

Sermon for Rogation Sunday

Gustaf Wingren

Matthew 6:5–8 · 1983

High Mass, Rogation Sunday, 8 May 1983

Storkyrkan (Stockholm Cathedral)

Text: Matthew 6:5–8 (second series of texts, High Mass)

“When you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. They love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that people will see them. One thing is certain: they have received their reward. No, when you pray, go into your room, shut the door, and then pray to your Father who is in secret. Then your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, you must not babble empty words as the heathen do. They think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not do as they do. Your Father knows what you need before you have asked him.”

The one who says this is Jesus Christ. It is today’s preaching text. That means that Jesus says these words now, to us. For this is the definition of “preaching”: Jesus comes and says himself what he has to say. That is why there is a text at the beginning of the act of preaching. Through it he wants to speak.

The text is taken from the sixth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, that is, from the Sermon on the Mount. In this context three religious practices are spoken of: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. In those days all three were something one could often see with one’s own eyes as they were carried out. People gave gifts in public, they prayed in public, and they fasted in public. One could see who was religious in earnest.

Of all three Jesus says: Hide them away. Conceal what you do. When people see you, they are to think: “That man does not reckon with God. That man has no religion.” That is how you are to live, says Jesus.

But of all three — giving, praying, and fasting — he also says something else: Do not stop offering, praying, and fasting. Hide from people that you do it, but do it behind closed doors,

in secret. When no one sees it, then do it. Give away your life, pray, deny yourself — in secret. You have a Father who sees down into the secret place. He sees into your hidden life. He knows what you do. He knows what you need. And he will give you all that you hope for. Harvests will grow out of your life.

The talk of “closed doors” — the same Greek word is used — comes back in another place in the New Testament, twice. In the terror and paralysis after the execution on Golgotha the apostles meet “behind closed doors.” This period of fear and “closed doors” is a riddle to us when we look for the explanation of how the early Christian church came into being. The Gospels speak of disciples who constantly misunderstand their Lord. They desert him at the execution. They let a stranger coming in from the fields carry the cross for him. And in the end they sit terrified behind closed doors.

Yet it is these same apostles who a few weeks later — according to the Acts of the Apostles — proclaim to the whole world that everything in heaven and on earth has been changed by Christ’s resurrection from the dead. The injection of life that Europe received through the witness of these people is stronger and longer-lasting in its effect than anything else that has happened in Europe. And this life was born when the message of the resurrection came to a band of people behind closed doors.

We are here in Stockholm now to reflect before Martin Luther and his Reformation. In 1505 lightning struck near Stotternheim. In terror the twenty-two-year-old student vowed to become a monk. He said farewell to his friends in the street outside the monastery gate in Erfurt, and the door to people and to the world was shut behind him. In there, “in secret,” alone with “the Father who sees in secret,” he spent years in the study of Scripture, years of brooding and anguish. What he was to do “before people,” he did not ask about. One thing, one alone, troubled him: How do I become righteous before God? If this lonely struggle had not taken place behind a closed door, there would never have been any Reformation. There would never have been the “life-giving effect” that — with this cathedral as its starting point — shaped the land of Sweden.

Now we are here, not only to remember Luther’s Reformation, but above all to ask: What is required for a new reformation today? The great temptation, now as in the text, is our inclination to recast the question so that it reads: What shall we do to be seen by people? How shall the church behave to win the ear of the people again?

When one twists the question in that way, one readily thinks that the thing to do is to try to grasp what the need of “modern man” consists in. What needs do they have, the people of today? “The down-and-out,” or “the workers,” or “the searching, struggling intellectuals.” If we could understand them, “put ourselves into” their problems, then the church could come alive in this age.

The unrest, the anguish, that the apostles carried “behind closed doors” was their own unrest, not other people’s. They themselves were in anguish. That charitable interest in the need of others, while I imagine that I myself am without inner wounds — that charity embarrassingly often gives birth to tame words. We ourselves are in need. And this need is the only thing that gives birth to renewal: if we carry the need into our room, shut the door, and hold the need up before God, and go on holding up our unrest before him alone. “God, answer me. Do not be silent. What do you mean by leaving me alone? Answer me.” Day after day, year after year, to keep one’s own need open, unprotected, unhealed — “I will not let you go unless you bless me” — that is prayer. Not with “many words.” No, with few and poor words, yes, sometimes with no words at all, only a suppressed whimpering behind the closed door. That is prayer.

