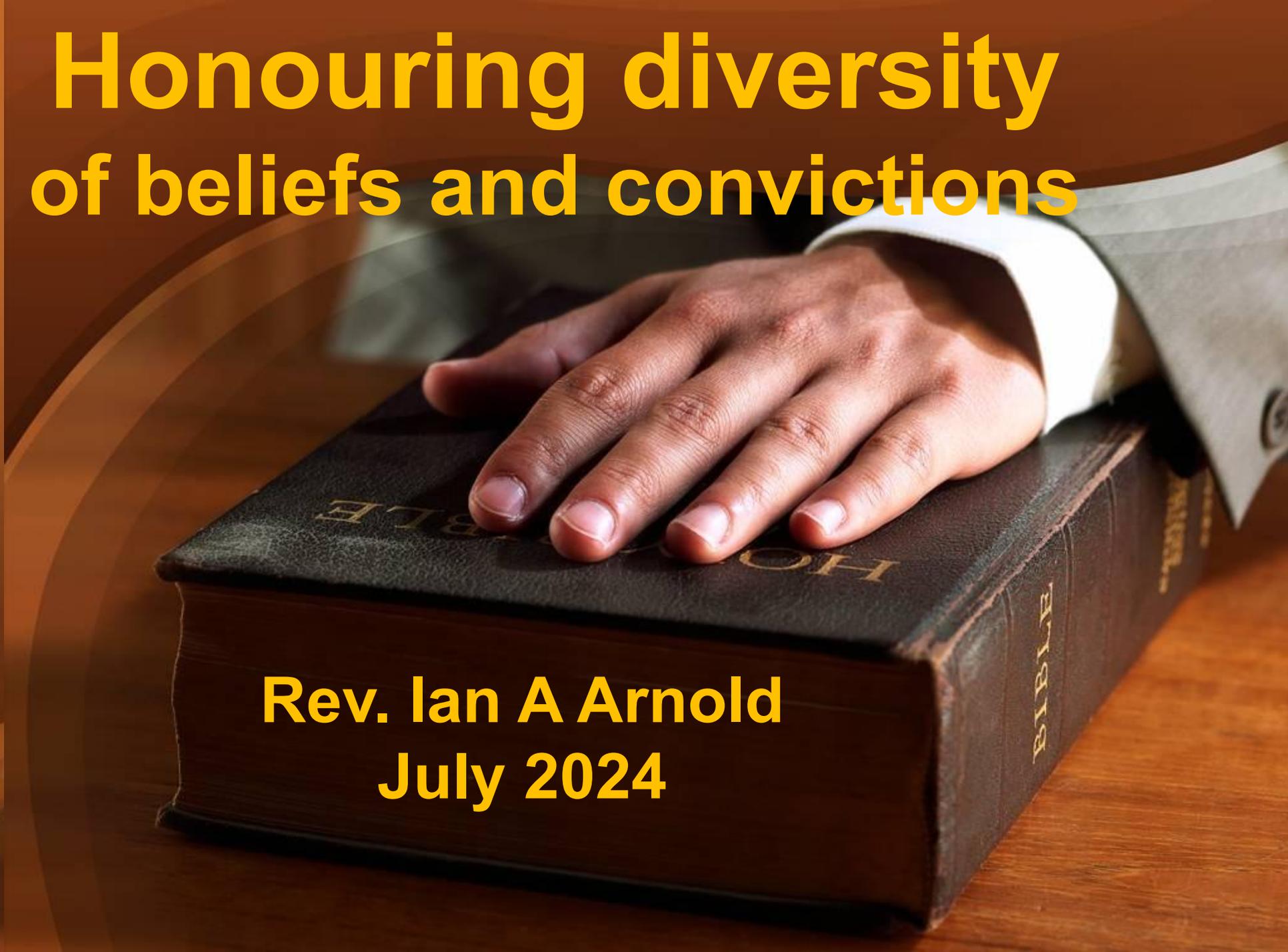


Honouring diversity of beliefs and convictions

A close-up photograph of a person's hand resting on a dark brown leather Bible. The hand is positioned on the top cover of the Bible, with fingers slightly spread. The Bible is lying on a wooden surface. The background is a warm, brownish-orange color with a subtle circular pattern. The text 'HONOURING DIVERSITY OF BELIEFS AND CONVICTIONS' is overlaid in large, bold, yellow letters at the top of the image.

