

SERMON

Sermon at High Mass on Candlemas

Gustaf Wingren

Luke 2:(22–32) 33–40 · 28 January 1940

In Gamleby Church.

Text: Luke 2:22–32.

Psalms: 3:1, 32:1–4, 305:4–5, 4:1–4, 21:2–3.

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

You power over wind and clouds,

you power over life and years,

who constantly renews all

and breaks all into fragments,

with destinies and with the hour

in Christmas's evening fire

you stand, and the seed gleams

in the sower's hand.

Give psaltery and lyre,

when toil is made long for us,

do not deprive us of the precious,

the sweet desire for song.

Let our days resound.

Like wind in green meadows,

like sea in wave motion. Amen

Candlemas! It is the mass of the consecration of light. All the newly cast white candles that were to burn in the church's candlesticks had first to be consecrated before they were allowed to be lit to the Lord's honor. And so Candlemas Day was made the day on which the candles were solemnly consecrated.

That time is past. We no longer consider that we ought to arrange special celebration days for the consecration of external things. But precisely on Candlemas Day this year we do have something similar on hand. Today we put a new chorale book into use. Just as the ancients with wonder and expectation looked upon the many still unused candles that were to shine through the coming Sundays of the year—under the lingering winter's passion Sundays, under spring's Easter and Pentecost festivals, under summer's even stream of Sundays after Trinity and under autumn's Michaelmas and the new winter's Christmas masses—in the same way as the ancients with wonder and expectation regarded all these lights, in the same way we look forward to the time that is coming, when new melodies shall now and then reach our ear during the services. The new song shall sound over the way we go. So may it be permitted us on a day such as this to gather our thoughts around this theme: The Christian song. We can so much the more readily do this, since our preaching text, Candlemas Day's gospel, which was just read from the altar, deals precisely with song. The text bears the superscription: Simeon's song of praise. What does this gospel have to teach us about the Christian song? There are three things that we are urged to pause before when we more closely consider our narrative of the old Simeon and his song of praise.

First. The Christian song's right place is the temple.

It is true that our whole life, our everyday life, shall be a song: "speak to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, and sing and make melody to the Lord in your hearts," the apostle urges in the letter to the Ephesians. And that home is happy in which the psalm sounds. But we also know that this song, this everyday psalm during the workweek, ought to be an echo of the Sunday service's song in the temple. The psalms' right accompanist is the church organ and its right place is the pews under the temple vault. For the one who has accustomed his heart thereto, there are few things in the world that give a purer joy than the psalm's change through the church year: Advent's firm and powerful admonition to prepare the way for the Lord, Christmas morning's rushing chorale, Lent's quiet thanksgiving to the man of sorrows, which reaches its holy high point on Good Friday only to be exchanged three

days later for the jubilant praise and glory: "What light over the grave, he lives, O joy!" Pentecost's spirit psalms fill us with a peculiarly clear joy, bound as it is with the sight of the young throng of communion children at the Lord's altar. Immediately thereafter the mild summer is greeted over our whole land with the safe and thankful tones of "The time of blossom now comes, with delight and beauty great."

Thus the temple shelters our life and our song. There is reason to emphasize this on Candlemas Day. For that day also bears, as we have all seen, another name: the Virgin Mary's Churching Day. The first part of our text tells us how Joseph and Mary brought our Lord and Savior, as a little child, up into the fathers' temple. If they thus showed faithfulness toward the Jewish temple, which Christ nevertheless in a spiritual sense would tear down, then it befits us also to show such faithfulness toward our temple, the one consecrated to the Lord. To this we are also urged by the old Simeon, of whom the gospel thereafter deals. Of him it is said that "he came by the Spirit's impulse into the sanctuary." There, in the temple's embrace, he found the Christ-child. There he struck up his song of praise over the Lord's salvation, the light for the Gentiles and the glory for Israel. So may also our Christian song rise up toward the temple vaults.

Thither with father and mother we have gone,

There the child's prayer lifted its wing

There for the Lord God we have stood

Together at the altar rail

There was our first communion,

There at Christmas and Easter our song

Has united itself with our fathers.

But from Simeon's song in Jerusalem's temple we learn, second, that the Christian song is a song to Christ.

The gathering superscription for Candlemas Day's texts and prayers is the single short word "The Revelation." And the revelation is Christ, the image of God's essence and the reflection of His glory. In him the Father in heaven has made known his heart and his will. In his suffering God himself was active to crush the law's power and for eternal times to give us the

gospel of mercy. Therefore it is the salvation that Simeon's thanksgiving concerns, when he takes the little child in his arms and begins his song, God's salvation in Jesus Christ. Thus the old singer in Jerusalem's temple teaches us that our song is superficial and empty if it is not innermost and deepest a song to Christ and of Christ.

