

A Paracetamol God?



People sometimes try to use God like they use paracetamol. "When the pain increases take one dose twice a day. If there is no effect then increase the dose and consider going to the support group on Sundays." It is little wonder people behave like this because, at times, the Bible makes it appear that our relationship with Him is like taking paracetamol or like going to the dentist only when the pain gets really bad. It reminds me of what some parents say about their children when they first leave home, "We only hear from them when they are in trouble or need a loan!"

Ideally our relationship with the Lord matures from this rather childlike self-centred one which is motivated by our troubles to one based on a truer understanding of Him. The New Church teaches that the Lord is intimately present with everyone. His life enters each soul and creates a unique person. His loving and wise presence wants us to fulfill our potential as a loving and wise human being and find lasting happiness. His inner presence constantly provides for the spiritual needs of everyone in every event of their life. No-one is outside His care. He is not only present when things are going well for us but is also there in the most terrifying circumstances. So even if we plunge into deepest despair and depression, bitter hatred, overwhelming jealousy or depraved sexual lust, He is present preserving within us the possibility for us to change in the future.

Psalm 139 describes this relationship very movingly.

"Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, 'Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me' even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you."

This description of the Lord's relationship embraces us every moment of every event of every day. We are all invited to acknowledge that relationship and respond to it by reading His Word, sharing with Him our hopes and fears, things we are ashamed of and thanking Him for everything we receive. He is no angry God waiting to punish us but one who wants us to be happy. Opening ourselves to such an ongoing relationship alters our inner world. We become more a balanced, calm and contented person.

Most of us begin with a paracetamol God. He accepts that but He will always seek ways to enable us to draw closer to Him and form a lifelong and loving relationship. May your relationship with the Lord grow and be a source of encouragement and joy.

Rev John Sutton

Inside this issue:

Our mission is to express, share and experience with others in life an inclusive, non-judgmental vision of God's kingdom





Seaburn Dene

Harvest Festival

Traditionally a very bright and happy service, this morning was no exception, as young and old gathered for our traditional celebration. At the front of the church there were baskets of fruit, bread, vegetables and flowers - all showing the tremendous increase which harvest brings each year. Our Seekers had completed some harvest letters which adorned the altar rail, each letter carrying pictures of harvest offerings. We produced our own `crop' from the letters on display - how many words can you make up from the letters of HARVEST? Three or four groups worked on this for about five minutes, and then we listed them on the flip chart - we had more than thirty words already, and I'm sure there were more to come, had there been time. But the really striking thing was that so many of the words produced had a link with harvest, showing us in a very dramatic and spontaneous way how plentiful the Lord's creation is! One word, SHARE, shows us the way forward now!

From the Seaburn Dene Newsletter

Paisley

Open Day

Our annual Doors Open Day proved to be a successful and happy occasion. We were fortunate in having a total of eleven volunteers to act as stewards, enabling us to maintain at least five people on duty at any one time. We had a steady flow of visitors during the day, eventually totalling sixty adults and thirty-seven children. An added bonus was the presence of Pie Gen {Brian} a Chinese student at Paisley University, who sat and played the piano in the West Hall for about three hours, providing excellent entertainment for visitors and stewards alike. During the day we had lots of good conversations with our visitors, many of whom expressed their delight at having the opportunity to see our lovely church. Our thanks go to everyone who gave up a Saturday to help us run the event, to those who prepared display material and the children's quiz, and also to those who brought home baking for the tearoom.

From the Paisley Newsletter

Kensington

Worship - Giving God the Glory

On Saturday 10th September, six of us met at Kensington with Rev. Gillian Gordon to participate in a 'short confidence-building course' for Worship leaders. I have yet to lead a full service, so I felt any help I could get would be great. We used a module from the New Church College written by Rev John Presland that focussed on what worship actually was, and communal worship in a variety of situations; the idea being to work with a theme and produce an outline service which we could develop and use ourselves.

