

SERMON

Sermon for the First Sunday after the Epiphany

Gustaf Wingren

Luke 2:42–52 · 1940

High Mass, 7 January 1940

Gamleby Church

Text: Luke 2:42–52

Hymns: 206:1–2; 207:1–5; 213:3; 214:1–4; 1:6–7

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

When Christ came to earth and began to work among men, something wholly new broke in. On that everyone agrees — even those who do not want to receive for themselves this new thing that came in Christ. The first Christian congregation is something other than the Old Testament people of God. The first Christian congregation is something other than the crumbling Roman Empire. Anyone can see that, even if he does not believe in Christ.

But the text that meets us in today's Gospel seems to impress on us something quite different. It speaks twice over of Christ's obedience to what is established, of his faithfulness to the old. For first and foremost we see the twelve-year-old boy, who was to re-create the whole world, sitting in the temple of his fathers, listening to the teachers and asking them questions. And besides this we notice how the evangelist stresses Jesus' obedience to Joseph and Mary, his father and his mother: "And he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was subject to them." It may seem quite natural, to be sure, that a twelve-year-old obeys. It does not follow, of course, that the grown man must also be obedient to the heritage of the fathers. The longer Christ lived, the sharper his conflict became, both with the scribes of the people and with his own home.

That is true. The gospel is something other than the law. It was, after all, around the law — the demand of the Lord of hosts on his people — that all the inherited piety of the fathers in Israel was gathered. And in Christ that time is past. "The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ," says the Gospel of John. The gospel, the forgiveness of

sins, puts the law out of force. Let us look more closely at what this means in our lives, we who live now.

If I receive forgiveness from someone, that does not mean, of course, that she and I agree that what I did was not so serious. She does not come and say, “You have the right to do as you please.” That is not forgiveness. Forgiveness means that two people go on living together as friends, even though one of them has done something he ought not to have done and ought not to do again. That last point is very important. When I receive forgiveness, I know that this must not happen again. It is wrong if I repeat that act. In other words, forgiveness between people does not take away the demand, the command, the law, for the future. No — the demand and the law remain, but the friendship goes on, even though one of them has done something that conflicts with what is right.

So it is with the gospel and the law too. The law comes from God and still holds. God’s Ten Commandments really are God’s commandments, which we cannot set aside if we want to live. But if we sin against God’s commandments, and in humble repentance and faith pray for forgiveness, then God has told us in Christ that he forgives our sin. He is a merciful God, who forgives his children. But he excuses nothing. He never says, “Your sin is not so serious. You could not help it.” God never speaks like that. That would be to push the command aside, as if it were a mistake. That would be to revoke the Ten Commandments. That would be to say that forgiveness is not needed.

And now we understand that Christ is faithful to the heritage of the fathers, to God’s law, and must be. The gospel cannot live if the law does not live on. Forgiveness has no meaning if there is no sin to forgive. That God is gracious is only an empty phrase if we do not also know that God is a holy and righteous God, who repays evil. Christ does not throw away God’s law. The New Testament does not abolish the Old Testament. In our Bible reading and in our worship we would do well to stop more often at the Lord’s word in the Old Testament and listen to what it says to us. It looks as if even the order of the church would give people the fundamentally false idea that the Old Testament is a Jewish book with no place in Christian worship.

But now we also understand how it can be that the words of the gospel are so foreign to our generation. People often complain that words like grace and mercy no longer mean anything to the people of our time. Forgiveness, atonement, salvation — do you feel any secret joy in your heart when you hear these words sound in church, or see them on the pages of Scripture?

Surely someone is sitting here who would answer yes to that question without hesitating. He once saw his sin and the perversity of his will, and after long toil understood that he himself was not the man to set right what was broken and crooked. Words like those just mentioned have been burned into his soul in letters of fire: "If our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything." "He is our Passover lamb, sacrificed for us, God's pure lamb, who has borne the sin of the world even unto death."

