

Address at a Christmas Eve Prayer Service

Gustaf Wingren

Galatians 4:4–6 · 1959

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St. Peter's Priory Church (S:t Peters Klosters kyrka), Lund

Text: Galatians 4:4–6

The holy days often draw crowds to the churches, but among these holy days Christmas holds a special place. Those of us who are older almost always think backward. We remember the Christmases of our childhood. The power of remembrance is much weaker at other holy days. And memory's journey backward is in a way a beggar's journey. In the present no impressions are strong and fresh. We long back to the first years of life. They hold that our origins have on us is our own groping after a renewal of ourselves. The texts of Christmas also speak of a birth, but it is not our own birth. There is a child lying before our eyes. That child's birth is to be our renewal. How is that possible?

The text says of Christ that he is "born of a woman and placed under the law," in order to give us freedom and "sonship" with God — "the rights of sons," it says. This is developed in two parts. One and the same word is used twice, and it is the key word. "When the time had been fulfilled, God sent his Son ..." Now "he has sent the Spirit into our hearts." Here in Swedish the word has different forms — "sent" and "has sent" — but the word Paul wrote is exactly the same, twice. So there lies a child, a human life on earth — it is sent to us. And now something stirs within us, thoughts, faith, hope — it is sent into our hearts. It is the Spirit at work in us. What does it mean that Christ is sent into his birth and that the Spirit is sent into our hearts?

That Christ is sent means that one cannot explain him from what existed before him. He shattered everything people had expected of a Savior. He is incomprehensible from his surroundings. There is a spring somewhere, and the spring wells up through him and not through the others around him. But it also means that when we stand before him, something happens to us. We receive something new from him.

And with that we have already touched on the second point. That the Spirit is sent into our hearts means that the Spirit comes from him to us. The Spirit is not merely the notions that occur to us in our own stillness. When the picture of Christ is painted for us and the story of him reaches into us, something wakes within us — and it does not come from ourselves. There is remorse over the deeds we have done, there is the wish to be changed, and much else. But if his picture is clearly drawn for us, a voice also sounds within us: “Do not despair or be troubled. You are a child, and you have a Father in heaven.” God blots out the old and lets the new grow forth through the Spirit’s work in us. The two “sendings” — that the child of Christmas is sent into human life and that the Spirit is sent into our hearts — flow together in God’s dealings with us.

If we could hear Paul’s words as he wrote or dictated them twice — God “sent” the Son, he “sent” the Spirit — we would recognize an old, familiar word that we have all heard, the word “apostle.” It means “sent.” Because Christ has come, and because human beings need to hear about him to have peace in their hearts, there begins — and this is the third “sending” — that strange traveling down around the Mediterranean. Apostles suffer shipwreck at sea, apostles are put in prison and flogged, but they do not keep silent. They go on speaking and painting the picture of him who was born in Bethlehem. They cannot stop, for they are sent. While this drama of the apostles was being played out down there in the South, darkness lay over the North, the midwinter darkness with its sacrifices and heathen offerings “under the law,” the same darkness that now settles outside the church on this Christmas night — for in the world of nature nothing new happens. But one day the one who was sent out was here. Then the White Christ came and went forth. On Christmas Eve we might think of what his coming meant for children. Respect for strength we had up here before. But when the Child from Bethlehem and the Spirit from there were allowed to work on the hearts here, the weak and helpless life became inviolable — and see, this is new. We have children here in the church tonight, at our Christmas prayers. These children now live in the condition that we older people, looking backward and a little self-absorbed, long back to. And we perform actions in their lives [?], good or evil actions, which will determine their attitude to everything in the future. The best thing that could happen to them would be to be kept in the expectation they now have, the child’s expectation, the child’s certainty that what is coming is good and bright. We who are “grown-up,” as it is called, know very well how hard it is to keep that expectation, how easy it is to grow hard and embittered and to “know” that what is coming is worth

nothing. To remain a child and to look at all one's fellow human beings as if they were children — which they are — is a high and noble art.