We started off with coffee (of course!) and Gill explained what we were to do. I must admit to feeling rather alarmed at the prospect ahead; there seemed an awful lot to think about and accomplish in a very short time. However, Gill was very confident that we could do it - so I took heart from that, and in no time we were involved in the first part of the module which was to discuss how to provide for the different needs and wants of people within a church service. We were encouraged to focus on what was needed in worship and came up with a lot of similarities, but also some interesting differences.

In the afternoon we split into groups of three and started the practical work on the service. We could work on one service between us or choose to work singly. It was good being able to bounce ideas around and benefit from sharing with each other and we had good advice if needed from Gill. At the end we had a feedback session which proved very useful. It was a very enjoyable day and it was nice to be with others who were also committed to learning more about worship leading as a service we can offer to the church.

Linda Wells - from the Kensington Newsletter

Brightlingsea

Brightlingsea Liberty Service

In the February 2005 issue of Lifeline it was reported that the Chief Executive of Conference, Michael Hindley, had been appointed as Deputy of the Cinque Port Liberty of Brightlingsea for 2004/05. As explained then, Brightlingsea is one of the 'limbs' of the Cinque Port of Sandwich and used to provide men and ships to fulfil the requirements of Sandwich.

On Sunday 9th October a special Cinque Port Liberty Service, arranged by Michael Hindley, was held in the Brightlingsea New Church at 3.00 p.m. It was attended by the officers of the Liberty, local civic leaders including members of the Town Council, members of the New Church and other Brightlingsea residents. In all there were about 100 people in the congregation. It was a great privilege for the New Church to be the venue.

The Rev Christopher Hasler had travelled from Southend to conduct the service. He was already in the chancel to receive the banner of the Cinque Port Liberty during the singing of the processional hymn "Praise, my soul, the King of Heaven". The procession was led by the Chairman of Tendring District Council and her husband and included the Mayor and Mayoress of Wivenhoe and, of course, the Deputy and his four Assistants.

Michael explained about the background history of the Liberty, which goes back to the sixteenth century, and welcomed everyone to the church. Christopher Hasler spoke about the benefits of tradition and stable civic values. In a vivid example, he told how in his native country, now known as the Czech Republic, the currency had several times been completely changed, reflecting the successive domination of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the German Reich, a brief few years of independence and then the descent of the Iron Curtain. When Christopher reached Britain in his teens after World War II, he was astonished to find coins dating back to Queen Victoria still in circulation. And it was wonderful, he said, to find that policemen were polite when you spoke to them. This was a salutary reminder to many of us about good things which we just take for granted.

Councillor Mary Bragg, the District Council Chairman, responded warmly to the words of Michael and Christopher.

In his address Christopher spoke about Matthew 7, verses 13-14: "*Enter by the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many*". He looked at this text in the light of Jesus' remarks earlier in the chapter: "*Judge not, that you be not judged*" (verse 1). He

suggested that we should not see the statement in verse 13 as a condemnation of others inclined to do wrong. He encouraged us, rather, to note within ourselves many worldly concerns and inclinations to selfish and baser things, which could too easily swamp more spiritual aspects of our life. He urged us not to let the narrow, better side of our nature be restricted and overwhelmed by the broad world.

There were rousing hymns chosen by Michael: "And did those feet in ancient time", the National Anthem (two verses of it) and "Now thank we all our God". Michael also chose what he said was his favourite hymn: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God". Under Michael's careful instruction, after each verse the men repeated it while the ladies sang the chorus.

