

SERMON

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent

Gustaf Wingren

Matthew 27:15–26 · 1940

High Mass, 10 March 1940

Gamleby Church

Text: Matthew 27:15–26

Hymns: 79:1–2; 76:1–4; 94; 88; 73:4

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

Reading of Swedish Hymnal 71:1, 3, 6, 8.

Reading of the text.

“Lord, we pray you to write these words in our hearts.”

The choice between Jesus and Barabbas.

The text we have heard urges us to gather our thoughts around this theme. There are four truths in it that we must especially take note of.

I. Pilate wanted to avoid choosing either Jesus or Barabbas.

Pilate was the Roman official. He had probably sipped at the rich cultural heritage of his time, and he was what one calls an “educated” man. He had surely read the philosophers — not much, perhaps, but he must have skimmed off something, enough to be able to talk about it in an easy tone, as the “educated” man likes to do. He had taken in the doubt, already old by then, that anything is really true, as his weary question to the Master shows: “What is truth?” He felt, of course, that he stood above the tumult that now filled the people’s minds. The simple people, the masses, could make their choice between Jesus and Barabbas. He himself, the distinguished Roman, had no need to take a stand. He had other and considerably more refined teachers to edify his soul with, from the classical schools of philosophy of ancient Greece.

Pilate is a living man in the highest degree. He is still found today in our Swedish people. Things have come to the point among us that it is almost counted a sign of education not to take a stand on Christ at all — precisely that: not to take a stand. Open denial, undisguised mockery of Christ, is admittedly not quite the thing any longer. It seems a little out of date, and even a little uncultivated, thinks the modern Pilate. The open and clear hatred of Christianity, which was in a way an honest opponent after all, has been replaced by a cool indifference that thinks it can avoid taking a stand at all. To be sure, one does not want to declare for Barabbas. One wants to keep far from violence, from the plain crime. One wants nothing to do with the powers in Europe today that barbarously fight against the Christian faith. By no means does one want to choose Barabbas.

But on the other hand — to stand up and confess Christ, that is really too much to ask of an educated man. To bow one's head in prayer, to go into God's house with a hymnal in one's hand — no, that seems a little too much like the peasantry after all. Simple folk, the masses, must have such clear and plain and tangible lines: either hate-filled struggle against Christianity, or else a plain and true-hearted confession of Jesus Christ — either Jesus or Barabbas. But a really "fine," "educated" person has so many other possibilities. He need not choose between two such extremes. He has the great thinkers and authors, whom he can understand and make his own, unlike the simple people. If one is really educated, one can perhaps even work out a quite personal, private view of life for oneself, one that is all one's own. "Each one is saved in his own way, after all." What is truth? No truth really exists in and of itself. Each one must come to a conviction of his own, and this view of his own is then a personal truth. No other truth exists, one thinks.

II. All the same, the choice stood between Jesus and Barabbas.

In reality there was no third possibility. Pilate has gone down in history as the man who released Barabbas and condemned Jesus to death.

Even today the choice stands between Jesus and Barabbas. Whoever, like Pilate, wants to avoid taking a stand chooses Barabbas, even if he does not know it.

Anyone who has eyes to see with and ears to hear with can make sure of this by watching, calmly and without prejudice, what is happening out there in the peoples and lands where the spiritual battle for the soul of Europe is now being fought. How have all the "refined" views of life fared under the governments that have set Barabbas before people's eyes, larger than life?

How has the much-praised personal conviction fared among the representatives of education in general? The ranks have given way — as they must give way, once the thought that anything is true, true regardless of people's opinions and feelings, has been given up. Once the proposition has been set up that my personal conviction is true for me, what is to keep me from happening to become personally convinced that racial persecution, and other things besides, are right? The weary, doubt-sick attitude to life that asks with Pilate, "What is truth?" is bound to burst when the spiritual battle begins in earnest. It crumbles, and people end up in two camps, both of which go into battle without wavering or hesitating any longer. We have seen that the only power out there in Europe that holds its ground is the despised Christian church, small and few in number, but firmly resolved to meet hardness with hardness. Whoever does not choose Christ, then, does not stand above the choice. He himself takes part and chooses, even though the choice falls on Barabbas.

It may be many years yet, but one day the people of Sweden too will surely come to that choice. The state we have lived in for some decades can be nothing but "times of waiting." That a people keeps a church which, in heart and deed, is embraced only by a limited band within the people can be nothing but a makeshift while it waits for the decision. But it may well happen that the hour of decision is put off until Barabbas has come a little closer to us, so that the act of choosing becomes clear and simple: Jesus or Barabbas. And when it comes to this choice, let us not lull ourselves too easily with any hopes. For the third simple truth that the text urges us to stop at is this:

III. The people chose Barabbas.

The men saw the silent, suffering Master from Nazareth side by side with the well-known criminal Barabbas. They were free to say which one they wanted to choose as their man. And they cried out loud and clear: "Barabbas." To the question, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" the answer came just as clear and unmistakable: "Let him be crucified!" And the men got what they wanted. Barabbas's chains were loosed, and he was let out a free man. Jesus of Nazareth bared his shoulders, the blows of the scourge fell on his body, and then the cross was laid on his shoulders.