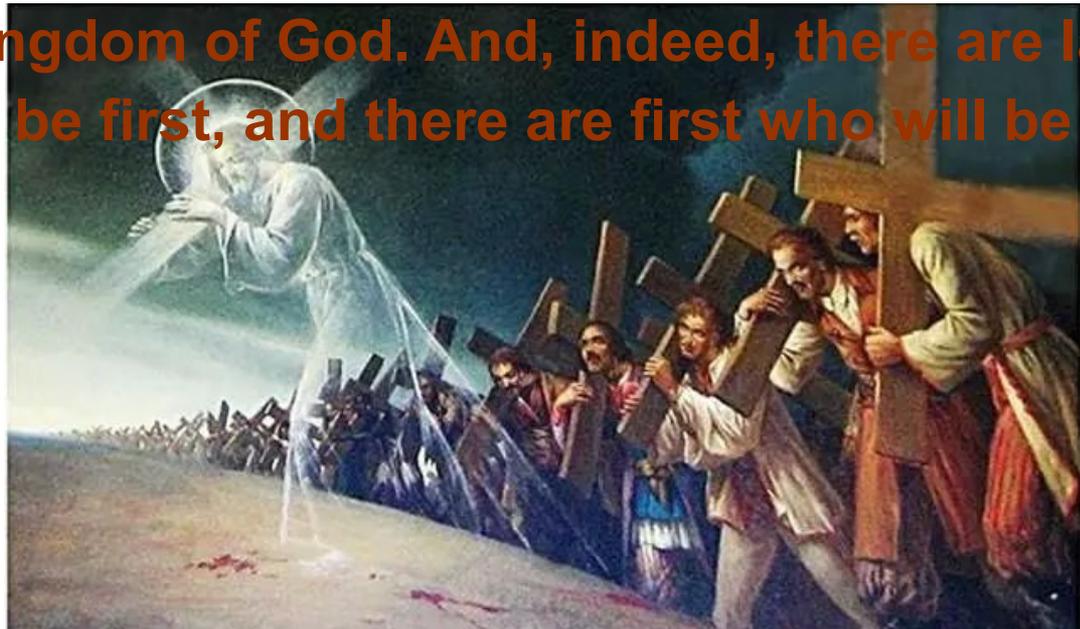
Rev. Ian A Arnold
July 2024

Matthew 8:10-12

“When Jesus heard it, He marvelled, and said to those who followed, ‘Assuredly I say to you, I have not found so great faith, not even in Israel. And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’”



At the outset here, friends, I would like to turn to, and pick up with you, where in Luke's Gospel the Lord is making the same point, though more emphatically and in a way that no one listening could have been in any doubt as to what He was getting at. Reading, "There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom, and yourselves thrust out. They will come from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south, and sit down in the kingdom of God. And, indeed, there are last who will be first, and there are first who will be last."



What the Lord was doing was confronting and challenging long held assumptions of His listeners who, indeed, were completely certain, that because they belonged to a certain Church and were born into a particular religious heritage, they were a “stand alone” Group and, as a consequence, their access to – and place in – the kingdom (however they understood that) was guaranteed.

But here they are being told in no uncertain terms that the great likelihood was that this would not be the case.

The more you read and think about these words of Jesus the more you realize how hard hitting He was being. By the end they would have been choking in indignation and anger. The Lord was telling them



What is both sobering and sad is that down through the centuries since then people have continued to fall into this trap of believing the very same thing. There remain today those pockets where people are persuaded and convinced that unless you are “one of us” and belong to “our” Church, you can’t be saved.

And this persuasion, it needs to be noted, is not only found amongst Christians. We see it in the extremes of non-Christian religions as well.

‘We have the truth and the whole truth and unless you see it our way you will not be saved’.

The question that arises here, and which is usefully reflected on, is, ‘What do such



This is surely something that was in Jesus' mind when He said what He said. Those people at that time, and to whom He spoke here, so plainly believed that they had a special relationship with God and that He favoured them above everyone else.

But the Lord was clearly trying to get them out of this mind set and to move them to a different and more all-embracing idea of God.

The reality is that **God has no favorites**. And His connection with people does not rest with external acts and rituals and the proper observance of them: nor does it rest with people subscribing to a particular set of beliefs or belonging to a certain



It comes to mind, from The Heavenly Doctrines, that newcomers to the spiritual world are not asked what Church they belonged to or what they believed in, but **how they lived their lives**. We read in the Writings: “In the spiritual world where all arrive after death, no one asks what our faith has or what our beliefs have been, only what our life has been, whether we are one kind of person or another. They know that **the quality of our faith and the quality of our beliefs depend on the quality of our life** because life constructs a belief system for itself and constructs a faith for itself.” (“Divine Providence” 101:3)

It is something to remember and to be reassured about, that the Lord was never fazed by religious diversity. And on different occasions He welcomed,



His disciple John brought to His attention on one occasion that they “saw someone who does not follow us casting out demons in your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow us.”

