himself.

Amen.

Lessons: Isaiah 42:1-7; Matthew. 12:14-21; *Arcana Coelestia* 2273:

©2004 by Patrick A. Rose