

Sermon for the Second Sunday after Easter

Gustaf Wingren

Matthew 9:36–38 · 1987

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Uppsala Mission Church

Text: Matthew 9:36–38

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. From of old it has had the gospel about Jesus as the Shepherd. When the number of texts was increased in the nineteenth century, the text now read was given its place on this day, because a couple of words in the middle of it call the crowds “sheep without a shepherd.” These crowds are we. That is why we read the text aloud and join a prayer to it. The presupposition of the service is that something is wrong with us. We need something. He who is the shepherd, and who has now spoken to people for almost two thousand years, needs nothing. When we are gone after a few short years, those who are alive then will read the text about him and wait for his word. If we think that we know better than he does and can help him become credible in our antireligious time, then we should, radically, stop holding services and instead, for example, arrange study circles in religious studies.

But we have now read the text aloud. So we may go on.

If one is to hear what the text says, one must first look at its context in Matthew’s Gospel. The text is the last three verses of chapter nine. The chapter tells of individuals who receive help, first the lame man and then others, one after another. Now, in these last three verses, Jesus goes about among the crowds. They are sheep without a shepherd. Here is a harvest waiting. Pray, he says, pray for harvest workers. Then follows immediately, in the first verse of chapter ten, the calling of twelve apostles. The three verses that are our text today mark the coming into being of the congregation. They are the movement toward congregation, that is, the movement forward toward what we are now, today. The crowds, “the sheep without a shepherd,” who have become a “congregation” — that is we. Thanks to his sending them out, we are now the congregation. That was why we read the text aloud and joined a prayer to it.

When we did so and read the text straight through, we perhaps thought at first that “the crowds,” the helpless and harassed, were some people to be pitied. That we react like that is due to what we spoke of at the very beginning: we do not see clearly that we have problems, that the distress lies in us, deep in the heart. We think instead that “Christianity” has problems, and we would gladly help Christianity to become better.

This is a false view. That the church is as weak as she is today is due first of all to precisely this false view. When the church was once strong, when she endured, she saw that what was wrong lay in herself, in the depths, in the heart. That is why she could then, in her holy text, openly tell of three leading apostles who slept in Gethsemane — and she could, in the midst of that, stand upright in martyrdom, even to death. The apostles, “the church,” sometimes fail. He never does. He lives with the keys of the realm of death and with the forgiveness of sins. He lives forever.

An example from the second century makes this clear. The people of that time could read the biblical texts word by word, and they could see what was written in them. When Jesus takes the chief priests to task, he says on one occasion, “Publicans and harlots shall enter the kingdom of God before you.” We grow used to the anger in Jesus and think it sounds mighty and fine under our vaults. In the 1981 translation it gets worse: “Tax collectors and whores go into the kingdom before you” (Matthew 21:31).

Other texts in the Bible have, so far, been given a tidier translation. The prophet Hosea is commanded by God to marry a harlot (Hosea 1:2 and 3:1). In Swedish it says an “unfaithful” woman, “an adulteress,” but what is meant is a whore. Hosea obeys and takes Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim, as his wife. She was a fallen woman. In his marriage with her the prophet has a couple of children.

What God wants to teach the people of Israel through this prophetic act is three things. First, the people are like the woman, faithless, whorish. Next, that I am healthy and strong and have children is no sign that all is well with me — things go well even for those who have gone astray. Last and greatest, God in heaven holds fast to Israel. He loves a people that has gone astray.

And now the great passage about the woman, the word in the fifth chapter of Ephesians about Jesus and the congregation, “the bride of Christ,” what Paul calls “the mystery” (Ephesians 5:25–32).

All this was held together in the time of the martyrs. We are the bride of Christ, said the young Christians of the second century. We are his congregation. We are not better than others. On the contrary, we are worse. But we were chosen by him when, after the resurrection, as a young man, he went out into the world to look for a girl to marry. Then we became one body with him, in death and in resurrection, in martyrdom and in praise. He could choose whom he wanted, but he chose us. He chose a bride who is a little doubtful. In incomprehensible, unfathomable love he chose precisely us. Now Jesus' word about the publicans and harlots who go into the kingdom of God is fulfilled. We go before the righteous. We go in just after him who marched in first of all, the robber on the cross. "Now what we failed in is healed, and God's grace brought to light."

The Christians of that time did not believe they were faultless. But on one point they were unbending. They refused to worship the emperor's genius. They did not worship and adore the idol in the middle of society, the idol before whom the others, the blameless, bent the knee.

The pattern is not wholly unknown in the later history of the congregation. We meet it also in the early days of the revival movements:

*"The garment marked with the cross, with its name of scorn, I take on,
even if no one in my family bears that name too."*

(Rosenius)

Today we sense this as something distant and foreign. Why? Think about it. What became of the revival people? Nowadays they are rather well dressed and relatively well paid. "The crowds," whom one feels pity for and who need help, are abroad. Here in Sweden they are often immigrants. They sweep the floor and clear the dishes in the restaurants where we eat. How have these "crowds" come about? Through our way of life, whose pattern is economic growth on the basis of exports. Our standard of living rises, and poverty increases among those we call "the third world."

The poor politicians in our country must, in every election campaign, promise us voters to manage economic policy properly, and then, once in government — whichever party they belong to — they must break their election promises. They can do nothing else. Yes, we say, but surely they can refrain from making these promises. Certainly they can refrain. But then

we do not give them our vote in the election, and there they stand with an empty basket. That is how we are in the election campaign. We are the problem.

Now comes the last question before the Amen. It runs: "When shall we understand that we do what the young Christian church did not do?" We worship the idol in the middle of society. Then his name was the emperor's genius. Now his name is the standard of living, our standard of living. As long as we go on worshiping him, the crowds around us in the world grow, the harassed and helpless.

We end with the same prayer we prayed at the beginning: God, send your Spirit into our hearts, so that we hear your word and then obey you in our deeds. Amen.

Translator's notes. The source has three typed pages followed by thirteen pages of Wingren's handwritten manuscript of the same sermon. The translation follows the typescript, and the handwritten pages were not transcribed. The heading reads "2:a söndagen efter påsk den 3/5 1987," that is, the Second Sunday after Easter, 3 May 1987. Wingren contrasts the older Swedish wording of Matthew 21:31 ("publikaner och skökor") with the blunter 1981 translation ("tullindrivare och horor"), and we have tried to keep the difference in register. "Kejsarens genius" is the emperor's guardian spirit, whose worship was demanded of the early Christians. The hymn line about healing and grace and the Rosenius couplet are translated for sense. A few typing slips in the typescript ("problematsikt," "ärs," "desa," "komer") are passed over silently.

Gustaf Wingren · draft translation ·