

SERMON

Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Trinity

Gustaf Wingren

Matthew 21:33–46 · 1939

High Mass, 22 October 1939

Practice sermon [?], preached in Reng and Stora Hammar churches

Text: Matthew 21:33–46

Hymns: 205:1–3; 280:4–6; 25:1–2; 506:1–5; 158:9

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

Let us pray.

*We pray you: let us feel
that the fire in which we burn ourselves
is but the flame of your love,
and that even angry winds lead
home to you the one you hold dear. Amen.*

(Swedish Hymnal 305:2)

“You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities” (Amos 3:2).

Among human beings it is often the case that where there is love, there is no room for judgment. It is never so with God. Just because the Lord had chosen Israel and sought it without ceasing in love, judgment was to fall on the people without mercy when, in spite of everything, it remained in its iniquities. Over human wickedness, God’s love itself is a constant judgment.

For it is not as though human wickedness and God’s love stood against each other as two equally strong opponents. The Holy One has power over wickedness instead. He has power

over it in this way: in the midst of wickedness he can carry out his good, and so turn the very evil deeds of men into their direct opposite. “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.” And the holy God has power over wickedness in this way too: he can set a limit to his patience and crush what stands against him. “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” Most of all, however, God shows his almighty power in this: that he forgives us our transgressions. “But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared.” This is what today’s sermon text is about — the second series for the Twentieth Sunday after Trinity, which... (The text is read.)

God’s love and human wickedness.

1. God’s love seeks the world in spite of human wickedness.

a. The tenants were wicked tenants. It was in the power of the owner of the vineyard to destroy them at once, as he finally decides to do. But before this irrevocable judgment falls on the tenants, they receive one message after another. When they have mistreated one of the owner’s servants, they are allowed to kill another and stone a third. At last, with incredible patience, the owner spent his own son’s life to get a hearing with them.

b. In the same way Israel was the object of God’s unceasing seeking. This is just what the parable is aimed at. Time after time the people of his own possession heard prophets who spoke God’s word without turning back. All too often they suffered the same fate as the owner’s servants in the parable. “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to it!” At last God’s own Son came, and him they crucified.

c. Our people has now heard God’s gospel preached for a thousand years. We can see what success the message has had on the day that has now come. “They all seek their own” — that is the reality to which our people’s conduct at the recent outbreak of war bore witness. And that is only a small sign of the general indifference to one’s neighbor and his need that seems to be gaining more and more ground. Truly, if it depended on our worthiness, God would long ago have taken his word from us. All the churches would stand mute, without the gospel, pronouncing judgment over us all with their ice-cold silence. But that is not what happens. The word still sounds among the people of Sweden. God still seeks.

d. And you and I! Are we better than a month ago? Am I better than a year ago? Can you say that you are more master of your selfishness, your sluggishness, your pride now than you were before? And yet the grace of baptism rests on us. Again and again, through the stirrings

of the soul, we notice God's calling voice. Again and again the way to the word and the sacraments is opened to us. The individual too is sought by God without ceasing, in spite of his unconquered wickedness.

2. When human wickedness triumphs, God's love in reality conquers.

a. The tenants killed the son. But just when this happened, it became clearer than ever that the owner of the vineyard wanted to reach them. He did not want to destroy them. He showed that he could still bear with them.

b. Israel crucified Jesus Christ. Can a greater triumph for wickedness be imagined? Here God himself goes about in the form of a man, a servant. Here the Majesty of heaven takes on manhood and becomes our brother. Evil men spit on him, revile him, and put him to death among robbers. Beneath his cross rough soldiers cast lots for his clothes while they call out words full of contempt to him. Can a greater triumph for wickedness be imagined?

