

Sermon for the First Sunday in Advent

Gustaf Wingren

John 18:36–37 · 1943

28 November 1943

Motala Verkstad Church

Text: John 18:36–37

Advent means arrival, and he who comes is Jesus Christ himself. “The Lord comes to his church” — that is the heading over all the texts for the First Sunday in Advent. In this sentence the whole message of the present day can be gathered up. Our particular preaching text from the eighteenth chapter of John’s Gospel forms a part of this strong and mighty message: “the King of truth” before the world power, before Pontius Pilate.

That Christ “comes” to his church is, of course, a picture. For he does not come as a visible, walking human being comes. He comes in a spiritual sense. But, spiritually seen, one might say that he is always in his church, that he is there, and so does not “come” at the beginning of the church year. But there is more in the expression “the Lord comes to his church” than one would think. Christ cannot be in his church in any other way than by constantly coming. For Christ’s presence in the church is a presence through the word. When it is silent, he is gone. There is no magic. When the church’s message sounds out, pure and unadulterated, then he is there, alive and mighty. This message can be bungled and falsified and replaced with human words. Then Christ withdraws from his church, and she loses his power, even if the members in her ranks grow more numerous for the time being. And it always costs the same inner labor really to keep Christ’s own message unimpaired. It is not something the church is ever finished with. On the contrary, in every age she must work at this task anew. And so Christ comes anew in every age, as if from far away. He comes when the message of truth is preached.

This is his kingdom, his kingship. Pilate asks, “So you are a king after all?” And Jesus answers, “You say yourself that I am a king. Yes, for this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth.” As long as the earth stands, Christ’s royal dominion is

limited to this: he speaks — and cannot be silenced. Nothing of his kingship ever becomes a kingdom of power on earth, a political kingdom, never before the last day. “My kingdom is not of this world” — that is the basic word of his speech from the throne. One day, to be sure, his kingdom will come as a visible kingdom that all can see. But when that happens, “this world” will no longer exist. Then the earth will be consumed by flames, and the whole history of humanity will be ended. Then the imperishable life of the resurrection will have come. For us who live here there is only one way to this kingdom of Christ: here on earth to receive Christ’s word in faith and obedience, to bear our cross and live in love, and one day — when, no one knows — to die bodily and so go through death into the heavenly life, where we shall see him as he is. Until then his kingdom consists not in tangible power but only in the word, in the gospel, in this, that he “bears witness to the truth.” And the church’s essential and great task, alongside and above her other tasks, is precisely this: in every age to let his word be heard, so that he himself may “come” to every generation and “bear witness to the truth.”

On earth, in “this world,” it is kingdoms other than Christ’s that hold outward power. The Lord himself gives the most important mark of all such earthly kingdoms when he says to Pilate, “If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would surely have fought, so that I should not be handed over to the Jews. But now my kingdom is not of this world.” Christ conquers when he suffers. An earthly kingdom must fight to survive against its enemies. Fighting belongs here on earth. This is true of all earthly kingdoms except the bad ones that are unfit to live — it is true of Sweden too — and the will to fight in defense of its existence is not an exclusively evil quality in an earthly kingdom. Christ did not mean that. He only wants to distinguish between the kingdoms of the earth and his own kingdom. Fighting — even with force, even to the shedding of blood — is a burden that has been laid on the nations because of sin, and that burden will remain on them until the day when Christ returns as King and sets up his eternal heavenly kingdom. Yet there is peace on earth even now. In the bleeding world where the wars rage, the church of Christ stands and bears witness that this earth is not everything, that heaven awaits us after death, that Christ will one day become a visible king in the world of the resurrection. There is a fellowship of love and of bright hope in our world.

Everywhere now the powers of this earth are trying to use the church of Christ for their own this-worldly purposes. In the countries under dictatorship they want to use the church for the education and cohesion of the people. For these masters do not believe in any heaven. They regard the earth — the life of the people, the life of the race — as the only real and important

thing to live for. In these countries Christ once more ends up before Pilate's judgment seat, suspected of revolutionary activity. We have seen that in such a situation in our day the church has been able to show faithfulness to the word, faithfulness to her message, the truth: this earth, the people, the race, must not be made into idols and worshiped. God's kingdom is not of this world, and all human beings are sinners. No one, not even a people's Leader, has the right to rule over the consciences of his subjects. Whoever has stayed in such a country and heard such bold preaching has felt something of the tremendous strength of the word when it sounds out without being watered down. He knows that Christ, the Lord of the church, is himself in the word — this thing that sounds so strange — so that when this strong and eternally fresh word of the Bible breaks forth and is purely proclaimed, this happens: the weariness lets go, and the strength flows in. "The Lord comes to his church." He comes, he who was once crucified and mocked by ignorant people one Passover in Jerusalem, but who broke open his grave and founded his church for all time. He comes in every generation, now in the midst of this materialistic Europe. He cannot be driven away but always makes himself heard, and he carries out his work of salvation in the hidden life of the nations with a quiet and unfathomable power.