The New Testament shows us a way to learn that art, and our text speaks of it. The strange expression that God “has sent the Spirit into our hearts,” the Spirit “who cries, Abba, Father,” leads us to a word on Jesus’ own lips and in his own mother tongue. When Jesus prayed to God, he cried the word “Abba.” We still hear it today as if from his own tongue. And it was not a solemn word. It was an everyday word, as when we hear a child at home or in the street call out “Dad.” There was a tremendous claim in this word, for only the promised Messiah stood so near to God that he dared to speak like that to the Lord in heaven. When Jesus now came into the world, he took this word into his mouth, and it was new. It may be easy to change a word. Everything depends on when one does it. The disciples could never forget how Jesus cried “Father.” We see that in the fourteenth chapter of Mark’s Gospel. It is the night in Gethsemane, when the child born on Christmas night in Bethlehem was to lose his life. He falls on his knees on the ground and says, “Abba, Father.” Never is it so clear as then that he is “born of a woman and placed under the law.” But in this extreme distress he also won for himself that strange power in the form of weakness of which John’s Gospel speaks in one of the Christmas texts: “To all who received him he gave power to become children of God.” When he had gone before, one could, after him, turn to God in every distress as to a father and trust that whatever came, it was something good that came. Out of this was born the strong joy that welled up in the earliest Christian congregation. In its worship people called God “Father,” Abba, as Jesus had done. They had learned it, and it is this way of naming God that Paul refers to here in the text.

Now perhaps someone says: Where today is there such a congregation, endowed with the gifts of the Spirit? The answer: When you see a little child fold its hands and say, as it has learned, “Our Father who art in heaven,” you stand before the holy congregation of Christ. This childlike turning to God can return, in the same simple outward gesture, in the old person who is about to die. The child and the old person — those are the two stations. Both are enclosed by holy baptism and sheltered by Christ. And between the two stations, “under the law,” lies all our sorrow and all our struggle. Along the whole way it is possible for us to cry “Abba, Father” and to do it in trust. The Christian congregation has an invisible Father, but it has a great Brother, yes, a big brother who has lived on earth and gone through everything. “The firstborn among many brothers,” Scripture calls him. And it fits with the name Abba, the name of father, to call him the great Brother, with many brothers and sisters,

many “children,” as we shall soon sing in Olaus Petri’s hymn: “You have now become our Brother” (Swedish Hymnal 40:4).

In our Christmas piety it easily becomes the case that the Christ child is of course there, naturally — now we must make ourselves ready and worthy for Christmas. The old Christmas hymn has another tone. It marvels first and foremost at this: that he is here. It cannot, as it were, finish marveling that the child has been born for us. And in the praise of the boy in the manger one never forgets what it later cost him to be human, and to be human in such a way that he could shine for all people forever. One can see something of the same in old paintings: darkness over all the faces and over the whole picture — and then, from the child in the manger, this flowing light, which casts its radiance over the faces, even the darkest, and over the very things. It is the world, the whole earth, that is different because he has come. Work is different. Sorrow is different — it is only a hard shell; the kernel is joy. This is the gospel of Christmas, new every year. It can never grow old.

[Note in *Postilla*: The sermon was preached on 24 December 1959 at a Christmas prayer service in St. Peter’s Priory Church in Lund. Olof Sundby was the liturgist. On 20 December Wingren had assisted at the ordination of Hans-Göran Carlsson in Linköping Cathedral. It was Ragnar Askmark’s first ordination as bishop. On 25 March that year Wingren had declined votes in this episcopal election on the ground that he could not leave his duties at Lund University. In 1958 Wingren had published the book *Skapelsen och lagen* (*Creation and Law*), the first part of the dogmatics completed in 1960 with *Evangeliet och kyrkan* (*Gospel and Church*). The hymn is Swedish Hymnal 40:4 in the 1937 hymnal and 33:4 in the 1986 hymnal.]

Translator’s notes. The source is the printed text in *Postilla* (2010), which places this address under the Sunday after Christmas; the occasion, a Christmas Eve prayer service (“*julbön*”), comes from the editor’s footnote, translated in brackets at the end, and the title names it. The print’s “*vi är handlingar i deras liv*” (literally “we are actions in their lives”) seems to lack a word and is rendered “we perform actions in their lives [?].” “*Blot*” (the pre-Christian Norse sacrifice) is rendered “heathen offerings,” and “*den Vite Krist*” is kept as “the White Christ,” the old Norse name for Christ. “*Abba*” is kept as Wingren gives it, and “*Far*” is rendered “Dad” or “Father” as the context requires.

Gustaf Wingren · draft translation ·

SOURCE

From Postilla: Gustaf Wingren predikar (Artos, 2010), pp. 53–56, under the Sunday after Christmas