

SERMON

Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent

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Matthew 4:1–11 · 11 February 1940 · Gamleby

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Gamleby Church

Text: Matthew 4:1–11

Hymns: 349:2; 77:1–3; 25:4; 346:1–3 (134:1–3); 71:7–8 (123:7–8)

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

Let us pray. Read Psalm 93:1, 4.

The most remarkable words in the whole of our text are the first sentence: “At that time Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness, to be tempted by the devil.”

We readily imagine that life in God is a life of unmixed joy and a sense of victory. We do notice, to be sure, that our life as Christians is not always found on such heights. We are at times led into times of weakness, times of melancholy, wilderness times. But such dark times we do not regard as God’s times — on the contrary: then we believe that God is gone, that he no longer deals with us. When we come up again to a summit, then we think that God has come near to us again.

This view of the spiritual life is a modern thought, and, like most modern thoughts, false and incorrect. In the Bible we can learn otherwise. It does no harm to go through Holy Scripture with particular attention to the significance that is there assigned to time. Distress has its time, salvation its. Silence, waiting, has its time, speaking its. The one is God’s time just as much as the other. In distress and in victory God deals with us, though in different ways. Gone he never is.

Christ had been at the Jordan and had received baptism from John the Baptist. He had received confirmation of his election through the voice from heaven: “This is my beloved Son, in whom I have found delight.” His incomprehensibly high standing had become clear to

himself, and the surmise that he, Jesus of Nazareth, stood above all others, had taken hold of the Baptist's mind and the minds of the rest. So the Master had stood on a mountain height in the realm of the spirit; he had perceived certainty and power and seen the holy calling.

According to the law that holds in the kingdom of God, he was now ready to be led from his mountain height in the world of the spirit out into the dry wilderness, so that the devil might have opportunity to tempt him. So, once and for all, the unsearchable God deals.

This is nothing that applies to Christ alone. The Christian life consists, for ever, in this: that strength is given for a way in the valley of the shadow of death. The distress that consists in outward suffering and powerlessness does not come from the devil but from God. He leads us out into the wilderness.

But the evil that consists in sin and in temptation to sin does not come from God but from the devil. "...he was to be tempted by the devil." And in what, then, does the temptation consist? We see it from our text. Christ was tempted to make stones into bread, when hunger pressed him. He was tempted, by a miracle that all the people would see — the leap from the wall of the sanctuary — to come forward as a Messiah mighty in outward respects. He was tempted, by falling on his knees before the devil's power, to become a prince over the riches and dominions of this world. There is something common to all these three temptations. The temptations are one single temptation, namely this: to turn aside from the way of lowliness, the way of hiddenness, the way of the wilderness, to turn aside from serving and instead to seize power, power in the world.

We all know that Christ otherwise worked miracles. But the miracles then belonged to his servant-work. It was for the good of others that all the Saviour's miracles took place: his healing of the sick, his feeding of the poor, his raising of the dead. This was his commission, which the Father had given him. "A servant of servants came, the Lord of all lords." For that very reason he was also to be a "man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." Every step up toward power and esteem and honour in the eyes of this world would for him have been a step aside from the appointed way. The way appointed by the Father in heaven led, namely, inescapably down toward the cross of Golgotha, not up toward the pinnacles of honour. He was equipped with a power that could have made his life a shining point in the history that deals with earthly power and genius and honour. But he, the greatest of the sons of the earth, lived a life that not one of the historians of his own time even noticed. The only testimonies we possess concerning his life on earth are the words we find in our New Testament, carried

on to us thanks to a few poor Galilean fishermen and their brothers in the faith. This lowliness, this contemptible clothing for the gospel, was the Father's will. Every addition of splendour, every mixing with the ridiculous finery of this earth, would have made the poor sinner uncertain whether the gospel was for him. And that must not happen. It is for poor sinners, without hope in the world, that the gospel exists. It is for them that the Saviour gave his life on the cross of disgrace.

Therefore the splendid offers in the wilderness were the devil's offers. What Christ was there tempted to do was, for his own part, to take power and gain without thereby serving anyone. He was enticed with "happiness, bread, and honour" for himself, for his own plenitude of power. He was tempted to become a ruler instead of a servant. It was the same enticement that reached him through Peter, when Peter would dissuade him from entering upon the way of suffering and said: "This shall by no means happen to you, Lord!" Christ rejected the temptation both times in the same way. He saw the way of disgrace and of death and knew that he must walk it. He says to Peter, as he said to the tempter in the wilderness: "Be gone, Satan." — "I have come to serve and to give my life as a ransom for many."

This, now, is likewise nothing that applies to Christ alone. To be sure, we can never, as he did, fulfil the will of God. The righteousness we have is, on the contrary, his righteousness, which is given to us in the word of the forgiveness of sins. But what holds of Christ's life and work holds also of us in this way: that what for Christ was the good is also, in our struggle on earth, the good, and what for Christ was the evil is also, in our struggle, the evil. Sin is selfishness. Righteousness is serving, the will to forgo, to be of help to others. Let us look a little more closely at what this implies.