And what did Jesus say? Stop him? No, not at all. “Do not forbid him, for no one who works a miracle in my name can afterwards speak evil of me. For he who is not against us is for us (or, on our side).” Mark Chapter 9: verses 38 to 40.



And then, with regard to Him commending the goodness He could see in people's hearts and actions, whether followers or not, you will perhaps remember the poor widow who cast only a tiny amount into the Temple Treasury. "Truly, I say to you", Jesus said, "that this poor widow has put in more than all." (Luke 21:2)



It has to be strange that whilst Jesus could handle - and be so welcoming of and comfortable with - religious diversity, some amongst His followers haven't been.

As with anything we strive to get our minds around, and to understand, the key here is **to start with God**. Once we get this reasonably right everything else follows.

It is Scriptural, frequently insisted on here in the Bible, and something we need to continuously re-affirm, that God is perfect Love. And His love is such, we are taught in the Heavenly Doctrines, that **“the Lord wills to have everyone near to Himself.”** (Arcana Caelestia 1799). That is, everyone, everywhere, whether they be born into the slums of Calcutta or in one of the wealthy cities of the world. It



Every person born, in whatever country, into whatever circumstances, into whatever culture, and into whatever is the prevailing religion, even into a family of no religion, is a beloved child of God. God brings us all into being and He does so with the unalterable intention that **He will lead us, somehow, someway, and over our life time here, to heavenly life. With all eight billion of us alive today, He is working with each and everyone to bring this about. It is beyond us getting our finite minds around it, but it is so.**

It is of the Lord's order, also, that there is such astonishing variety among humankind. Different races, different cultures, different perspectives and different levels at which people live their lives, some very external and some much more internally.



We only need to stop and think for a moment of the differences that exist among the children of one family: different temperaments, different interests, different talents, different skills, different genetic inheritance and different experiences: and, how it is that parents have to employ different strategies to deal with each. What works for one simply fails to work for another.

In the case of the Lord, and His management of the human family as a whole, **these different strategies He employs are different belief systems and religions, both Christian and non-Christian. It is a case of the Lord meeting people where they are at and making use of what best establishes meaningful links and connections, they with Him and He with them. Some strategies work with some people, other strategies work with other people. Here is the Lord, out of His great and perfect love, reaching out to His children, so differently placed, so differently seeing**



It may be surprising but it is a teaching in the Writings, that the Mohammedan religion (Islam) “was raised up by the Divine Providence of the Lord.” And the two reasons why it was are, firstly, that Islam has within it, or within certain sects of Islam, recognition of Jesus, “as the Son of God, the wisest of mortals, and a supreme prophet”. Secondly, “Islam was raised up by the Lord’s Divine Providence in order to eliminate the idolatrous practices of many nations.” (See “Divine Providence” 255)



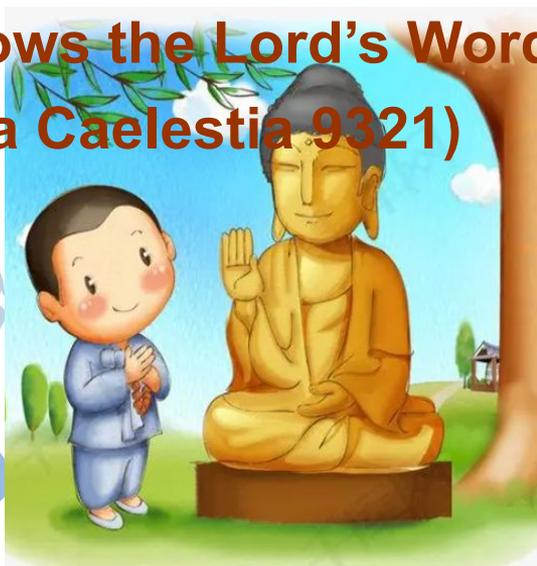
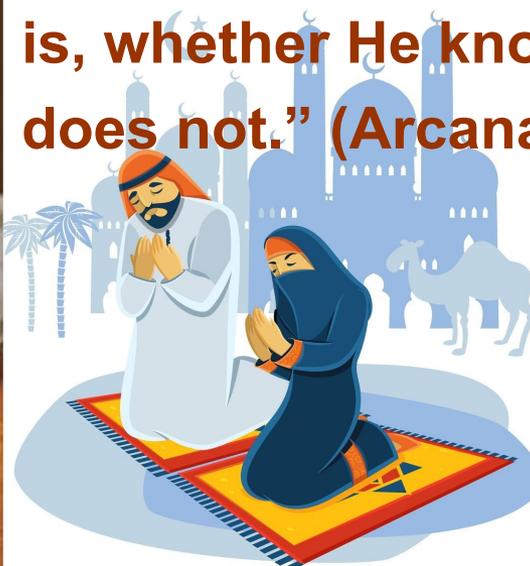
We can all too easily under-estimate the Lord and His capacity to reach people. As is held up to us through the prophecy of Isaiah, “His hand is not shortened that it cannot save.” (Isaiah 59:1)

