"There went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed."  
- Luke ii,1

Joel iii,1-17  
Psalms 75,76  
New Book of Worship, p.62

At this time the thoughts of all in the Christian world are turned toward Christmas. The Advent of the Lord has a twofold meaning - its historical meaning and its spiritual meaning. Historically we celebrate an event which took place about twenty centuries ago, an event which was a turning point in the history of mankind. In the light of the spiritual meaning involved in the story of the Incarnation it is possible for us to understand what really happened. The Lord came into the world in human form that He might overcome evil and redeem mankind. It is this deliverance that the Advent season should mean for us. We should celebrate the real event rather than merely the outward manifestation. What we really should celebrate is the beginning of a Divine process by which evil was subjugated, the light of truth brought into the world, and spiritual freedom restored to man.

That process, begun with the Incarnation, was completed on the Lord's part when His work on earth was finished. His birth was the dawn of a new day and was fittingly accompanied by angel songs. It is important for us to know the historical facts and to believe them, but these facts would have little meaning if it were not possible for the Lord to be born spiritually in the lives of men today. He came into the world never to leave it. He says, "Lo, I am with you alway," fulfilling the words of the prophet: "His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and his dominion is from generation to generation." The Gospel drama from the Nativity to the Resurrection must be reenacted in individual lives.

Our text reads, "There went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed." Caesar Augustus was king at Rome, the capital of the world. Herod was king in Judaea. The reign of Augustus and of Herod gives the historical setting of the Advent. Caesar was the symbol of worldly power, Herod at Jerusalem the symbol of the power of the church or spiritual power. Herod represents not the power of the heavens, for he was a wicked king, but the power of evil in the heart. And it is written that when, through the wise men on their way to Bethlehem, he heard of the birth of the Lord, "he was troubled." There is no record that Caesar Augustus even knew of the birth of the Lord. But his command that all the world should be taxed or enrolled brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, where the Lord was born. Caesar's enrolling the world represents the power of worldliness seeking to make all mankind subject to it. And just as the world was subject to Caesar, so was it spiritually under the dominion of worldly interests and ambitions.

As we look out on conditions in the world today, we can see that great changes have taken place since the Lord's time - changes in the outward conditions under which men live, and changes in men's outlook upon the world. People have become
more humane; the life of the Lord has awakened new thoughts concerning the meaning and purpose of our lives. Jesus said, "Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." He had, but men have been slow to avail themselves of His power. They have gained some victories in His Name over some external evils, but the spiritual conquest is still for the future. In large part the world is still under tribute to Caesar. The prophecy "On earth peace, good will toward men" is not yet fulfilled. Today is a time of crisis. It would be hard to name the nation that is not seething with discontent, hard to instance any industry in any nation that is not full of unrest and fearful of worse things to come.

There are two great departments of human life, the religious and the secular, the spiritual and the natural. The church ministers to our religious or spiritual life, bearing witness to the fact that we are spiritual beings, belonging to a spiritual world, and having relations with and duties toward God, who made us. Nevertheless, the world and its affairs, its interests, cares, and duties are of pressing importance to us all. We have to live as citizens in the world, we have to live in the world among our fellows, in cooperation with them to produce the means of living, and to perfect our life in the world.

The church and the world comprise the whole of human life, and these two fields cannot be separated without disaster. A religion that is of the thoughts alone, that does not express itself in outward act and conduct, is worse than useless. Such a separation ought not to be; it indicates that something is fundamentally wrong in the life of the community. The church and the world, the religious and the secular, the spiritual and the natural are two aspects of life which should be related in the experience of every individual. The same people — all people — ought to constitute both the church and the world. It is not good for any man to live without cultivating that part of his nature to which the church ministers, just as it is not good for any man to try to serve God by shutting himself up within monastic walls. The church and the world together constitute the complete life, the orderly life.

The world today is in a state of conflict. The means of producing and distributing commodities are far greater than they ever were, yet multitudes are in want and many are without occupation. To remedy conditions endless trade agreements and adjustments are made, usually with the effect of making matters worse. In the political field nations, having world peace in view, are holding interminable conferences but getting nowhere because of mutual fear, distrust, and jealousy, and preparations for war go forward at an alarming pace. The reason is that men are under tribute to Caesar. The two great departments of human life are torn asunder. Religion is not applied to life in the world, and the world's life is therefore without any adequate guiding principles.

No man can help the world in its fundamental problems who has not in his heart acknowledgment of the Lord and of the obligation to serve Him by loving the neighbor as oneself. And no man has these essentials of the church in his heart unless his
daily life in the world is an effort to embody and express them in all his dealings with men, without true ideals, aims, and motives and the strength to realize them. There is no hope for security or peace. Without the knowledge of the Lord, love of Him, and faith in Him—faith and love being expressed in life in faithfulness in our calling, justice in our dealing, and righteousness in our acts—distress will increase. Caesar's enrolling the world to be taxed is the symbol of that bondage which results from seeking first the things of this world.

The Gospel drama of the Nativity needs to be reenacted in our lives. The Lord came to conquer the world, and He said, "Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world. But His conquest was not a military conquest. It was in the realm of the spirit, and the eye of flesh was and is too gross to see it. He was taken into a high mountain, shown the kingdoms of the world, and given the offer of them. But He declined the offer. The world that He overcame was the spirit of worldliness, the love of rule, the spirit of covetousness, the delight in vain things. His empire was of the heart, and throughout the centuries His conquest is going on.

The real cause of all conflict and misery is in the spirit of men, and it is with the spirit of men that the Lord deals. When He is accepted as the ruler of our souls, the world in us is subdued. There is no other way of overcoming the world. And the Lord's victory is an eternal victory because He is a king over voluntary subjects. He does not impose His will upon us. It is only as we choose Him freely for our King that His victory can become ours. When His spirit comes into our lives, it enables us to shun evils. Ill will is displaced by good will. Hate is dispossessed by love. Selfishness gives way to altruism. Instead of greed there comes generosity, and the love of the world is transformed into love of the neighbor. Then truth appears clearly, the mind is enlightened, fairness, justice, honor, virtue, mercy, and kindness become ascendant. This meaning the Advent should have for us.

You and I belong to the church and to the world—they go together. As members of the Lord's New Church we should be able to see that the removal of the evils that distress the world can come about only by the application of the Lord's truth to the world's life, and that by making our individual lives the embodiment of this truth we can become witnesses to the Divine Savior. We cannot do this of ourselves. We cannot live a Christian life in our own strength. We must come into living relationship with the Lord, so that His truth controls us and His strength sustains us. For this purpose we come to church to learn of the Lord and to worship Him. Let us gain that deliverance from bondage to Caesar for which the Lord came into the world. Let us not be content with the standard and example of those who do not acknowledge Him and His Word as the law of life. Let us make His teachings the standard of our conduct. He has a purpose for each of us, and in fulfilling that purpose we shall find happiness and blessing and make our contribution to the world's freedom and peace.

Amen