

Sermon for Quinquagesima

Gustaf Wingren

2 Peter 1:16–21

Sermon on Quinquagesima Sunday, 21 February 1982

In the crypt of Lund Cathedral (the student priests)

Text: Acts 8:26-35 and 2 Peter 1:19.

The sermon is framed by a hymn from Credo, p. 55, vv. 1-3 before and vv. 4-5 after. Hymn 617, distribution hymn.

“Theology — is it something for ordinary people?”

This evening I shall read three texts, two from the Bible — that I shall do straightway, now at the beginning — and one from Aftonbladet of the 6th of February this year; that text will come a little later, it is also longer.

(Reads Acts 8:26-35 and 2 Peter 1:19.)

The meeting between Philip and the Ethiopian court official took place out on the high road. Philip stood beside the chariot but heard that the man was reading the prophet Isaiah. In those days one read aloud when one read. There was no risk that these reading aloud would disturb one another. The number of those who could read was not great, and the number of books, all handwritten, was still smaller. Personally to own a book was as to own genuine art today.

This was a meeting between an apostle and an Ethiopian — who is shortly to be baptized and become a Christian. But the text he is reading is Old Testament; there was no New Testament text, there was an oral word concerning a death on the cross and a resurrection — but no text concerning that matter, not yet.

It was this that was the problem. The Old Testament text was the problem. Israel's holy texts gave a picture of a mighty Messiah, a strong, a healthy and conquering man. And that which had in fact happened was an execution — and Jesus had been anxious in Gethsemane; he had wept, he had sweated in anguish. This was the problem. The wonderful text concerning the

walk to Emmaus treats of this. The stranger on the way opens the Old Testament text for the disciples so that they see — see and understand — that the Messiah must suffer. Precisely that which has happened is the sign that He is the Messiah, precisely this Descent into Death and Anguish. The text which helped them to see was Isaiah 53, among others (which the Ethiopian was reading in the chariot and which Philip explained).

The Messiah whom Israel awaited and whom the twelve around Jesus also awaited, he was strong, invulnerable and unconquerable, he stood above suffering. And the one who actually came, he was down in all that over which the Messiah was to be exalted. Those who then put faith in Jesus, they were able to bear life, such as it actually is, because they believed that He, the Risen One, was down in their depth, thus was near them, with a Life that overflowed in the suffering. That the Ethiopian saw in our text. Therefore he — as so many others — immediately had himself baptized. So it was then. Long ago.

Now we are here this evening to ask ourselves whether theology is something for ordinary people. One part of theology is called “exegesis.” Its task is to set forth the situation in biblical time. As it was then. Long ago. That we have now done.

Another part is the analysis of the contemporary situation. There the theologian is to enter into his own time and sketch its problems and questions in order at last to set the biblical text in relation to those questions, the contemporary questions. This analysis of the contemporary situation, to which we now pass, becomes thus the great middle part in what is to be said this evening. It is there that the text from Aftonbladet of the 6th of February 1982 comes in, a rather long text, written by Eva Mattsson. She reviews a book by the psychiatrist and physician Horst Richter, a newly published book with the title “Between Omnipotence and Powerlessness.” Aftonbladet’s notice of the book has the heading “Now we ourselves are God.” I read verbatim, word for word, substantially four long paragraphs in Eva Mattsson’s text:

“The modern human being,” it says, “dreams of invulnerability, strength and immortality. Everything that reminds of suffering and weakness awakens discomfort in her... In order to avoid suffering oneself and to avoid sharing suffering with others we build up various strategies. At the same time we are almost always aware that we deceive ourselves and others when we avoid the suffering. From this feeling of betrayal is born an insecure and unhappy human being who powerlessly struggles to conceal her insecurity and unhappiness. Richter’s book is a survey of the human being’s self-conception from the Middle Ages up to today. The human being has developed from a little human being in God’s hand to become

a creature that has taken over God's role Leibniz, Newton, Freud, Marcuse — there the line runs forward to today's happiness therapies... One of the worst diseases in our civilization is," writes Eva Mattsson, "the inability to suffer and to suffer with. In order to avoid feeling weakness one can resort to various tricks, take to liquor, drugs, drug oneself with work, run to parties (Hi, how are you? Fine, you! And you yourself? Fine!), practice relaxation and yoga, eat whole-grain and jog. Alternatively one can lie on a bed of nails and make a show of being above suffering.

One must also rid oneself of near persons who suffer or who break down so that it disturbs, the handicapped, the aged — they must live in special houses.

Worse is it when one oneself becomes really old or sick. Then there is no longer much Hope. If we regard life as a straight, forward-striving line, then we must become disappointed and afraid when we see the end of the line coming." (Now this article in Aftonbladet with its analysis of the contemporary situation has arrived at the conclusion:) "Richter means: We must appropriate another conception of life. Otherwise we cannot manage our own anguish and — otherwise we cannot manage a genuine fellowship with the weak and the sick." (that was Aftonbladet)

A straight, forward-rising line, that is the life which we persuade ourselves that we have. A straight and rising line, that was the Messiah the disciples awaited. They received a Messiah who broke down. We live a life which of necessity breaks down.

The difference between then and now is very small. That we can learn through the exegesis and through the analysis of our own contemporary situation. Theology is in any case good for something, even if it cannot help us forward to faith.

There is namely a great difference between then and now — and that difference is perhaps our greatest hindrance to faith.

When the Ethiopian court official sat in his chariot between Jerusalem and Gaza, he presupposed, already before the meeting with Philip, one thing which the modern human being does not presuppose, can scarcely presuppose: he presupposed that we — in some way — needed SALVATION, that is: someone who gave us Life from outside. He reckoned with an earthly strong Messiah and he received, through the gospel from Philip, a crucified Christ. But the important thing was that he awaited something. We in our time await nothing — nothing other than ourselves, an increase of life that comes within ourselves, by ourselves. Eva

Mattsson's article in Aftonbladet gives us a photographically exact picture of this modern condition: The hunt after oneself bringing about an "increase" of Life.

And then FAITH — this receiving from outside — appears as merely loss, merely weakness, the opposite of LIFE. Not so! No! "I refuse merely to 'receive' and to 'have' nothing."

In reality it is the case that we time after time accept to have nothing and merely to receive. When the winter, in a few weeks, is over and the spring comes, then everything becomes given to us from outside, from the Sun — and we receive it. We think that it is our sun, our life. And when we breathe it is in the same way: the whole process is a fetching in from outside, nothing exists in us. If nose and mouth were closed, there would exist in us nothing other than suffocation and death.... We must be open, that is all.

So it is also with God's Presence. So it is with the living Christ, He who is risen and is here. The word of Scripture, this incredibly dry and poor aid — so a newly converted Christian can feel it — it is dry so that it crackles — this dry, somewhat lifeless thing, it holds us in waiting for the PRESENCE, it holds us open when the PRESENCE comes. Of that speaks our short biblical text, which I read out at the beginning but then passed by, the single verse from the Second Epistle of Peter: "You do well to pay close attention to the word, as to a light that shines in a gloomy wilderness, until the day dawns and the morning star rises, in your hearts."

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