

SERMON

Sermon for the Third Sunday in Advent

Gustaf Wingren

Matthew 11:2–10 · 5 October 1939

Specimen sermon written 5 October 1939.

Thursday, 5 October 1939, 6–8 p.m. Sermon on the Gospel for the Third Sunday in Advent, Matthew 11:2–10. Character of the Sunday: the Lord's forerunner. The text: John's embassy to Jesus.

Hymns: 41:1–2, 43:4–7, 206:4, 63:10–15, 239:3–5.

Gustaf Wingren

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

Behold, your king comes to you;

righteous and victorious is he.

He comes *poor*, riding upon an ass,

upon an ass's foal.

Zechariah, the 9th chapter, the 9th verse.

The vision which the prophet paints for his people does not belong to the usual prophetic visions. As a rule one thought of the high Messiah-king's coming as something more splendid than it is depicted here. Righteousness and the certainty of victory had of old been held in honor, but the distress of the captivity was required before one learned to set poverty and lowliness also into the picture of him. When the time was accomplished and the king came, it proved that one had quite generally forgotten the little one had heard of the coming King's form of humiliation. One found it hard to believe that this friend of publicans and sinners, whose way unceasingly bore downward toward suffering and scorn, was in truth the fulfillment of the proud dreamers of the future, a fulfillment at which generation after generation had looked. So long as earthly life lasts, this trembling doubt before the humiliated

Lord will be for men the gate to despair. We gather our thoughts on this day around the subject:

Our wonder before the Poor King.

1. John the Baptist's wonder that Jesus did not take the power in the world.

John had devoted his life, from his grown years, to preparing men for the coming of the kingdom of heaven. Bitter receptions were appointed him, but he held his gaze steadily directed forward: soon he would come, whose latchet he was not worthy to loose, and step to the power. So he still thought when he sat as a prisoner in Herod's fortress. He believed that Jesus of Nazareth was the one who should come, and he waited unceasingly for the day when this King should take his winnowing shovel and cleanse his threshing floor — then the gates of the prison should spring open and humiliation be exchanged for power and freedom, the wicked dominion of the wicked should be crushed and the chaff burned to ashes in the fire that spares none but the righteous. But the day delayed. The Lord's forerunner sat left in his prison, and no one brought him word that Jesus had taken the power. The searching Baptist had to wait in vain. One day a guardsman came with a sword in his hand, and the life of the righteous was extinguished, while "those who wear fine clothes in kings' palaces" held banquet and were glad of the dance and the dancing-girl. Shortly thereafter one seized him "who should come into the world," and nailed him fast to a cross, between two robbers.

Whether it was Jesus' accession to power in this world that John saw before him, he had to wait in vain. But altogether without an answer he did not remain, when from the prison he sent his despairing question: "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" The answer reached him before the guardsman's sword set a period to his earthly life. It was a wonderful answer, and of victory in the visible measure over Herod and his following it did not treat. It ran instead thus: "The poor and the despised get to hear a glad message, among my twelve nearest is a publican, a lame man in Capernaum can walk, a widow in Nain has received her dead son back, those who mourn for the dead receive the forgiveness of sins. — I am the one who is to come, but this is my work, which the Father has given me. Blessed is he for whom I do not become a stumbling block."

2. Our wonder that Christ does not take the power in the world.

The one who first flung out the question, whether Christ really was the one who should come, was the Lord's own forerunner, greater than a prophet, the greatest among those born of

women. It is beforehand quite probable that we shall be weaker in the faith than John the Baptist. And we are not that, either. Now we go about in the prison of our thoughts of men and wait unceasingly for the day when a report from without shall bring us the news that Christian faith and church begin to come to regard in this world. Yet Herod sits at the government. Thrones are overthrown, peoples and tribes are subjugated, and the church's voice drowns in the noise which the princes of the earth love to hear. We know that our God laid the foundation of the world, we know that he brings the stars forth in numbered hosts, we know that he can quench the life-flame of the mighty when it so pleases him. But why then does nothing happen? Here a handful of the faithful listen to the gospel of Christ, here small companies gather to the Lord's holy supper. Is this the king who broke the seal of the grave and "went through the stone hard," the King who now sits at the Father's right hand and before whose judgment seat one day the world's teeming millions and all their princes shall be judged, "each one according to his works"? Why then does nothing happen? "Are you the one who should come, or shall we look for another?"

