

Sermon at Devotions at a Mission Sale

Gustaf Wingren

Psalms 46:11 · 1943

It is only in small type that the news from the mission fields stands written in the daily press. It looks unassuming among all the other news-items, which crowd for space and compete to seize the large letters. Sometimes one can almost forget that this work goes on as a continual breaking of new ground: that every day there is some village, some person, who has never heard of Christ before, never seen a Bible — but who today, for the first time, hears this word, for the first time opens the book of books. Even during this war new messengers have gone out from our country, young Swedes who had never been abroad before. [One sentence illegible in the manuscript.] It is a strange thing to think of such a newly ordained missionary, trying to get through Europe in order to reach his small field of work in Africa or Asia. It is a strange thing to think how often, on this journey, his path is crossed by other travelers, hardened professional politicians, who are also moving through Europe today with the destinies of whole peoples and lands in their portfolios.

What would one of these great ones of the world think, if he knew that the young man in the crowd at the great railway station is a missionary, a man who also, in his own way, thinks in continents — though as a servant in an enterprise far more unassuming than politics is for the moment: a servant of the world mission? Probably he would feel neither enmity nor contempt for the young man, but pity. How can one give one's life to anything so meaningless as preaching Christianity to Chinese and Negroes in these days, when the destiny of the world is decided with sword and blood — and with treaties that are made to be broken?

Yes, that is how it looks now. After two thousand years it may look a little different.

What person in Rome, the capital of the world, in the first century, did not know the emperor and his following? His name was on everyone's lips. He was the lord of the world. But who today knows the names of these emperors and lords? Of many of them it is true that the one whose work it is to study must keep track of them; but even he forgets them and must look them up again in some reference book. How could one keep in memory the names of all the insignificant people of whom history is full? But one day a ship put in at Rome's harbor town,

and a prisoner from Jerusalem stepped ashore, a plain man, who was to visit a company of fellow believers in the great city. He met his friends on the Appian Way, and he praised God. That man's name you can ask for in any Swedish elementary-school class you please, and you will see many small hands in the air: Paul.

Or how many today know the names of the contending mighty families in the North at the beginning of our millennium? Of all the names in the history of Sweden in the centuries nearest after the year 800, there is surely only one that is truly commonly known: the name of a monk who fought his way through the forests, suffered shipwreck, but went on, and at last stood before the leader of the Northmen to speak to them of "White Christ" — Ansgar. Everything looks a little different after two thousand years, or after a thousand.

*For God, the highest wonder-worker,
can raise up and can bring low.*

And if in our thoughts we return to that quiet and fleeting meeting, in one of the capitals of Europe, between the man of politics and the servant of the mission, we can perhaps, after a little reflection, agree that the young missionary, with calm and boldness and good Christian irony, can meet the superior diplomat's pitying look. He can think to himself: "Your 'statecraft' and your intrigue and your wars do hinder us a little in our work, but it does not matter so much. The church can wait, for she has eternity on her side. God builds slowly, but his work stands, which is not true of the works of men. 'All flesh is grass, and all its glory like a flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades — but the word of our God remains forever.'"

It is truly so, that "the word of God remains forever." There is no noise around the word of God, but around quite other things. From that one can be led to believe that it is the great and mighty of this world who have the strength, while the word of God is weak. But what does it mean if some power can for a time capture people's minds, if this power does not stand in the course of time, but falls asunder, ages, and dies? So the power of the world does. The word, God's word, has on the contrary this astonishing power to stand, this freshness and continual "newness."

But it is true: a single people can despise and reject the word of God. We spoke just now of Paul. It is almost uncanny to think how it now looks in the regions where many of Paul's letters were written and read. The lands around the eastern and southern Mediterranean were the cradle of the first Christendom — Antioch, Alexandria. Now these lands are heathen

realms, as far from Christ as they were before the apostles traveled through them with the proclamation of the gospel. Partly through war and violence — Arabs, Turks — partly through people's spiritual indifference, Christianity drew back and heathenism welled up again. At the same time the gospel wandered north instead, step by step up toward the heart of Europe, in the direction of our country, where our forefathers then still lived in ignorance of him who was crucified and rose. In time the message of Christ reached Sweden also — we named Ansgar just now. Through the whole of our history this divine power has sought to take possession of our people and press into it.

How does the case stand now? The church history of our own time really holds only two features that matter: the mission's slow victorious advance in Africa and Asia, and the de-Christianizing here at home. We must consider that what is now happening out there on the mission fields among the colored peoples is the same as what happened here a thousand years ago: new spiritual powers are being set in, previously unknown, which shall [illegible word] the events of the future out there. When Christianity came here to us, heathenism was at the same time advancing down there in the birth-lands of Christianity. Nothing prevents heathenism from now advancing among us, at the same time as the word of God wins victories among the colored. That the gospel is despised and rejected by single persons or single peoples is no sign of God's powerlessness. Single persons can despise the sun and shut themselves into the dark. Then it is not the sun, but these persons. The sun goes on shining over other persons, who receive its warmth and light and get life from it.

