

SERMON

Sermon at High Mass on Palm Sunday

Gustaf Wingren

Matthew 21:1–9 or John 12:12–19 (Procession); Passion: Matthew (26:1–27:10) 27:11–54 (55–60)

17 March 1940

In Gamleby Church.

Text: John 12: 1-16.

Hymns: 72:1-2, 80:1-5, 94:-, 73:1-3, 81:6-8.

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

Sv.Ps. 43:4 is read.

The still week, which begins today, on Palm Sunday, is the week when the throng around the Master thins and decreases. In today's gospel, which was just read from the altar, it is spoken of a multitude of people who met Jesus and strewed palm branches on his way. They hailed him as Israel's king. They expected that he would take the dominion in visible measure. When this did not happen, faith faltered and the ranks melted together. An unarmed King on a peaceful colt of an ass one can hail for a time in the hope that he will soon change form and clothe himself in power and glory. But when he remains a poor King, one has difficulty keeping faith in power. When he, moreover, goes deeper into lowliness, is crowned with the crown of thorns and finally suffers the death of the cross, then the breaking point approaches for the human ability to hold fast the certainty. Thus the number of the faithful sinks for every day that passes, during this the holy passion's week, and in Good Friday's darkness even Christ's nearest leave their crucified Lord.

It is, however, a peculiar contrast between the first and the latter half of our text. In the first part of the text the picture of the sibling throng in Bethany meets us – especially Mary's deed of love is drawn clear for our gaze. We know of this little circle of intimates, to which the 3 siblings belonged, that they in any case wanted to be faithful to the Lord in joy and need. Even if also their strength came short in the dreadful evening of death on Golgotha's hill, yet they hung with their hearts fast to the Saviour even then, yes, after death. Their love to Christ was

no superficial whim. Mary's deed of love toward her Lord was not the fruit of a temporary mood that soon blew away. But the people, who in the latter half of our text devote their homage to the Master, they did not quite know what they thereby meant. They had in any case no will to, whatever might come, hold fast to their homage toward the Lord on the colt of an ass.

Since we last gathered for worship here in our church, the North has received outer peace. And during the bloody days that went nearest before this peace of violence, a new spirit had begun to be perceived in our Swedish people, a spirit of cohesion, of service and of sacrifice. The service and the will to work for our common North, which then arose among us, drew its strength from the sight of a little people that fought for its freedom, its life and its honour. Now the way went downward just as our Lord's and Saviour's way went downward. Is it so with us, that the will to sacrifice and the will to work has now slackened, then we resemble the superficial people, who for a time could hail the lowly King on the colt of an ass, as long namely as the belief that he would conquer could live. Then the willingness was finished.

In fact the tasks for Sweden's people begin now. That which happened the night to last Wednesday has completely changed our whole situation for as long a time ahead as we can survey. Probably many of our shrewdly wise will little by little seek to convince us that the danger is now over and that we can return to the order of the day. If this cleverness succeeds in its attempts at persuasion, then we shall again fall asleep and sleep, just

as we slept until the day when our brother people was exposed to the assault. No one knows how long it delays for us. It can come soon enough. But it can also happen that the great war ends and is followed by a peace, under which the temptation to easy belief and sleep becomes especially burdensome. One day our turn will come anyway, whether it be under this war or under the next war, this year or in 25 years. After what has now happened, this is inevitable. The time of service and gift that we have behind us, we lived through in the beautiful shimmer from a manly deed admired by a whole world on the Finnish battlefields. The time of unyielding work for the country's and the whole North's future that lies before us will lack this shimmer. That work takes place instead in the shadow of a peace that crushed many's hopes. Now as first it shall be tried what our will is worth. If we slacken now, then we resemble the capricious people in Jerusalem, who could give their homage as long as victory beckoned, but who then fell away.

But the essential that the text has to say to us concerns despite everything not our position as Swedes, as sons and daughters of the North. The text's essential message concerns us as Christians and disciples to him whose crucifixion we now go to gather our prayer and our thoughts around. It teaches us the healthy doubt of all hastily flaring homage for Christ on streets and squares in this world. It teaches us the reverence for the unpretentious but faithful deed of love toward the Lord Christ in the circle that is faithful and intends to remain faithful. Already the difference between Mary in Bethany and the singing people in Jerusalem, who soon would cry "Crucify, crucify!", has something to say to us about this. But Palm Sunday is not only Mary's and the kingly entry's Sunday – it is also the Lord's Supper's Sunday in our church year. In the middle of the "still" week lies Maundy Thursday, the evening of cleansing and washing – of "cutting" – as it is called in memory of the foot-washing. And he who has taken part in the celebration of the holy meal, he also recognizes in our text the words in the hymn that forms part of every Lord's Supper service in our church: "Blessed be he who comes, in the Lord's name." To receive him anew, who constantly anew is the coming one, for that we have during the four days that remain to prepare ourselves.