But "the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes." We like to imagine that if the good is to happen, the evil must first stop happening. But the faith that is anchored at the cross of Golgotha ought to know better. For a darker deed of men than the one carried out there has never happened and never will. Golgotha is the great sign that wickedness is the mark of man — that it was the devil's image that was engraved on him in the Fall. And yet here, in this night of human wickedness, God's purpose of salvation is carried out. Generation after generation, in the temptation and anguish of sin, would turn their eyes toward this cross and see there the love of the Unsearchable One, the world's only hope. It was not that there were moments on the evening of the first Good Friday when human wickedness was idle for a time, so that God happened to be able to carry out his good. That Christ was crucified was from beginning to end a work of human wickedness, without a pause. But it is not that the good happens when the evil has stopped happening. God's good happens instead in the midst of human wickedness. How this is possible, and why it should be so, is God's secret, which our thinking can never get to the bottom of. But we can draw one thing from it: an eternal comfort and confidence in the face of wickedness, our own and the world's. We are never left alone with evil. Just when evil happens, the Unsearchable One is with us, in the midst of the evil, with his incomprehensible love. Love cannot be conquered. When the waves of evil surge up against it, it only becomes purer, clearer, stronger, and gentler. In this — that the good happens when evil seems to conquer — lies the forgiveness of sins, which is a miracle and will remain a miracle forever.

c. The history of our people shows us the same miracle. For it is in times of gross and widespread sin that a people's awakening usually comes. We are waiting for an awakening. We want to see the word come alive again, sharper than any sword, so that it cuts right through our whole people. But do we not believe, then, that the growth of wickedness is a bad sign, a sign that the awakening will be slow to come? In our ignorance, do we not mean something like this: first people in general must stop and come to their senses and give up sin, so that a righteous people stands there waiting for a word from the Lord? But experience, both from our own people and from others, tells us that it does not come about that way. On the contrary, it is on the brink of destruction that the word comes to life. Just as the earliest Christian church went forward and conquered in a world that was rotting, with the wounds of death gaping to right and left, so the last century too saw the power of the gospel in a world of decay — and that is true both of our people and of others. The spring that sprouted in our church then has now turned to autumn and to languishing life. Some districts are still faithful to the sanctuary of the fathers, but they are only small bright spots in a dark picture. We should not tremble so much before that darkness. We should remember that evil does not have to stop in order for the good to happen. We should know that God begins his work just when sin triumphs. The decay has not yet gone so far that we have wholly despaired of help from men. And as long as we believe in men, no miracles happen among us.

d. The individual comes to know the same miracle of God. It is not that we smother our sin bit by bit, so that the evil steadily dwindles, and God at last, when the evil has been conquered, lets his good begin to become real. In that case it would be all over with us. For our old, selfish self is always raging inside us. And when the law attacks us, when in anguish we decide to conquer our evil desire, it is as if the sin in us grew instead of shrinking. The old writers noticed this and testified to it, for our comfort. In the seventh chapter of the letter to the Romans, Paul lets us look into this struggle. "When the commandment came, sin came alive." "For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

So we may know that the sharpening of sin can be a sign that God is not far away. It is not in the righteous man that faith conquers, but in the sinner. At the end of the chapter from which we just took Paul's despairing words about his struggle against sin, we also meet this confession: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

For Golgotha does not belong only to the past. The night of wickedness, when sin is at work without a pause, remains forever the right time for God's good deed. In the midst of that night God works — and that may hold for peoples and generations, and it may hold for you and me. Whoever waits faithfully will see the light of Easter morning light up the darkness. The words of thanksgiving will be given to him in the midst of the world of sin.

But —

3. When human wickedness hardens, God's love becomes eternal judgment.

a. The tenants hardened their hearts even against the owner's last message to them. They killed the son, the utmost sign of the owner's patience. Then the master of the house resolved to destroy them without sparing, and to give the vineyard to others.

b. Israel rejected God's last message and hung the Messiah on the wood of the cross. Then Israel was crushed as a people, Jerusalem was laid in ruins, and through the apostles the gospel went to other "people, producing its fruits."

c. Our people can suffer the same judgment. We are the new Israel now — all of us who belong to God's church in the world. If the Lord could hand the old Israel over to ruin, it should not surprise us if the same can happen again. It is not only the Jewish people that must now do without the light of the word. Large parts of the region where the church was born are now non-Christian. The word is a living word that moves on through the world, from people to people, from continent to continent. It is nothing strange if the gospel stops shining over a people that does not "produce its fruits." Such things have happened. In our day the mission is moving slowly but victoriously forward in Asia and Africa. Perhaps the small churches out there among the colored peoples may become "the people producing its fruits." Least of all would the de-Christianizing of Sweden mean ruin for God's kingdom, as we sometimes seem to believe. The word goes further in the world, as the Almighty wills. But it would mean one thing: that God's judgment falls on us, without mercy and beyond recall. It would mean that we stand before him as the wicked tenants, for whom there was no turning back.