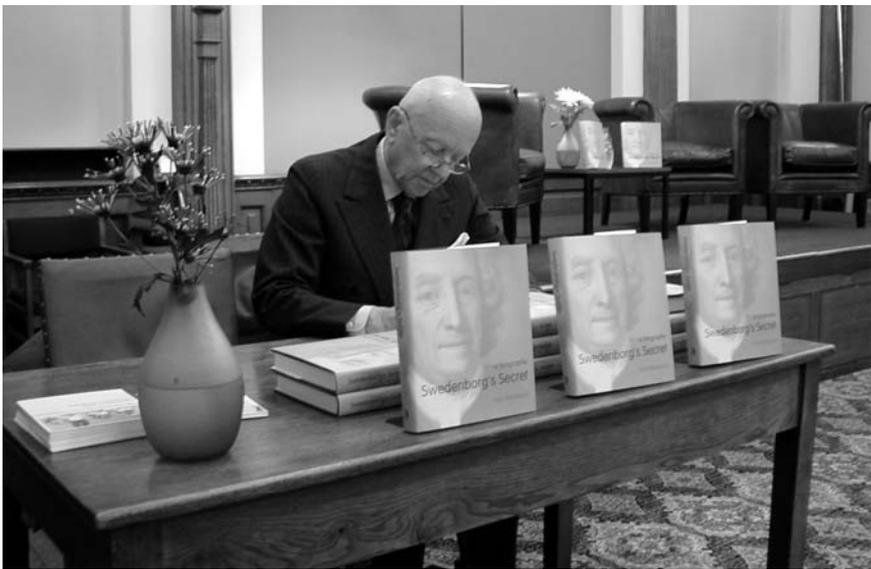
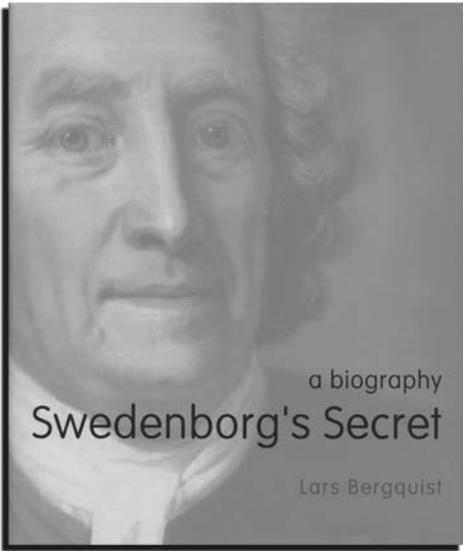
The organist for the service was Andrew Fisher. Together with his wife he had come from his home in London to stay with his parents, Graham and Frances Fisher, in Colchester especially to accompany the service. Regrettably in Brightlingsea we now usually have to rely on CDs each Sunday and so it was a joy to listen to the sounds which such a sensitive and accomplished musician as Andrew can draw from our organ.

After the service most of the congregation moved to the church hall for tea and biscuits and a good chat, even standing out on the lawn in the warm autumnal sunshine.

Many people went away with a closer acquaintance with the history of the Cinque Port Liberty of Brightlingsea, with a fresh appreciation of civic values and with a stimulation of the spiritual forces for good in their life. A special thank you to Michael, Christopher and Andrew.

Gordon Kuphal





This is a brand-new publication - a translation into English of the 1999 book by the Swedish author and now-retired diplomat Lars Bergquist.

The readership of Lifeline could probably infer what is implied by the book's title, though Swedenborg's Secret's title page provides this brief explanatory vignette: *'The Meaning and significance of the Word of God, the Life of the Angels, and Service to God'*.

Besides the spiritual angles in the book, Swedenborg's complexity and humanity are explored, set in those truly exciting decades of 18th century western Europe. Emanuel Swedenborg rubbed shoulders with and corresponded with a wealth of famous individuals, including royalty and nobility and such as the Astronomers-Royal, Edmund Halley and John Flamsteed. We learn such novel snippets as Swedenborg's efforts to discover a method of determining longitude, for which the British Government had promised prizes of tens of thousands of pounds. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately (for us), the goal and hence the prizes eluded him.

