

SERMON

Sermon at High Mass with Holy Communion on the Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity

Gustaf Wingren

Matthew 6:24–34

SERMON AT HIGH MASS WITH HOLY COMMUNION ON THE 15TH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY, 1 SEPTEMBER 1940, IN GAMLEBY CHURCH.

Text: Matthew 6:24–34.

PSALMS: 207:1–3, 339:3–4, 317:5–6, 317:3–4, 47:3, 307:1–3, 104:2, 194:1 ff, 244:4

In Jesus' name. Amen.

Let us pray.

Care for me, O dear Father!

I will not care

For the day that is not yet,

And ask the unknown. (Swedish Hymnal 319:1)

Today we celebrate “The Day of the Elderly.” And it is a strange providence that it is precisely on this day that the cares for our sustenance are set before us for consideration through the Gospel. For old age is often the time of cares: where shall I find a dwelling?, who shall take care of me if I myself can no longer manage?, how shall the pension suffice, and so on and so on. The whole of human life is marked by such anxiety, but the anxiety not seldom reaches its height when the grey hairs draw near.

The text may then seem to us somewhat abrupt. “The most urgent care” stands as the heading over that portion of the Sermon on the Mount which is the Gospel for the 15th Sunday after Trinity. “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness!” Care for bread is bondage to Mammon, slavery to him. Is then the earthly side of life altogether without significance? Do I

not almost profit by caring for myself, so that I need not become a burden to anyone? The careless one, who always relies on others to take care of him, can he really be more in accordance with God's will than the one who does what he can to make ends meet with expenses and income? If there is anything unchristian, it must surely be that irresponsible "spirit of living on support," which for long enough has had the wind in its sails? People have no right to be as carefree as birds and lilies, for their carefreeness will then very perceptibly and unpleasantly fall upon others, who must bear the burden of their idler's life. All this may be said. But if one says so, one is tacitly reckoning that the only thing that exists is people, no God and no Providence in the world. It may be thought that both carelessness, waste, and anxiety are equally displeasing in God's eyes: the wasteful one does not think that his neighbour exists, and therefore he breaks God's commandment; the anxious one does not think that God exists, and therefore he breaks God's commandment. It is quite possible to be industrious and thrifty and at the same time calm and trusting as a child.

Jesus' admonition to carefreeness in earthly things and his command that we above all shall seek the kingdom of God—these two things which we see in our text—do not spring from the view that the worldly is insignificant and unimportant. On the contrary, it is so significant and so important that God from the beginning decided himself to take charge of the matter and place the earthly immediately under his sceptre. Therefore He created the Earth and all that is upon it, and cared for the years ahead so that there should be rain, sunshine, plants and animals, wood and other fuel, medicines, and the like upon his earth, and he still provides today so that there is sufficient of all this—despite his little people complicating the whole by torpedoing entire ships with foodstuffs, bombing each other's stores, and driving with tanks and armoured vehicles over the grain fields instead of reaping and threshing and grinding grain and otherwise being "good friends and faithful neighbours." It must be rather trying of patience to have such a globe with such people upon it, but God has not yet lost patience. Even this year it grows in the fields, though most complain that it grows too little—just as if we had deserved to receive anything at all. Gratitude is what becomes us in this year 1940.

Our text is a living simple instruction concerning the First Article: I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. And that our Saviour was careful to keep this faith also alive, we can see from the fact that when he is to teach his disciples to pray, he teaches them also this prayer: Give us this day our daily bread. That God's children should pray thus did not depend on their being without food if they happened to forget to pray that prayer—"God makes his sun rise on both the evil and the good and he lets it rain on both the righteous and

the unrighteous”—but that prayer for our daily bread we are to pray, as Luther says, so that we may “acknowledge all good as a gift of God and receive our daily bread with gratitude.” We do not need to beg God for any special grace toward us in temporal things, but we need to have our eyes opened to the grace that is already there—in every day’s riches—and so be able to become thankful people.

Can you name any single time when you received less from God than you deserved? Can you even name any time when you suffered real crying need without help coming in some form through kindness from outside? Through goodness from God and people? Looking back, we almost always find reason to marvel that everything has gone as well as it has for us. Looking back, we find occasion for gratitude. Why then should we look with anxiety toward the future? We have after all learned that if we feared earlier, we may indeed have received one trial or another to bear, but precisely what we feared would happen often enough did not happen—it was something entirely different that became our lot. Then we may well learn that it is meaningless to go about fearing things in the future—what is to happen to us we can seldom calculate in advance. Existence is a war and moreover a war of surprises. Or else we were anxious about one matter, and that unpleasantness we did indeed receive upon us; one fine day just that which we had gone about fearing happened—but it was not at all so dangerous! It was worst before it happened; once one had entered into it, it went excellently. That is to say: the only real suffering we had from the matter was the anxiety before it happened—our unnecessary care, which we ourselves laid upon us. Then we may well for the future promise to leave off such cares. “Each day has enough of its own trouble” and “the heavenly Father knows what we need.”

