

SERMON

An Address at Confession

Gustaf Wingren

Philippians 1:6 · 1940

Pentecost Day, 12 May 1940

Gamleby Church

Text: Philippians 1:6

Hymns: 120:1–3; 187:4–6; 164:1–2; 134:1–3; 138:1–2; 131:1–3; 188:1–3; 189:1; 269:4

In the name of God, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“I am confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will also bring it to completion, until the day of Christ Jesus.”

(To the confirmands) Today the festival of farewell has come.

If one looks at what the confirmation of the young and their first Communion really mean, it is, to be sure, the other way around. First Communion ought not to be a day of farewell but a day of welcome. Until that day the young person has not been a member of full age in the Christian congregation. As a child he or she received one of the sacraments of the church, baptism. But the other, the Lord's Supper, has not yet been given. Faithful to its Lord's command, the church of Christ wants first to instruct and teach about Christian faith and Christian life. But at the moment of confirmation, which we came to yesterday, this time of instruction and teaching is finished. Now the young person is solemnly given access to the rich world of the Lord's Supper as well, and the congregation welcomes him as a full-grown member of the fellowship around the Lord. So first Communion is not a farewell but a welcome.

But we all know that in reality this day is a day of farewell and not of welcome. Until now Christian instruction has not yet spoken its last word to you young people. Today it does. For by far the most of you, a journey begins today that, sadly, does not exactly lead you nearer the church. It leads out into the bustle of the world — where God is near you too, but by invisible ways that we cannot always make out. It does no good to cast a glow over the grim reality. But

it does no good to complain either. So today we want to stop at the word from the letter to the Philippians that we just read: “I am confident — in spite of everything I am confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will also bring it to completion, until the day of Christ Jesus.”

He will bring it to completion: God, not we human beings. He is at work here on our earth, and he shelters the children of men with his hands, even when we cannot understand how. He stretched out his hands over you in baptism, and he has brought you to church today. He still lets his congregation endure in our Swedish people and surround people’s lives, and step in with the power of God’s quiet, strong word whenever something great and important is about to happen. Even if you young people do not seek him and his word very often, you will still quite surely bow under his blessing when one day you set up your own homes. To him you will bring your own children in baptism. And at last God’s hard, firm hand takes hold of everyone, and nearly everyone in our people is still gathered into the arms of the church when the three shovelfuls of earth fall and God’s word about “death and resurrection” is read.

(To the congregation) We greatly underestimate the hidden power in all this. We do not see clearly enough that a never-failing stream of life flows from God over our world through this word that sounds among us without ceasing — this word that makes its way into human hearts as long as life lasts. We have no idea how many there are who still pray in secret. The one who stood before the face of the Lord in his youth may go astray, to be sure. But he can never escape — never wholly escape — the seeking God, who meets him on the right hand and on the left, and who longs to “complete” the work he has “begun.”

But now someone says: “What does all this mean, if people do not open themselves to God’s word and let him re-create the heart — if they do not truly hold to him and to no other?” Then God’s word becomes only a judgment, not a gospel that transforms.

That is true. But it is not for us human beings to fix times and seasons for God. Our part is to sow in hope, and to wait. And of the young who stand at the Lord’s altar today, we say with the apostle: “We are confident of this, that he who began a good work in them will also — when it pleases him — bring it to completion, step in and carry it further, and gather them into his kingdom when the day has come.” In any case, we can pray for this.

(To the confirmands) And you confirmands, whose future we know nothing of today, should keep one thing in mind from your confirmation instruction. However things go, wherever

you end up, you can never get so far away from God that the way back is not open for the one who longs for forgiveness and cleansing. You will set out on different paths. Some of you will keep the faith, and the love of God's house, of the hymn and the word. For others the way will be harder, and the rays from God's heaven will come more rarely and more thinly. But the way is never closed entirely, any more than it was closed for the prodigal son. It is just this truth that the Lord's Supper wants to impress on us. The Lord's Supper is the witness to God's forgiveness, to his willingness to receive whoever comes, wherever he comes from. When we go forward to the altar today to receive the gift of the Lord's Supper, it is at the same time a promise stretched over your whole life — the promise of forgiveness, which does not waver. If God were not the God of forgiveness, we would have reason to despair in earnest. But now we know instead that God can let every person begin again, not seven times but seventy times seven. It is on that firm foundation that we dare to hold the confidence that he who began a good work in you will also bring it to completion, until the day of Christ Jesus. That is the firm foundation to which the preaching of the Lord's Supper always points.

(To the congregation) But with this the Lord also wants to invite not only the newly confirmed but our whole congregation to the table of the Lord's Supper. Quite a few have come to church today to share in the young people's festival, many of them perhaps people who are seldom seen there otherwise. Here, before our eyes, we see just such a day when God seeks those in whom he once began a good work — a work that has not been completed. He longs to bring us all, young and old, nearer the completion of the work, to draw us more firmly to himself, and to lead us with surer steps on the way he once showed us as the way of life, but on which we have so seldom walked. The table of the Lord's Supper stands open for all. The one who feels his heart urging him on, however hesitant and embarrassed, may let go of his hesitation and come. The timid longing deep in the soul is God's work — he who now stands at the door and knocks, who wants to come in to carry on his work. Everyone who grieves over his spiritual poverty and longs for strength from above goes worthily to the Lord's table. God sets no other conditions. He asks nothing except to be allowed to give to the one who has seen that he himself has nothing.

(To all) So let us all, young and old, go before his throne. We come with our frailty and ask him for his riches. We pray that, in spite of our faintheartedness and our resistance, he will bring his work in us to completion. Let us worship God and kneel before him...

After the absolution: Swedish Hymnal 110:6

*Washed clean by baptism's flood,
in Christ now we are found,
and all our sins are taken away;
our soul is saved and free.
May God himself now work in us,
and with his Spirit strengthen
in faith our new life.*

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

Translator's notes. The bracketed cues "(till konf)," "(till förs.)," and "(till alla)" are Wingren's own directions for whom he is addressing, and they are kept, in italics, as "To the confirmands," "To the congregation," and "To all." The confession itself is not written out in the typescript, which breaks off with "...." after the invitation to kneel. The text verse is given in modern English, but in the same words each time he repeats it. "Templet," the old preacher's word for the church building, is rendered "church." The hymn stanza after the absolution is translated for sense, not as a metrical stanza.

Gustaf Wingren · draft translation ·