What God requires of us is faithful service toward the neighbour. "You know that the kings act toward their peoples as rulers, and those who have authority among the peoples call themselves 'gracious lords'; but so it is not with you; rather, he who is greatest among you, let him be as the youngest, and he who is the foremost, let him be as a servant." In these words of Christ is given, for all times, the commanding order to his true disciples. Sin is not this or that outward thing; sin is the will that wants to draw back from the servant's place and instead arrogate to itself power, pleasure, a lord's standing. All our ineradicable striving upward, all our flight from what is lowly and despised to what is great and mighty — all this in us is what must stand in shame before the cross of Golgotha, where the world's most glorious man and God's own image is given up among robbers and criminals. It is this selfish desire to assert

ourselves that we ought to give heed to and regard as our constant temptation. It is this self-glory that is sin. Who believes he will be rid of that power in his soul? Who has the face to claim that he has conquered this desire simply to have it good, to escape being tormented for the sake of others? Who dares, before the suffering and crucified One, open his mouth and begin to speak of his own righteousness? He who has clearly seen what Christ's work implies, and who also knows that this life of Christ is for us the pattern before which we shall one day stand for judgment, he cannot take any other word upon his lips than this: "In the hour of death, at the last judgment, help us, gracious Lord God!"

If we grasp sin aright, if we understand what sin is, then we also understand that temptation is not something we have to fight against now and then, but that our whole life, from the cradle to the grave, is a struggle between God and the devil in us, an unceasing strife in which the two enemies — God, or the will to serve, and the devil, or the will to power — storm against one another without turning back. That strife surges back and forth in us as long as life lasts. But our text about Christ's temptations has perhaps something to teach us in this respect also, that it tells us when the devil's attack is launched at its worst. Christ's struggle against temptation begins after the baptism, when the high words had been spoken over him, that he was the only-begotten Son, in whom the Father was well pleased. And it is precisely to this high calling, this surpassing spiritual experience, it is precisely to this that the temptation is tied. "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread!" — "If you are the Son of God, cast yourself down...!" It is by no means to what is low and base that the devil's voice urges. He does not seek to make the Lord Christ doubt his high calling. On the contrary. He confirms the high spiritual standing; he attaches his enticement precisely to that truth which God himself proclaimed on the bank of the Jordan — that the carpenter's son was the elect one.

We must not imagine that the devil has changed his procedure. Our worst temptations, too, come to meet us in the days of success, when we have won, when high spiritual experiences have been granted us, when people admire us. All other temptations are child's play compared with that in which we are enticed to use our success in spiritual things in order to gain power, when we are tempted, precisely as Christians, to be selfish. Nor is any sin more abominable in God's eyes than this — nothing of all that which we in our ignorance count as gross sins: fornication, immorality, drunkenness. We must surely notice, if we read our New Testament, that those who come with such gross sins to the Saviour — harlots and tax collectors, the most despised of all people — to them he holds out the gift of the forgiveness of

sins without limit, without restriction. It is over the irreproachable Pharisees, who never in their whole life committed a gross sin, that the unsparing judgment goes. Why?

The gross sinner, who has seen his misery, his wretchedness — he lets God be God. He bows under the judgment of the Holy One; he says: have mercy on me, have grace on me, Lord! And God is, once and for all, the God of grace, of mercy: over against him who knows himself to be a sinner, God is allowed to be such as he is; God is allowed to be God.

But when I, in self-regard over my spiritual life, when I on my height in the realm of the spirit look with pleasure upon myself, then I put God off the seat; then I no longer let him alone be good; then I myself take the throne that belongs to God, the Almighty. Then I shut the way for his grace toward my poor heart.

This is the root sin. And the fearful powerlessness of Christianity in our people today may be due to this: that we who are in the Church of Sweden are, on the whole, victims of that sin without knowing it. It may be that the powerlessness of the Church does not depend on the others, those who stand outside the Church, being such gross and dreadful sinners. It may be that the powerlessness instead depends on our, who are inside the Church, making God small by not acknowledging ourselves to be dust and ashes before him. Christ's gospel was once the message of unrestricted mercy and forgiveness to despised and reviled sinners. Have we remade this gospel so that it is instead to suit the sinless one, who needs no forgiveness? It is possible enough to win victories in that way too, but then it is not God who conquers, but the world.

But when we consider that it is the flight from despised serving that is the sin and the temptation before all others, then we ought surely to thank God that he also sends wilderness times upon us. In the days of success self-complacency grows; in the time of distress and of being held in low esteem God teaches us humility and trust in him alone. May we then also learn the simple and faithful serving in what is lowly and inconspicuous! For Lord and Master we have him who took the form of a servant when he came in human form, him who humbled himself and became obedient unto death, yes, unto death on the cross. However our way goes, up toward the height or down into the depth, into success or down into adversity and distress, we will always bear this word in our heart: "Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life." Amen.

Blessed be God.....

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