Whoever believes that this tells us something only about the Jewish people is thoroughly mistaken. Barabbas has a secret ally in every human heart. The human soul is a fearful riddle, and the deeper the eye goes into its hidden shaft, the more fearful it is. There is a secret delight in violence deep in the soul, a fascination with brutality, a worship of raw and

unpredictable strength. This love of darkness can sleep. But ask some gray-haired man who has lived through, say, a revolution in a people, the overthrow of a state, and you can hear something of what it looks like when this lust for destruction, this death drive, wakes up. Then the beast of prey raises its head, after being held down and suppressed for years. Then the mask is torn from man's face, and all the uncanny notions that used to rise in secret in the soul, in its closed room, suddenly become reality in broad daylight. The choice of Barabbas instead of Christ is not as strange as it first appears. It is a fearful thing to say, but the truth is that there is something truly human in choosing that way.

IV. But in the fourth place: God chose Christ.

An Easter morning dawned after the night of Golgotha. Barabbas, the people's choice, lived out his life without being of any use to the world, as far as we know. But the scourged and reviled Nazarene broke the seal of the grave, to live through all generations, to heal the wounded [?], to shine over the darkness of the earth. And even if a whole people rejects him again today, it does not change by a hair's breadth God's choice of him to be Lord of the world. One day, all the same, it will be made plain that it is we human beings who must stand trial before him, not he before us. And we who belong to him in this barren time may know that his position as Lord stands firm, even if the whole of Europe rejects him. That only means that the whole of Europe stands under God's judgment. It does not shake God's sovereign rule of the world. Just as the people's choice of Barabbas instead of Jesus, that time before Pilate, could not shake God's resolve to bless his created world through Christ, so the peoples today, with their worship of violence and the sword, cannot make God's majesty tremble. The only thing the choice of Barabbas brings about is new streams of blood, which are demanded of Barabbas's followers themselves, as they were then. The people cried, "His blood be on us and on our children," and so it happened. Jerusalem was leveled to the ground a generation after the cross was raised on Golgotha. God remained God, and Christ, the one rejected by men, remained his only-begotten Son. The light was set to shine for other peoples, who did not persist in trying to put it out.

So whoever has put his trust in God can never despair of God's power to bring his work to victory. When, humanly speaking, was there less reason for hope than at the moment when Barabbas's chains were loosed and Christ was led away to be crucified? And yet this very thing was the way to Christ's eternal victory, which had to be won through the agony of the cross. God's possibilities always lie beyond the limit our eyes can reach. That still holds today.

But the faithful Christian does not have his heart only with God. He also loves his own people, grown together with it, as he is, with every fiber of his heart. And if he never needs to despair of God's victory, he knows instead that the Almighty may very well give his people up to ruin, just as Israel, the people of his own possession, was given up to ruin. Who can think of this without feeling his heart shrink in his breast? Who can be wholly comforted that God always conquers, if at the same time the people of Sweden is to be swallowed up by the darkness? But this darkness is inevitable unless our choice turns out different from the choice of the Jews. Now Christ and Barabbas are set before us again, more clearly every day. We can choose Barabbas in a flock, but we cannot choose Christ in a flock. "One by one we must climb to the cross that atones for all." Every single person must choose Christ day by day, and subdue Barabbas in his own heart. A Christian people is a people whose individual citizens, in daily struggle, make this choice again and again: they say yes to the King of love, to suffering and sacrifice, and they say no to their own lust, no to selfishness, no to the evil heart that secretly worships brutal self-assertion and the raw strength of Barabbas. Whoever, quietly and without many words, holds to Christ in the thousand small things of everyday life and stifles Barabbas in his own breast does a deed on behalf of our whole people. He lays his own heart, like a ballot, in the box at the fateful election that will decide whether our people is to have Christ or Barabbas as its King. In this decision everything hangs on the struggle against the selfishness of one's own mind. For "if I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing." "Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant." This is the victory over Barabbas. Amen.

Let us pray. (G.b. = the Gospel Book.)

Translator's notes. Wingren numbers his four truths in the text (I, II, "the third simple truth," "in the fourth place"); the numbering is made uniform here, I-IV, without adding anything. "Hela den sargade" after the resurrection is read as "to heal the wounded" (hela, to heal), but the object is unclear, so it is marked [?]. The quoted line "En och en vi måste stiga" is not identified in the sermon and is translated for sense. The closing note "(e.b. = evangelieboken)" is his own reference to the prayer in the Gospel Book.

Gustaf Wingren · draft translation ·