So go our questions, when we look out into the world. We sit and weigh the latest church figures, swaying between dejection and hope, waiting for the truly refreshing news, which is constantly announced but still delays. From God's hard and blessed word today, the word of the wondering Baptist in the prison, we can learn that we probably must — wait. We ask amiss, and we may ask, until the prison door is opened — for Herod's guardsman with the sword in his hand. Toward him who asks after power, the holy God has never shown any forbearance.

But altogether without an answer we do not remain, any more than John the Baptist. And if we receive the answer we are given, we are led into a confidence for which there never in eternity is a defeat. The world's uttermost threat is death, and since the cross was raised on Golgotha, death is the same as the victory. Who surmised in those days, when the Baptist fell by the sword and Christ was nailed fast to the wood of the cross — who surmised then, that for the generation which of King Herod knew nothing but his destruction, the word of Christ should be the bread of life? Through centuries he has comforted the weary and given healing to the wounded. Through centuries he has ever anew borne the world's sin, and ever new companies have with thanksgiving taken his name upon their lips. So it will go, so long as this earth remains. When the mighty of the day are forgotten and dead to all hearts, Christ shall still be "the light of the world," the victorious King. But "he comes poor, riding upon an ass's foal." He remains "the despised man Christ," "he comes not with hosts, and not with pomp and

splendor”; “with the Spirit’s sword he strives and conquers, when he suffers.” The righteous shall be trampled upon the earth. After the cross, this is victory. But the undisturbed power, the unshaken regard, is the defeat and the powerlessness. Therefore he also who asks after the church’s “state” is given over to anxiety, “a reed that is driven hither and thither by the wind.”

So we receive nevertheless an answer to our question, the same answer which the Baptist received. It does not point up toward the mighty of the world, not out toward great “currents” and “movements,” of which history is written. It points to the poor man, who receives the message without writing in the newspaper of his transformation, the blind man, who receives light upon the way and then goes forward there in quiet, the deaf man, who hears and then — himself silent — continues to hear. The number of such men is not named; figures we never get from the Savior’s mouth. He will lead us away from such counting of unbelief and direct our gaze upon our neighbor. And he adds altogether as when he spoke to the Baptist: “Blessed is he for whom I do not become a stumbling block.” To this no other answer befits us than this: “We believe; help our unbelief!”

3. Our wonder that Christ does not take the power in our life.

Instead of looking out over the world, how evil there sits in the high seat, I can look into my own soul and there meet the same crushing sight. There is the evil root of selfishness, ever ready to put forth new shoots. Pride is exposed and driven out, with much toil, from its lordly palace in the heart, only at once to thrust up its head again, disguised in a new, still worse, mask. There is the coldness toward the neighbor and his distress. There is the fire of lust, of which ravaged fields bear witness. And I have Christ for King and would be his servant! Why does the Lord not take the power, why does he not kill and destroy the sin in my inward part, why does he not transform me once for all? Have I any right at all to speak of God, I who, despite years of nothing but mercy, am still a prisoner in the prison that is called I Myself? Is it really Christ who shall save me from this body of death? “Are you the one who is to come, or shall I look for another?”

If you ask thus, then the Savior gives you this answer: “So long as you speak thus, you have your sight and are no longer blind; so long as you speak thus, you can hear the Word and are no longer deaf. A message of joy I proclaim to you in your poverty: Every day you shall receive from my mouth the forgiveness of sins; every day I shall give you life, if you will come to me with your leprosy. My grace is sufficient for you, for strength is made perfect in weakness.”

It is not for his power that the Lord will use us as instruments, but for his mercy. Therefore he works no wonders of transformation with us, but lets us ourselves live upon his constant mercy. As he himself was a hidden King, so also shall our righteousness be hidden in this world. As he himself conquered by suffering, not by ruling, so he will also lead us into the life of humble forbearance, not into that of plenary strength. Through the water of baptism and the bread and wine of the supper, through the Word spoken by sinful men, through that which is lowly in the eyes of the world, he comes again to us as a “poor King, riding upon the foal of a working she-ass.” And on the veil that hides all his glory, all his divine power, stand these words written: “Blessed is he for whom I do not become a stumbling block.” You may turn your gaze away from your sin, up toward the poor King, and say: “I believe; help my unbelief.” Amen.

The God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, he shall perfect, support, strengthen, and establish you. To him belongs the dominion for ever and ever. Amen.