If it were so that the Christian congregation were a fellowship for mutual admiration and for the praise of human works, then it would suit very well that the Christian song were a song about people and their good deeds. If it were so that we through our piety and holiness paved the way up to God in heaven and stood in his judgment, then it would be particularly fitting that the Christian song were a hymn to man's pure heart and unselfish mind. But now it is not so. Certainly we can cease in our thoughts to occupy ourselves with the earth and its things and instead turn our mind and our interest toward spiritual and religious subjects. But thereby we do not become free from our incurable seeking after our own, our own beautiful moods, self-love and pride, which precisely as spiritual pride, religious arrogance, is more intolerable than ever the purely worldly haughtiness can be. Christ's Cross teaches us how deep sin sits in us: when God was to reveal himself in human form, it did not go with less than that people crucified his revealer. But Christ's Resurrection teaches us that in the midst of people's evil, which led the Son up onto the Cross's tree, in the midst of that evil God performs his work. God was in Christ on the cross, and therefore love and mercy never suffered defeat. The Savior prayed for the coarse soldiers who divided his clothes, and he brought salvation and love's message to the robber at his side. "Therefore God has also highly exalted him—Christ—above all things." He gave him victory over death in Easter morning's watch. Since then Christ lives and is near us, invisible, as Lord over sin and all our evil. In faith in him the daily gift of the forgiveness of sins is extended to us. In faith in him we dare look forward toward death and judgment. Therefore the Christian song deals with Christ and not with ourselves. Therefore it is Christ's name that is praised the church year round, in Christmas's, Good Friday's and Easter's psalms, yes even in Pentecost's, inasmuch as the Holy Spirit is none other than Christ's Spirit. Just as Simeon's song in the temple was a song to him, the King of Revelation, so may also our song be it.

Our brother now you have become,
to us for great joy and honor.

You will always be near us

and grant us all good.

What do the world's threats and scorn concern us?

Our brother is God's own Son,

who can now destroy us?

Precisely because the song in the temple is a song to Christ, it is also a song of praise. With that we have come to the third and last thing that the text gives us occasion to say about the Christian song.

—Simeon praised God.—It cannot be otherwise. He who sings of Christ believes in him, and he who believes in him must praise and thank him.

[Editorial note on the page: this section from the psalm verse is the original which was later crossed out, probably in connection with this sermon having been used as a devotion on another occasion]

[Here begins “the devotion,” which is seen through this page having received number one in a new numbering]

[Handwritten note left blank: do not guess handwriting]

In Acts chapter 16 stand some lines in bold type about Paul and Silas during their short imprisonment in Philippi, the imprisonment they fell into because they had healed a young girl who was possessed by an evil spirit. When the apostle and his companion had been stripped of their clothes and been whipped with rods, they were led into the deepest dungeon, where their feet were fastened in the stocks. And now come the short and gripping lines: “At midnight Paul and Silas were engaged in prayer and praised God with song, and the other prisoners heard them.” Imprisoned for a good cause, with backs bleeding from the rod-beating and with the immovable wooden stocks locked around them, they praise God with song as midnight approaches. “And the other prisoners heard them.”

(The other place in our New Testament where the song of praise is directly mentioned is in the narrative of Jesus' last night together with his disciples, between Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, when death and suffering broke in over the little throng. It says: “When they had sung the hymn of praise, they went out to the Mount of Olives”—out to meet the power of

darkness.) (addition, probably when parts of this sermon were used as a devotion on another occasion)

Our situation is considerably more comfortable than these both (the word “both” crossed out, probably in connection with the devotion) confessors’ situation was. But how often does the song of praise rise from our lips? And how often do the other prisoners hear us? For prisoners we all are. In these days “Fear” is the prison that surrounds us on all sides. Anxiety for the future holds us in its iron-hard grip and Anguish (exchanged for “the worry” in the devotion variant) is the scourge of our shoulders. It may well happen that someone thinks the song of praise outright unsuitable in a time such as this. But it is only the cheap song of praise to people that leaves a stale taste in the mouth and that our conscience has the right to silence. The Christian song of praise need not be silent in times of lament. It is the song of Him who conquered death and darkness. The joy over Easter finds itself on the other side of all superficial optimism, for Golgotha’s night remains as the Easter light’s eternal background. The Christian song of praise comes out of the Great Affliction, it sounds out of the darkness—it is the Song at Midnight. Therefore the external need must not tune down our song: on the contrary, the external need has since Christianity’s first days been the right place for the believing congregation’s hymn of praise to the Lamb with the banner of victory.

And we can be assured that if a truly clear and pure song of praise rises from our lips in a time of need, then the other prisoners hear such a song. If our song is not merely a song with the mouth alone, but our heart in truth, free from fear, “jubilates toward the living God,” then such a song has an irresistible power over man’s senses—in the same way as Paul and Silas got all their fellow prisoners to listen to the strange thanksgiving at midnight in Philippi’s dungeon.

(Who guesses what the Russian soldiers thought in their hearts on Christmas morning, when the psalm, united and strong, rose up from the Finnish front, filled with joy, in the midst of all need? Who knows what effects such a psalm has had? May the Christian song sound in our hearts and from our lips when midnight approaches for Europe! So we pray: Give psalter and lyre when toil is made long for us! Do not deprive us of the precious, the sweet desire for song! Amen) (end of the devotion)

The church’s song of praise preaches better than her exhortation speech. Think if the temple’s doors stood open in all of Sweden’s land for the song of praise therein under the vaults, so that

it might sound far and wide and all could hear the assembled throng's faith-certain psalm song.

Your church rejoices in your protection.

She is built on a rock.

Until the hour of judgment

She rests on her foundation:

Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God!

Thus we greet the new chorale book welcome among us. Most of its melodies are already familiar to us—only of a few does it hold that they are new in our service. If we meet any such new tone during the Sundays that are coming, then we will not criticize what we hear but instead seek to learn to sing what is offered. Some songs we have well met before in another musical dress that we perhaps miss. But the transfer from the string instrument's world to the church organ's firmer rhythm, the transfer to the temple, has well made one and another change necessary. Even in its new dress it is nonetheless a song to Christ that is still extended to us. And he who carefully listens will well notice that the tone of praise has not been weakened but rather strengthened. Thus our new chorale book bears the same witness to us as today's text about the old Simeon, the witness that our song in the temple ought to be a song of praise to the King of Love. "God be thanked for his unspeakably rich gift!" Amen

Let us pray. "Praised be God....."