The initial part of the biography covers the early life of Swedenborg. We learn of the strong moral, religious and social influences in which he was first nurtured. These were largely provided in his early years by his learned and caring father, Bishop Jesper Swedberg. From him Emanuel Swedenborg acquired a useful knowledge of Latin and some acquaintance with Hebrew. At age eleven he attended Uppsala University where he studied a wide range of subjects, presenting a 62-page thesis there in 1709 - *Selected Sentences*.

The first third of the biography follows the subject's life up to the death of his father in 1735. Thereafter the book explores themes, illustrated by the chapter headings: to list but a few:

- The Spiritual Diary;
- Digression on a garden
(Swedenborg's garden which he designed);
- Piety, Wisdom and Providence;

- The clairvoyant Assessor;
- Swedenborg in daily life;
- Piety, Wisdom and Providence;
- The true Christian religion.

Subject headings are scattered throughout the chapters - signposts that greatly assist any reader.

This is no coffee-table book, notwithstanding that it is very readable, and enriched with over 50 illustrations, including 10 colour plates. It is 500 pages long with 35 chapters. Bergquist claims that Swedenborg's Secret is a biography, not an academic work, though the book certainly disports many of the trappings of a piece of scholarship. There are 20 pages of endnotes, a 12-page chronology of Swedenborg's life, 12 pages that list the contents of Swedenborg's library, a 20-page bibliography of some 300 items, some 60 of which are from Swedenborg's own pen (and subsequent translations). There is a comprehensive index.

Derived from his original work in Swedish, this English edition was prepared by Lars Bergquist, with contributory input initially by Rev Kurt Nemitz and latterly by Rev Norman Ryder. The book's design and typesetting was the work of Stephen McNeilly of Swedenborg House. The typeface is perhaps slightly smaller than I would have liked, though the spacing between the lines is generous, as are the margins, so that the text is easy on the eye once one has read a page or two.

At £16.99 it is excellent value for money, barely acknowledging the obvious cost of production. Moreover its authorship, its translation, its design and its production have clearly been Herculean labours of love.

Peter Cunningham

Swedenborg's Secret - a New Biography of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772).
Hardback, 516 pages, ISBN 0-85448-143-5





After completing the last article, at the end of which I promised to look next at Psalm 51, I received from the editor a reader's request that I should "offer some points of guidance to help people using the Psalms for their personal devotions." The reader also commented that there is "so little about the spiritual sense of the Psalms in the Writings, and some of their statements in the literal sense can be very difficult to use." Let me respond briefly to this request before I look at Psalm 51, sometimes called the *Miserere*, which is the first word in the Latin version of this song.

One way in which people may find help when they encounter difficult-to-understand statements in the Psalms, or in any other part of the Sacred Scriptures, is to consult other English versions of the Bible. No translation from one language to another is perfect; for each one is a compromise between being literal, that is, preserving the images and ways in which the original language expresses things, and being idiomatic, that is, employing phraseology belonging to the 'target' language. Take the French saying *rire comme un bossu*. Literally this means *to laugh like a hunchback*, for which the obvious idiomatic equivalent is *to laugh like mad*. But supposing a French-speaking person, in writing an article about hunchbacks, uses that particular saying? An English translator can hardly do other than render it literally.

All translators - including those who bring the Sacred Scriptures over into English - are constantly having to choose between a literal wording on one hand and an idiomatic rendering on the other. One translator aims to be as literal as possible, another goes right over to the opposite side and tries to be thoroughly idiomatic, while others steer a course somewhere between those two extremes. But all are striving to convey the same message, even though they do so in varying ways. They do not rival but complement one another. A multiplicity of translations therefore is good for us, for what we may find obscure in one version can be made clear by the different English wording in another. So if for example you have difficulty with something in the Authorised Version or King James Bible, why not turn to one of the following: New International Version, Jerusalem Bible, Revised English Bible, Good News Bible, English Standard Version. For different translations, I repeat, do not rival but complement one another.