You who are old! Your health may still hold for a long time. And if it does not, you know well that the death of the old is often easy and swift: a child must struggle far longer before it is let through to heaven’s gate. You have perhaps kindly people around you who shelter your journey, perhaps children and grandchildren—is that not something to give thanks for? You have perhaps a saved coin—be thankful that you live in a free people where you may keep what is your own. And if you have not that, if you stand alone and empty-handed, you know that you need not suffer any need, not in Sweden in our days. There are homes waiting for you, many kinds of homes, and the Old People’s Home is not the worst of them, not in Gamleby. To have been able to live and keep oneself upright as long as you have now been able is an honour, and all shall show you the honour you deserve—all respect you and care for you

in the evening of your age. The festival which we now celebrate is in its way a great honouring of you from thoughtful parishioners.

If we can now look with gratitude upon what has been given us, in the midst of pressure and want—we all live in the world of sin: in that world there is no perfect happiness for any human being—but if we can be secure in God's hands as regards the earthly, in spite of all, then this involves a liberation, a relief for the mind. A firm and restful faith in the First Article—God's care for us—makes it possible to direct the gaze more clearly toward the Second and Third Articles: Christ and the Spirit. Liberation from care for the temporal lets us see “the most urgent care.” If we can say: “For food and drink we have received here, to thee be praise, O dear Father,” then we can also continue thus: “To us all of that bread give, which grants the world eternal life!”

And this question after eternal life is the highest of all for all people, and not least for the old. To our length of life we cannot with all our care add a single cubit. It is a matter of gaining sight of the seriousness in the nearness of Death and of taking the Lord's stern word according to the letter: “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness!” Care beyond measure for the daily bread is slavery under Mammon, and we cannot serve both God and Mammon: we must become free from one or the other of the two services. Faith in God's care for us frees us from the service of Mammon: now we can wholeheartedly enter into the service of God, that is, we can ask as we ought to ask when Death approaches: O God, how shall I come to behold thy face?

It is strange with the one who ages. For every step he takes toward the evening of life, the nearer he comes in his mind to the morning of life. The older he becomes, the more the memory occupies itself with the events and figures of childhood. An old person often speaks of no other time in his life than of his first flowering years on earth; the immediately past 30 or 40 or 50 years he somehow skips over. But at the same time as the soul thus moves backward in time, it also moves forward, toward what is to come: the step over the threshold into the world of death and eternity. Sometimes the old one can stand there like Moses “on the heights of Pisgah,” on Mount Nebo, and look into the Holy Land, look across the border and catch a glimpse of the world on the other side.

Even for eternal life we receive Daily Bread from God. The Word is the soul's proper food in that hunger. And the Word's “star and kernel” is Christ, he who called himself “the bread of life.” The one who eats that bread has no reason to fear, neither death nor the final judgment.

“For this is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God and him whom thou hast sent, Jesus Christ.” And Jesus himself confirms this word with his explicit declaration: “He who hears my words and believes him who sent me has eternal life and does not come under judgment but has passed from death to life.” So may you then in complete security rely on God’s forgiveness and God’s power, which is outside you and which is active and living, even when your heart feels nothing. This is of great importance to keep in mind, especially if one is old. For sometimes the emotional life dries up when one ages: one no longer has any strong perceptions of God, no surge of feeling in the heart. Then one can begin to doubt that one is a true Christian, converted and born again. And to this is added that the latest fashion concerning Christianity involves a strong idolatry of the young, newly converted Christian. The development of the spiritual life in our days is from one point of view a development toward ever greater spiritual immaturity—sometimes one has the impression that the whole description of a Christian person only fits youths in the years of transition—when one has come to advanced age one would of necessity be weaker as a Christian or even unfit to be a “proper” Christian, with all the signs of “transformation” that the most modern catechism in “moral rearmament” sets up. —What kind of God would that be who was bound by the strength of people’s emotional life and bodily powers. You who are old and who perhaps notice that the heart is slower now, that some strong movements in the soul are no longer allotted to you, you may know that this means nothing in God’s eyes. A poor emotional life, a worn-out soul, can disturb God’s grace as little as a broken bone or a severe cold can. Salvation lies in God’s hands and not in our own. It does not depend on what you feel but on what God does. He expects of you that you believe his word. Before the word of an honest and reliable person you do not ask whether the heart feels something particular, but you believe what she says simply and plainly. In exactly the same way your God expects that you shall believe his word. Do not try to be a youth! Be a Child instead! Christ has said: “Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.” But so that you may be truly secure, God has given you outward things on which to fix eye and ear: the word and the water of baptism, the bread and wine of the Supper. In the Middle Ages one thought that “daily bread” in the Lord’s Prayer means nothing other than the sacramental bread. That is a misinterpretation, but a touching misinterpretation, which witnesses to joy at the Supper and little of unnecessary anxiety for sustenance. Our time, which has little hunger for the sacrament of the altar but has instead made the standard of living its only God, has on the whole got the meaning of life worse backwards than the people of the Middle Ages.

Today the table is laid with the unpretentious gifts of the Holy Meal. The one who in childlike trust goes forward and receives the bread and the wine, he or she also receives the promise of all God's power and blessing for his or her last hour and for the journey across Death's river. Amen.