That is how the brothers in the monastery at Erfurt heard Brother Martin whimper in his monk’s cell while he beat his hand against the wall: “Mea culpa, mea culpa. My fault, my fault.”

That is how reformation begins. That is how renewal begins. It means that those lofty judges on the heights of cultural life, who are to look at the church and tell us when the church has been renewed, will not say anything when the real renewal sets in. For they will not discover that anything is happening. “Why, nothing at all is going on here.”

No one saw the birth of the Christian church when the frightened band of apostles gathered behind closed doors after the catastrophe of Golgotha. No one saw the Reformation when the lonely monk trembled before God. No one then suspected this lonely man’s steadfastness before the emperor at Worms. No one.

But “your Father who sees in secret” — he sees. He knows. And since the beginning of time he has been used to creating out of nothing. He has always done that, from the beginning of the world.

When the need of others becomes a means of renewing the church, then no renewal happens. When a person’s own need — inside the church — becomes a cry for health and healing for the human being, not healing for the church but for the human being, then the church is

renewed from within its own center. For the center of the church is salvation for the human being. That is what the church exists for.

Salvation means that God, the Creator, gives the human being what she needs. Sometimes it is astonishing how worldly and how bodily it is, this that the human being needs — and that God gives her.

This amazing Europe, which ever since the early Middle Ages has been different from the other parts of the world. Noble princesses leave the royal court and begin to care for lepers. The most learned in the land form mendicant orders and take their place down on the level of the poor, where the thralls and the crippled live. Such deeds flow straight out of the Gospels' pictures of Jesus into the everyday life of European society. That is why Europe came to have a different care for the sick from what the rest of the globe had.

Or our poor snowbound country up here in the north — our Nordic peoples with the harsh climate, the low winter sun, and the short summer. We were shabbily dressed and without culture when the continent down there was flourishing. We had one way to freedom: work, the right to master our own hard soil without restriction. And we received this right — “the doctrine of work” is a gift from the Reformation to us. Today the Nordic nations, on the basis of skill in work, are among the richest countries in the world.

And now the postindustrial, technological society, whose need is our own inner need. We know there is something wrong with us when we sit down in silence in front of the TV instead of talking with one another. We know there is something wrong with us when people die in their apartments and are discovered there two months later — it begins to smell so strange on the stairs. We know that it is wrong, but we do not get out of it, because we are not renewed.

When renewal comes, it flows out into the smallest corner of everyday life, and it changes us. That is certain. It changes us in what is “worldly.”

Such things are part of salvation. And yet the greatest thing of all in salvation is to have a God and Father who sees in secret — a God I can keep company with and talk with, always, even if I am shut up in a dungeon. To talk with him “in secret,” the way a child talks with his best friend.

This is to be free, whatever happens.

Let us give thanks and pray.

God, we thank you for your promise: “Call upon me in the day of trouble, and I will help you.” We praise you because in times gone by you have kept your promise and renewed our world through people who cried out to you. Let those who lived before us become our teachers in endurance, in patience, and in trust. We know there is something wrong with us. Renew us according to your holy will. Through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Translator’s notes. The sermon is a typescript of six pages (page 1 is a cover giving church, occasion, date, and preacher). The heading’s “II årg högm” refers to the second of the Church of Sweden’s three annual series of lectionary texts, at High Mass; Bönsöndagen, the fifth Sunday after Easter, is rendered “Rogation Sunday.” The sermon was preached in the Luther anniversary year 1983 (Luther was born in 1483), which explains the references to Luther and to a “new reformation.” Two handwritten corrections in the typescript are followed: “bakom stängd dörr” (“behind a closed door,” where the typed text lacks the final d) and, over the typed “folkets ära” (“the people’s esteem”), a correction most likely meaning “folkets öra,” rendered “the ear of the people.” Wingren’s underlinings and his capitals (“BÖN,” “ARBETE”) are not reproduced, following the style guide. The prayer quotes Psalm 50:15, and the words “I will not let you go unless you bless me” are Jacob’s from Genesis 32:26.

Gustaf Wingren · draft translation ·