The thing is, and of His Divine Providence, the Lord has seen to it that the fundamentals which, if followed, lead to a change of heart in people, are upheld in all religions. You can find them if you look for them.

As in the passage from the Heavenly Doctrines, earlier in the Service: “The Lord is actually love itself and His love is an intent to save everyone. So He provides that everyone shall have some religion, an acknowledgement of the Divine through that religion and an inner life



So, there it is. These two “universals” or “fundamentals” urged on its followers in every religion which is deservedly called a religion. They are sufficient **to shift our focus; to get us to re-order our priorities; and to open the door to something of heaven flowing in.** “All who make these two universals of religion to be of their life have a place in heaven.” (Divine Providence 326:10). And this is lovely: “Seed will never cease to be sown in a person, whether he is inside the Church or outside of it; that is, whether He knows the Lord’s Word or whether He does not.” (Arcana Caelestia 9321)



We turn now to two questions which often arise for people as they think about the teaching presented so far:

Firstly, Does the teaching so far presented in this sermon mean that all belief systems have the same value?

The teaching of the Writings is that “truth is the form of good” (“Arcana Caelestia” 5337. What this means is that **truth is that into which good flows and is received**. Indeed, “good receives its own specific character from truths.” (“Arcana Caelestia” 3804) If, therefore a person has only **a few truths** or what truths they know and believe in are only “**half truths**”, or **truths partially or wholly falsified**, then **good cannot flow into these as effectively and as fully as when the truths a person possesses are according to**



For example, if I believe what is a wrong translation, in English, of Matthew 28:20, that Jesus spoke then of **the end of the world, this is a distortion and, being a distortion, it cannot adequately contain the good and the hope which the Lord meant it should do.** What Jesus was spoke about was the end of the Age.

Another example is the way the apostle Paul's teaching in Romans Chapter 3 has been falsified, it being absolutely insisted on that Paul taught salvation by faith alone. No, he didn't. What he was doing was writing to early Christians, in Rome,. and clarifying a question that had arisen among them, whether they were to continue practising Jewish rituals, practices and restrictions with regard to foods to eat or not eat and what things they could and could not do on the Sabbath. Paul wrote that these tings are no longer necessary, "Therefore we conclude that a (person) is justified by



The more we know of truth and the more accurate it is, so the more it able to contain the good which it can contain and be expressed by us in our inter-actions with others.

We read: “Those (people) who learn knowledges of truth in order that they may be perfected in the faith of love....are in the use of all uses, and receive spiritual and celestial life from the Lord.” (“Arcana Caelestia” 1964:2). And these people don’t receive it and keep it to themselves! Such spiritual and celestial good flows through them out into their daily lives and, hopefully, blesses the lives of others.



This, too, is a teaching from the Writings, that “People who are more enlightened than others about the truth that comes from faith, and who have a clearer sense of reality, can have a more highly developed conscience than people who are less enlightened and have a clouded sense of reality.” (“New Jerusalem and its Heavenly Doctrine”, 132)

Such a “clearer sense of reality” also leads to a truer understanding of God. As we are elsewhere reminded in the Writings, our understanding of God occupies the highest place in our consciousness and it cascades down and influences everything else.

Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who labour 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.



Secondly, for some people, and against the background of all this, the question arises as to statements in the Gospels that the Lord Jesus Christ is the only “way”. “I am”, He said, “The Way, the Truth and the Life.” (John 14:6)

Hopefully it helps to put it this way.

Jesus is more than a name or a person. **Jesus was – and is – the embodiment of all that is good and principled.** We think of His courage in the face of evil. We think of His unflinching focus on best possible outcomes. We think of all that He stood for and taught. We think of the dignity that He gave to people, the compassion He personified and the vindictiveness He shunned.

What we need to do is to think of all these things when we reflect on His words, “I am the Way, the



Truth and goodness, integrity and guilelessness, courage in the face of evil, compassion and forgiveness, the honoring of the dignity and worth of others....**THESE** are “the Way, the Truth and the Life”, and they are the doorway through which we enter to really connect and commune with, our Maker.