And the Lord's Supper gives us further occasion to consider the relation between the great throng of people who "hail" Christ, and the little throng who eat bread and wine with him.

It is few in number, this throng. And we can by no means rejoice that it is few in number. We must surely instead wish and pray that we may become ever more who will gather around our Saviour's broken body and shed blood. But we may surely also ask ourselves whether it cannot be God's meaning that the Lord's Supper-celebrating congregation shall be something more modest in its number than the throng is that otherwise hails him. For the Lord's Supper belongs yet ever since the first Maundy Thursday to the suffering, to the humiliation, it is contained within the "still week," under which the throng thins. It can happen that an essential part of the Lord's Supper's message was lost during the time when one went man out of house "to confession," as it was called. The holy meal will yet remind us that the suffering and the crucifixion belong also to our life. There is so much in our view of our own Christian life and of the church's life that leads us aside from the cross's message – so many wishes that do not belong together with a faith for which God has revealed himself in humiliation and death. When we now prepare ourselves to celebrate the Lord's holy Supper, may we then earnestly pray that the Lord of the Cross may anew take form in our lives, so that we do not draw ourselves away from the suffering and the humiliation and the lowliness but constantly anew stand ready to crucify our old man. When we now prepare ourselves to go up to a new

Good Friday, may it then get to teach us that the Christian congregation still today has to preserve the cross's message, that is, we must not seek here in this world to attain security and undisturbed comfort as a Christian congregation: if we do that, we stand aside from the cross. The Christian man's victory is the resurrection: the new man's daily

resurrection, in eternity grown together with an old man's crucifixion and impossible to loosen from this. And the Christian congregation's victory, the church's victory, is likewise the resurrection from death, from the eternal disregard. May we remember that Pilate, Herod never saw the resurrection, they saw only the suffering with our Lord and Saviour. So it is also with our new man's resurrection and with the Christian congregation's resurrection: it is hidden for him who holds to that which is before the eyes. If we will not understand this, then it must go with us as it went with the people in Jerusalem: we can sing our Hosanna when it looks as if it is going toward kingship on earth, but the song falls silent soon enough.

But in the circle that is faithful and intends to remain faithful, in the sibling throng from Bethany, which is the prototype of the innermost kernel in the Christian congregation through all times, in this circle wondrous things happen. Have we considered how precious this gift was that Mary gave her Lord and Master? A pound is a small weight, about 300 grams, and 300 silver coins is a large sum, about 200 kr. No one can claim that this anointing was necessary; there were far cheaper things in that line. How many of us would not today have said the same as Judas Iscariot said, if we had had this extravagant Mary among us? If it had at least been bread or ready money or in general something "useful" – but ointment! Let us not try to explain what the ointment was to be of use for: Christ himself has rejected all such explanations with his word that her deed was a preparation for his burial, thus an act of love, piety and reverence that did not need to be justified in any other way. We need instead to lay to heart that the Lord with his own word has wanted to teach us that holy carefreeness ought to mark us as Christian people in the midst of this harsh and shrewd world. The Christian congregation goes, like the individual Christian man, the way of the cross on this earth, but in the midst of all outer pressure it squanders quite foolishly to the Lord's honour and rejoices with childlike joy over precious and useless things: the vestment in the service, the silver on the altar. We are as glad of all this as the evangelist is when he says: "And the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment." We know from the Saviour's word about Mary in our text that we have right to this joy and we will preserve it in our hearts – as it says in an old hymn verse: "that life's way we gladly go and holily moved may sing: Hallelujah, hallelujah!" It is not when our church is adorned with costly beauty that the world's spirit gets her in its power,

but it is when she strives after power. And of the individual Christian the same holds: it is not the joy, the strong, fresh joy over creation's richness, that makes you a child of the world, but it is your lust to rule and subdue and govern instead of to serve.

Thus we go with thanksgiving and prayer into the "still week." Our text, Palm Sunday's gospel, has shown us forward toward that which the coming festival will give us. It has reminded us of Maundy Thursday's gift, the holy meal's fellowship with the Lord and Saviour. It has directed our gaze toward the riddle of the cross's suffering, around which we gather in Good Friday's mass. It has also spoken of the Lord's burial, which Mary's preparation concerned – thus the subject for the meditation in Good Friday's evensong, the 6th act. And in its last words – "this the disciples understood only after Jesus had been glorified" – in these words our text points forward also toward the resurrection's gospel that Easter brings us. May our hearts be open during the festival days that are at hand, so that God's word's rich message can reach us and strike us. Thereto give God his grace! Amen.

Let us pray! (Prayer after the sermon on Palm Sunday)