As regards there being 'so little' in the Writings or Teachings of the New Church about the internal sense of the Psalms, is this really so? For one thing, we have a brief presentation, in **Prophets and Psalms**, of the deepest level of meaning of every song or poem constituting the Psalter. And for another thing, many references to particular verses, phrases, or words of psalms are scattered throughout the Writings. (As I mentioned in my last article, attempts to bring together these scattered references were made by John Clowes and others in the early nineteenth century, and later on by O Prescott Hiller.)

Having said all this, I wonder how vital it is for people reading the Psalms in their 'personal devotions' to understand every statement. Have all those Christians chanting and singing them during the last two thousand years needed to appreciate every detail? Every month the entire Psalter continues to be sung with great reverence by English cathedral choirs; but is that reverence in any way diminished because the singers do not understand every single word? Surely not. What is vital is their humble recognition that the songs which are being sung are sacred. They are sacred because they served our Lord Himself while He was carrying out His great work of the redemption of the whole human race, in this world and in the next; and they are sacred also because they serve to tell us about where He is in the lives of those in every age who are seeking to do His will. Indeed the Psalms are holy and special because they served the Lord in His temptations, and they serve to assure us of His presence with us in ours. It is this sense of the utter holiness of the Psalms that matters when they are sung or read in public worship or private devotions. Our concern about the meaning of obscure statements belongs to another time and place, when the intellect rather than the heart is allowed to play the major role.

Let me now move on to consider Psalm 51 or the *Miserere*, which is associated in particular with Ash Wednesday. As in previous articles, I'm drawing on the English Standard Version.

The *Miserere* is often called 'a penitential psalm', that is, the whole song or poem is about confessing or owning up to sin and receiving God's forgiveness. That this is its theme is indicated to us in its superscription or

title: *A Psalm of David, when Nathan the Prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.* (By turning to another translation, those puzzled by the Hebraic expression 'had gone in to' will see that 'had committed adultery with' is an idiomatic equivalent.) Not that the essential theme of the song, even in the literal sense, is about the man David and his despicable behaviour which he afterwards repented of. Rather it is a meditation on where we are with God when we repent of our own words and deeds which have been as sinful as David's were. Even so, to have a proper feeling for the sentiments expressed in the *Miserere*, let us go very briefly over the account of David's sin, remorse, and restoration to a right relationship with the Lord.

According to 2 Samuel 11, King David lusted after Bathsheba, a married woman. He then committed adultery with her, after which he saw to the death of her husband Uriah, by ordering that he, a soldier, should be sent on a military mission in which he was sure to be killed. The next chapter, 2 Samuel 12, describes how David is brought by Nathan the Prophet to acknowledge and repent of his great wickedness. Nathan says to him,

Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife ...

David was being told that his lusting after and committing adultery with another man's wife, and his sending of that man to certain death, were not only immoral and criminal acts; they were also evil-doings in the eyes of his God. To do things with or to another person which he knew to be thoroughly wicked was to sin against God. Thus, when Nathan completed what he had to say, the penitent David declared, *I have sinned against the LORD.* And Psalm 51 contains a similar acknowledgement of sinfulness against Him,

*For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight.*

The emphatic words 'you only' seem to be confining sin to the One-to-one relationship that exists between the penitent and his God. But the real thought must be that my abominable treatment of another person, when akin to David's shocking behaviour, is not only an offence against society in general and that person in particular; it is also absolutely contrary to the mind of Him who has commanded me to love my neighbour as myself. This admission of guilt is clearly a cry from the heart rather than the intellect, for Psalm 51 begins with the conscience-stricken appeal,

*Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.*

The realisation that the words of this song or poem express deep feelings rather than rational thoughts will enable us to cope with a verse that is sure to startle anyone reading it for the first time,

*Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
and in sin did my mother conceive me.*

What does this really mean? Well, let's turn to another English translation, to the New International Version. There this verse is rendered,

