

Sermon at Midnight Mass, 23–24 July 1986

Gustaf Wingren

Genesis 32:22–32

Sermon at the midnight mass, 23–24 July 1986

in Stavanger Cathedral.

Text: Genesis 32:24–31.

This evening we have spoken with one another about two groups of people who are both fighting for the same goal: socialism. One group believes in God; they are called “Christians.” The other group does not believe in God; they are called “atheists.” How can people with opposite starting points become one in the struggle? Is it perhaps so, that those who are Christians among us live in a religious world of fantasy, and that the only thing real in them is their practical action, the will to socialism, and that the praxis of action rests on a much firmer ground if we cast away belief in God? Or — is there some other explanation of the surprising unity between atheists and Christians?

We read the text for this midnight mass from the thirty-second chapter of Genesis: “Jacob was left alone at the ford of the Jabbok.....”

All of us have been born here on the earth without anyone asking us whether we wanted to be born. We shall also die without anyone first asking whether we want to die. All of us, on our way from the time we were born up to now, have often been set before things we could do nothing about, things that are therefore stronger than we are. Both when we receive life and when life is taken from us, we stand before this which we are not masters of. Those who believe in God cry out to this strong power and set a name upon him. Those who do not believe cry out, and they groan in the heart, they too, but they use no name.

When God steps out of the darkness, “at sunrise,” I receive a new name, as Jacob received a name. “Israel” he is called now, and “Christian” I am called, I who believe. We are taken out, set apart. Israel became a particular people, which was not to be like the other peoples, and “the Christians” are, in our culture, another sort of people — they are not like ordinary folk.

But when Israel, during the struggle in the night, was taken out, was set apart, this happened for the others. Israel became “the Lord’s suffering servant,” “so despised that we esteemed him as nothing,” “he who poured out his life unto death” and bore, in his body, the hatred and the transgressions of many. He who is the Savior of the whole world, the child Jesus, was born inside that set-apart Israel, and he died in there, in Israel. Out to the peoples of the world he came only after death. This is the pattern for every Christian: he is marked, taken out of the multitude — but he is that for the multitude, for these many who do not believe. As a gift, offered to these others, a Christian person’s course of life is to be brought to completion.

To take what one is, to take what one has, to let the content of one’s life function in other people’s existence, and to hope that all will do the same with their resources — that enters in as a part of “socialism.” To be sure, “the socialist human being” is the least realized part of the goal for the future — but this Human Being is nevertheless coming into being; he is in the process of coming to be.

Such a Human Being, whose life functions in the lives of others, as Jacob, after the struggle at the Jabbok, functioned in the life of his people — such a human being is at one and the same time a Loser and a Winner. There is no possibility of entering into this work — for what is in question is a WORK — one cannot enter into it without going without positive resources, without really losing something. To be able to walk, with sound legs, is a resource one needs, a necessary part of a sound life — but Jacob, Israel, limped on the hip. And Israel has gone on limping forward through world history, bearing the burden of the surrounding world’s hatred and envy. And at the same time Jacob/Israel was blessed; he is blessed more than others — he wrested to himself, after the struggle was ended, God’s secret, unknown blessing, when “the dawn went up.” And Israel has borne that gift too, the Blessing, through world history, and does so still today.

Now it is night, and here we are. The struggle, the battle, has only begun. It is a long way to the sunrise.

When we go forward to victory in this battle, we shall lose a good many human resources; we shall make real losses. And at the same time we become blessed more than others; we become richer under the losses. In this riches we all receive a share, Christians and atheists together. The man who struggled with Jacob in the night, and who was God himself, the Creator, but who never uttered his name and was as a force of nature only, gave the blessing anonymously

to the struggling Jacob. So acts the nameless God. "Hidden is the one who reaches out to us strength and health as a loan."

Because God hides himself behind the course of nature and behind the things of creation when he blesses us, and because in his nearness we not only win but also lose, it is easy to be seized by doubt of his power. We sometimes doubt the victory: will any dawn go up, as it did in the end for Jacob after the struggle? Those who lose hope of socialism are many just now.

Therefore we want to close our service this evening with a prayer.

Let us pray.

God, we come before you with thanks for what you have given us up to this day. Whatever we went without, what you gave was always more than what we lost. Now we ask that you, in this night, would grant us the gift of being able to endure to the end, of not giving up. For this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

[Pages 3–10 of the file are handwriting. They are left blank. Nothing on them has been guessed.]

Translator's notes.

The heading is his. The date "23–24/7 1986" is 23–24 July. "Ibland oss" is "among us." The Genesis reading is left as he wrote it, broken off at the ford of the Jabbok, with his row of dots. The servant lines follow his wording of Isaiah 53, not a later English version. "Gärning," set by him in capitals, is "work." "Människa," where he capitalizes it, is "Human Being"; "he" is used for that figure and for the Christian, as the text uses han. The line "Gömd är den som åt oss räcker kraft och hälsa som ett lån" is translated from his quotation; no English hymn text has been substituted. No Luther citation appears on the readable pages, so no Luther's Works reference is entered. Pages 3–10 are manuscript handwriting the page does not yield; they are blank.