But most people — even of those who go to church fairly regularly — must surely answer no to the question, and with dismay: "We find it hard to understand these words about atonement, salvation, and forgiveness. We would like to understand them better. We would like them to speak to our heart. But we cannot get past the feeling of strangeness before these strange words." Can our meditation on today's Gospel so far not lead us to understand this too? If the gospel has no meaning without the law, if God's holy demand and command remains, with all its terrible power, in the very midst of the declaration of the forgiveness of sins — then we see that joy over the gospel can never come into a human heart unless that heart has first trembled under God's judgment and wrath. We cannot expect to feel joy and thankfulness over forgiveness and mercy unless we have first felt how terrible life would be if God's forgiveness were not to be had. It is out of anguish over God's wrath that joy over forgiveness is born.

You who complain that the words salvation and forgiveness mean nothing to you: do you believe in earnest in the holy God? Do you believe in the last judgment? Do you believe that your poor life will one day be gathered up in a world where the light that falls on every spot cannot be escaped? Do you believe that the voice of conscience is God's voice, which demands to be taken seriously, without exception? If you do not believe this, you cannot expect the words forgiveness and salvation to give you any joy. If a stranger meets me on the street and says he forgives me, I cannot be glad about it as long as I do not know what wrong I have done. But if I know my sin and grieve over it, if I fear God's judgment, then the old words about salvation and forgiveness are filled with life.

So our text speaks of the connection between old and new in God's dealings with us — the connection between the Old and New Testaments, between the demand and the forgiveness.

But that also means that your whole life and my whole life, every human life, is one connected whole that lies in God's hand. It is not as if God begins to work at a certain point in your life, while until then you have lived for yourself. The almighty God has been present in

everything. He has guided everything with his mighty hand. He is Lord even over our sin. Even through it he leads us toward his goal. Small, seemingly unimportant events in our childhood and youth are instruments of God's governance. Jesus' visit to the temple in Jerusalem at the age of twelve means something for his work as a man. It is part of it — otherwise the evangelist would not have told of this event.

But if there is a connection between past and new in the life of the individual, so it is in the life of peoples too — in the life of our Swedish people. For far too long we have had respect for the spirit of tearing down. It seemed to us enlightened and cultivated. The less one left standing of the heritage of the fathers, the more profound one believed oneself to be. This spirit of tearing down is surely losing its voice now, with no need for any priestly exhortations. The good and blessed thing in the distress that has come over our people is surely, above all, that it has taught us to recognize the value of what we have — what the fathers' toil has gathered into a heritage for us, and what we must rescue for the next generation through the grim night that now prevails. It would seem that all the cultivated blasphemers and detractors have become remarkably dusty and old-fashioned in these serious days. The time just behind us, the time when it was "smart" to know nothing about the Bible — we can surely see already that it will not be counted among the great and creative times in our people's life. To coming generations it will rather look like the period of decay before the awakening.

For the great and creative times are not marked by the spirit of tearing down. We can see it in today's Gospel. Christ was the new thing that was to come into the world. But when he came, he did not tear apart the bond that tied him to the old. He went up to the temple. He kept the heritage of the fathers. Much of it was rotten, of course, and that also fell away of itself. For the great and creative times put all their strength into building up the new, and at the hammer blows of the new building the old and rotten falls down of itself, if it is to fall. But an age that makes tearing down its chief task creates nothing lasting that can keep its memory for coming generations. Such an age never takes the time, either, to see whether the old really is rotten. It cuts down and destroys the healthy tree. It tears down houses that held warmth and security for generations not yet born. But if God in his grace puts a stop to the time of tearing down before its work is done, he will surely also give strength to build up again what folly tore down. New building is going on in the Church of Sweden today. And this new thing is being built in such a way that the connection with the heritage of the fathers is kept. So the church will surely be able to go on creating unity and wholeness in people's lives, which are so often

divided and frayed. If we dare to hope for this, it is because of the one who said: “My Father is working still, and I am working.” Amen.

“Blessed be God..”

Announcements.

“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ..”

Translator’s notes. The opening hymn verses (Swedish Hymnal 204:3, 5) are named in the typescript but not written out. “Rivningsandan” is rendered “the spirit of tearing down,” and Wingren’s building image is kept. “Fint” in “när det var ‘fint’ att inte veta något om Bibeln” is given as “smart,” in the sense of fashionable. “The distress that has come over our people” refers to the war situation of the winter of 1939–40; the sermon does not spell it out, and the English does not either. The doxology and blessing are only begun in the typescript.

Gustaf Wingren · draft translation ·