God still deals with the people of Sweden through his church. He has planted his vineyard. He has put a fence around it to protect it from attack from outside, he has dug a winepress in it, and he has built a tower. He is still waiting for fruit as the season of fruit draws near. If he does not get fruit, let no one think the vineyard will be given up to ruin. The church lives and stands firm to the end of the ages. But it can be given to other peoples, who will give the

owner of the vineyard the fruit in its season. It is over the tenants — the people that now has the church — that judgment and destruction can go. God seeks, God waits, God bears with us in patience and long-suffering. But once the last message has gone out from God, there is no more evasion. Then the limit is set. We do not know when this last message will come. We do not know God's secrets. But one thing we know: once the limit has been reached, it cannot be undone.

d. For every person, every individual, for you and for me, God has likewise set a limit — a limit we do not know. There is a last call from God to us. If it goes unheeded, hardening begins. For a person really is free to reject Christ. And even if he has once been received in faith, the possibility is not ruled out that we may “fall away from grace.” We also know that God answers our hardening against his last message with his eternal judgment. That holds for us as a people, and it holds for us as individuals.

The text says of the chief priests and the Pharisees that “they perceived that he was speaking about them.” They felt that the Master's words of judgment struck them, and no one else. We have reason to ask ourselves whether these chief priests and Pharisees, the “church people” of their day, did not stand above us in this respect. We have an incredible ability to imagine that God's words of judgment are meant for others, not for ourselves. We imagine that every hard word of Scripture is spoken to those who do not go to church and do not read the Bible — that is, to those who are not reached by this hard word of Scripture. But that is not how the Lord goes about it when he warns and judges. If he judges, he judges the very one to whom he speaks his word. The judgment on the others, those whom this Bible word does not reach, God takes care of himself. We need not trouble ourselves about it. There is an anguish in sin, a grayness over the soul, a joylessness in this world, which is truly judgment enough on those who go their own ways far from the church and the word of life. That judgment is so fearful to bear that one must sometimes believe the gospel will become real sooner out there among the others — the prostitutes and the tax collectors — than among us who sit secure and do not take the words of judgment to ourselves. For this law holds forever: whoever has not felt God's crushing judgment in his heart never comes to know what grace is either. He never comes to taste the healing drink that is called the forgiveness of sins. Today God's word of warning and judgment is spoken to us who hear it, not to others.

(Conclusion.)

But if we hear the word and take it to ourselves as sinful people, deserving nothing but judgment, then God is near us. Then we can know that God's last message has not yet passed us by. Then the Savior's intercession applies to us — his prayer for the barren tree: "Lord, let it alone this year also... Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down." So we too have reason to pray for our people in these times of waiting that we now live in. And should the Lord's fire of judgment pass over us, should the word be taken from us, then let us keep in mind the comforting picture of the penitent thief. In the midst of the night of Golgotha there was a man who received the word of the forgiveness of sins — a robber with no righteousness of his own, who by God's mercy was snatched like a brand from the fire. Whoever, in contrition of heart, without relying on his own imagined excellence, sets all his hope on the Lord's mercy will also hear from the Savior's mouth the same words the penitent thief heard: "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise." Amen.

Let us pray.

Blessed be God, etc.

At the end: May the God of peace himself sanctify you, etc.

Translator's notes. "PRAKTARPREDIKAN" in the heading is read as a practice sermon and marked [?]. Wingren's outline numbering (1–3, each with a–d: the parable, Israel, our people, the individual) is kept, since the sermon is built on it. "Vingårdsmännen" are "the tenants," as in most modern English Bibles. "The recent outbreak of war" is the war of September 1939; the sermon does not name it. "De färgade folken" is kept as "the colored peoples," as he wrote it in 1939.

Gustaf Wingren · draft translation ·