For those who don't know the Lord Jesus Christ His relationship to these virtues and ‘embodiment’ (as mentioned) of them will be explained and clarified with them in the spiritual world.

But then, what of His words about converting the world; about making disciples of all nations? (Matthew 28, verses 19 & 20)

The question is,

‘Which world?’



There is the world we all know 'out there' and around us; the physical, material, world we are all so familiar with. Yes, of course.

But there is also our inner world, yours and mine!

Our inner worlds of memories, thoughts, feelings, disappointments, yearnings, hopes and regrets.

And it is THIS world, above everything else, that needs converting and bringing into line with high values, principles and ideals such as our Lord taught and stood for. THIS is the world we are to go into; to explore; traverse; challenge; and into which we are to bring the sphere and influence of the Lord.

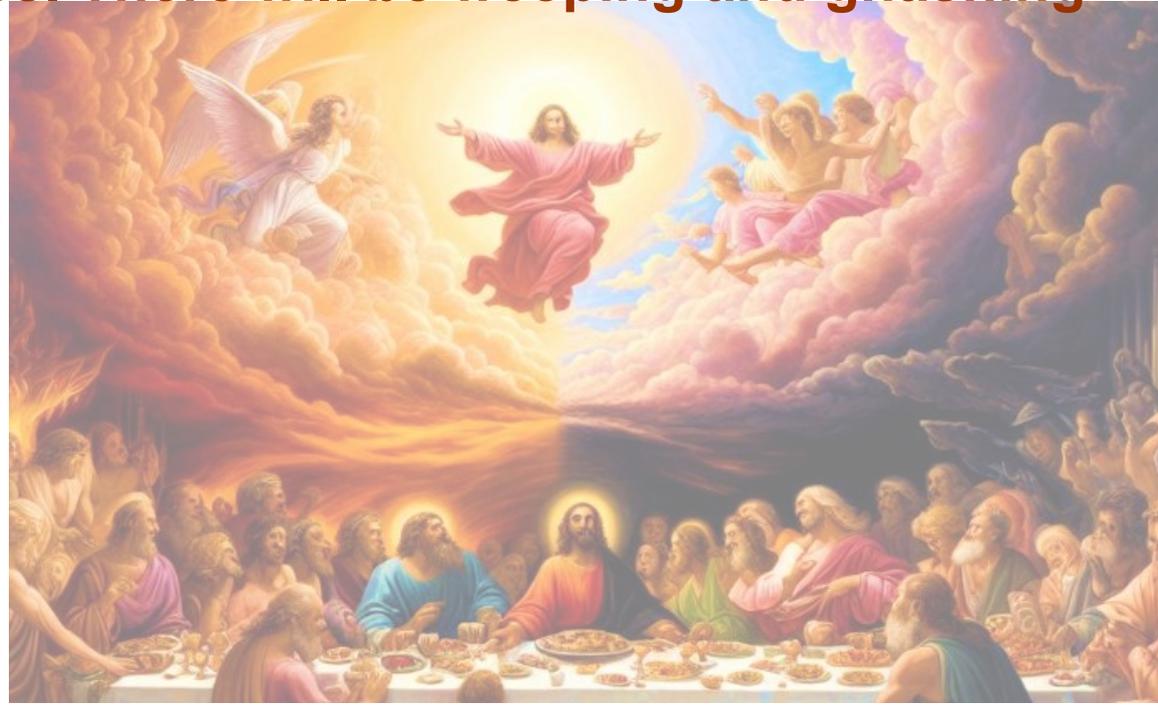


“When Jesus heard it He marvelled and said to those who followed, ‘Assuredly I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel.

And I say to you, that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.

But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Amen



Reading:

Matthew Chapter 8: verses 5 to 13

Revelation Chapter 7: verses 9 to 12



Heaven and Hell 318

“There are people who believe that the Lord’s Church exists only in the Christian world because only there the Lord is known and only there is the Word found. The reality is that **the church of God is wider, spread out and scattered through all regions of the world, even among people who do not know about the Lord and do not have the Word.** It is not these people’s fault and they cannot help being ignorant. It would fly in the face of God’s love and mercy if anyone were born for hell when we are all equally human...”

“The Lord is actually love itself, and His love is an intent to save everyone. So He provides that everyone shall have some religion, an acknowledgement of the Divine Being through that religion, and an inner life. That is, **living according to one’s religious principles is an inner life,** for then we focus on the Divine, and to



THE END