Here we truly have reason to think of the word in the forty-sixth psalm: "Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth." It is otherwise the case that we here at home, in our limited little world, see only one of the two important features in the church history of our time. We see the de-Christianizing here, that there are fewer people in church, the growing spiritual slackness, and so on. At the sight of this we are easily seized by discouragement, as if our God were a frail and powerless God, without might. Here we need to look both backward into history and outward toward the foreign continents. Here the mission is a source of strength for our faith. "Be still, and know that I am God." Under the day's farce, whose sensations are blared out by news bulletins and newspapers, God is building his work, eternal, unsearchable, holy. It is a great thing to be in on this work, perhaps the only great thing that is now happening.

Yes, the enormous difficulties with which Christianity now has to struggle in Europe have a still closer connection with the gospel's advance on the mission field. One of the greatest hindrances in the mission's way used to be the coupling of Christianity and European conquest of the world. When the missionary came to the colored peoples — for example at the end of the last century and the beginning of this — he was regarded by the African and the Asian as a representative of that master-people in Europe to which he belonged. He was one of these "whites," who for centuries had practiced oppression and exploited natural resources. The religion he proclaimed was the cherished state religion in the exploiting lands of Europe. So many of the native people still think today. But in the degree that the European missionary's homeland is de-Christianized, in the degree that the church in Europe is persecuted, in the same degree everything becomes different on the mission field. Then it becomes plain to the native people in general that Christianity and Europe are not the same thing. The missionary comes with a message that is persecuted in his own homeland, persecuted, that is, by the same power that practices oppression on the colored. Then the native people listen in a wholly different way than before. The word gets its power back when it becomes alone. It is not impossible that the future of Christianity today is this: increased adversity in Europe, and for that very reason new victories on the mission field. The blood of martyrs is seed.

It can happen that the peoples of Europe turn back to the Christian faith. It stands in the balance, and the question will surely be decided in this century. Whatever happens, it is God's will that happens. We must not waver in our faith before the spiritual decay here at home, even if it is going to remain and become still worse than now. It once pleased our God to lay the Holy Land in the hands of heathen, to lay the birthplace of the Christian faith, by the eastern and southern Mediterranean, under unbelief, at the same time as the gospel went on up through Europe, to us in the North. Such a thing can happen yet once more. The gospel is eternal and stands, whatever happens. "Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth."

But who can feel any joy in his heart before such a possibility for the future? We are, with every fiber of our being, woven together with our people. And we who have our home in the church, we also feel this almost painful belonging with those who are Swedes as we are, and who meet us in the everyday, but who never set foot in the temple, never feel the heart beat when the hymn surges out, never bend the knee at the altar or listen for the voice of God. They are blood of our blood and flesh of our flesh. Our sure faith, that God's word and promise

shall stand to the end of the ages, must give birth to this prayer in us: that God would awaken our own people. And it must call us up to work, and to an honest zeal for the advance of God's kingdom in our immediate neighborhood, here in our land, here in our town. So far as it depends on us, no possibility may be left untried of reaching people with the word of life — and of reaching our own. The respite has not yet run out. The leaf can turn. There are signs that the Swedish people may be on the way toward this great thing: once more to “be still, and know that the Lord is God.”

The terrible events that have been played out, and are now being played out, in our Nordic neighboring lands, are a witness to us of how it goes when those who have the power have deliberately set the word of God aside. It is an enormous responsibility to be a Christian in this time, when the destiny of the future for Europe is undoubtedly being decided: either new heathen forms of religion, or Christianity. The Church of Sweden still has the possibility, in full freedom, to bear her witness to God's works where she will, as often as she will, and as much as she will. And she carries on, as is right, this her proclaiming work among Swedish countrymen even outside the church building. The Church of Sweden does a seeking work also among our own brothers in the people. One such branch of the work is the care of seamen, which is also supported by the mission society that has invited us to this sale today. The seamen's pastor does the same work toward our own as the missionary does among foreign peoples. Both are equally worthy of our willingness to give.

Let us close with a prayer for all the work through which the word of God is carried out to people on our whole wounded earth. Let us pray.

Translator's notes. Swedish Psalm 46:11 is English 46:10. The two gaps marked in brackets are marked illegible in the typescript itself; they have not been filled. The politician's phrase “kineser och negrer,” and Wingren's own “färgade folk,” are kept in the English of 1943. To update them would be to correct the sermon, not to translate it. “Missionsförsäljning” is a mission sale, a fundraising sale, not a sale of missions. The hymn couplet is given for sense, not as a metrical stanza. The closing prayer is announced and not written out in the readable text.

Gustaf Wingren · draft translation ·