*Surely I was sinful at birth,
sinful from the time my mother conceived me.*

This rendering rightly focuses on 'me and my sinfulness' rather than on that of my parents at the time of my birth, indeed of my conception before that. But even this different focus is puzzling to us if it is taken to be a rational statement about where our sinfulness begins. Surely no new-born babe, still less a newly-fertilised ovum, can be said to be sinful. But in the literal sense the psalmist is being poetical; he is not speaking rationally but emotionally. He is expressing feelings of disgust with past behaviour. He was not literally a sinner at the moment of conception or at the time of his birth; but when he considered the enormity of his own wickedness, and in order to acknowledge his guilt, he was moved to employ the idea that he had always been a thoroughly bad lot, right from the start of his existence.

At this point one may ask what these words meant to our Lord, that is, to Him whom we have to understand in the spiritual sense when David is the speaker in the literal. After all, it may be said, He led a sinless life and therefore had nothing to repent of or feel guilty about. True, but He was in all ways tempted as we are, and those temptations were possible only because He inherited through Mary all those inclinations to act selfishly and wickedly that likewise come down to us from our ancestors and are passed on by us to our descendants. He abhorred all those inherited weaknesses that sully human beings and He prayed that He might make pure, as the brief explanation in **Prophets and Psalms** makes plain to us.

But the essential theme of the psalm is not just about sin and guilt, and about what it is in people that leads them to act sinfully. It is also about praying for the restoration of that right and joyful relationship with God which sin has destroyed. The prayer of one who is truly penitent must ever be,

*Purge me ... wash me ...
Let me hear joy and gladness ...
Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me ...
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and uphold me with a willing spirit.*

The truly penitent recognise that the right and joyful relationship will be restored when they have been made pure in heart and steadfast in spirit. So they pray for these inner God-given qualities, for without them no words or deeds, not even acts of worship, can bring them back to God when they have gone down the road to sin and in so doing have cut themselves off from Him. As the *Miserere* poetically expresses it,

*For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;
you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

God does not despise the sacrifices or acts of worship of those in whom pride, envy, and every other deadly sin have been crushed, and who are truly sorry and repent of all their sins. Indeed, as the final verses of the *Miserere* declare, He takes delight in the worship offered by forgiven sinners, for forgiven sinners have become citizens of the heavenly Zion and Jerusalem,

*Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;
build up the walls of Jerusalem;
then you will delight in right sacrifices, ...*

Let me finally offer you a translation of the explanation of Psalm 51 in **Prophets and Psalms**.

Verses 1-5	The Lord prays to be made pure, free from the moral and spiritual weaknesses which He had inherited from His mother.
Verses 6-10	If He is made pure and free from these, He will be pure,
Verses 11,12	and holy;
Verses 13-15	and being such He will teach the truths that are God's.
Verses 16,17	Not outward worship but inward.
Verses 18,19	He will set up a Church in which there will be worship based on what is good.

In the December issue of Lifeline I will look at three Psalms for Advent.

To be continued

Margaret Cunningham, wife of Geoffrey Cunningham, passed into the spiritual world on 16 September. She was the elder daughter of Henry and Elsie Peckham (née Penn) of the Camberwell Society. Margaret had been in failing health for some time; passing away quietly during a short admission to hospital. Since 1987, Margaret and Geoffrey (they were married in 1954) had lived in the Brightlingsea area. They have two daughters, Heather and Rosemary.

Between 1954 and 1987 they lived in the Southend area and were pillars of the Southend Church. Margaret was involved with the New Church Fire Fellowship and used to care for the children at the latter part of Family Worship Services.

Margaret was a gentle unassuming person, with an affinity for music (as a listener) and with a deep love of the sea and the countryside. Her particularly abiding interests were gardens and gardening. Many of the plants in the Southend Church garden were introduced there by her. Another of her interests was the leprosy charity LEPRA.

There is to be a celebration of her life on 6 November, during the Southend Sunday service.

Peter Cunningham

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