But let us not think only of the countries under dictatorship. We have quite enough paganism in Sweden. And here too voices of a similar kind are beginning to be heard, voices proclaiming that the church has value only if she places herself directly in the service of society — here as a bulwark for democracy, that is, for a "kingdom of this world." When one does not believe in any other life than this earthly life, one knows no other goals for any activity than earthly goals, and one finds it meaningless to have a church that preaches the same old worn-out doctrines as a thousand and soon two thousand years ago: the doctrine of Christ as Savior and of heaven as the true goal of human beings' journey on earth. Then the church of Christ must repeat her Lord's word to Pilate: "My kingdom is not of this world." I must bear witness to the truth. I can be thrust away and killed. I can withdraw from the people and land of Sweden and leave room there for paganism. But I cannot cease to bear witness to the truth. I shall always go mightily forward somewhere on earth — in the time now approaching perhaps in the mission lands of Africa and Asia, not in Europe. But always, always, until the last day of history, I shall come to the earth anew, come to my church, which knows no boundaries of language and race and color of skin, come in my word about a heaven after death, the word about "a kingdom that is not of this world."

For one thing is certain: there will always be people who put their faith in Christ. How many there are in each age God alone knows in his unfathomable counsel. In some ages they are many; in some ages — as now — they are few. Christ said to Pilate, “Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice.” The lords of the earth may shout as loud as they like and virtually take possession of people. There will always be some who listen to them only absent-mindedly and wait instead for another, quiet and penetrating voice, the voice of him who himself bore his cross: “Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” That is why there will always be a church, that is, a band of people who hear the word and receive the sacraments, who take Christ into their hearts and reach out toward the kingdom of heaven. These people feel a special joy when the Lord comes to his church, and on the First Sunday in Advent that joy blossoms more richly than usual.

And when Christ may come in this way with his whole word unabridged — not only as useful for the people, but as my Lord — it will also become clear that the power from Christ is for the good of life on earth and not for its harm. His Spirit is the spirit of love, and a true disciple of Christ is on guard against his own selfishness. He is willing to serve his neighbor and to obey the laws of his people for the good of the whole. Christ’s commandment is the commandment of love. It demands that every human being, even the poor and the incurably sick, be granted the right to live and not be handled carelessly by the strong and the rich. The general brutalization in our part of the world is certainly not because Christ’s word about a kingdom above this world has made people indifferent to earthly life, has been “opium for the people.” For love knows no indifference toward the neighbor on earth. Rather, this brutalization is because people in the different nations have refused to listen to Christ’s word and have therefore ended up in an unbridled idolatry of earthly goods, a worship of money, colonies, the standard of living, “living space” — for this is what the war is about at bottom. The forces of life and the will to fellowship between people and between nations will return if Christ — he who prayed even for the evil men who crucified him — may return. Today he comes anew to his church, to his church in the land of Sweden too. He comes without earthly power, in his bare word, but “everyone who is of the truth hears his voice.”

“Make high the gate, make wide the door,

prepare your heart to be his home.”

“Praise be to you, dear Jesus,

who will come and draw near to me.” Amen.

[Note in *Postilla*: The sermon was preached on 28 November 1943 in Motala Verkstad Church. Wingren was then serving as rural-deanery curate in Motala parish (21 July 1943–31 January 1944). The post involved much desk work at the parish office. This was so taxing for Wingren’s right hand, malformed from birth, that during this period he dictated his sermons to his wife Signhild. Because of this, the oral character of the sermon manuscript is, if anything, no less than usual. On 22 December 1943 Wingren was awarded a docent’s fellowship at Lund University from 1 February 1944 to 31 January 1947.]

Translator’s notes. The source is the printed text in Postilla (2010); the date and place come from the editor’s footnote, translated in brackets at the end. The sermon was preached in wartime, and the references to “the countries under dictatorship,” “the race,” the “Leader,” and “living space” (Swedish “livsrummet,” German Lebensraum) are kept as Wingren wrote them. The closing hymn lines are from the Advent hymn “Gör porten hög” and are translated for sense. Capitals for “Konung” and “Kyrkans” in the print are lowercased according to the style guide.

Gustaf Wingren · draft translation ·

SOURCE

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