

Sermon for the Second Sunday in Advent

Gustaf Wingren

Mark 1:14–15 · 1976

5 December 1976

Djursholm Chapel

Text: Mark 1:14–15

“At that time, when John the Baptist had been thrown into prison, Jesus came to Galilee and preached the gospel of God and said, ‘The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is here. Think otherwise, believe in the gospel.’” That is today’s text in a word-for-word translation.

One reservation must be made. The text has not been translated properly into Swedish. The word “gospel” remains untranslated. It is a Greek word. Since in Swedish we use the word “gospel” only in church, never in everyday speech, it is especially unfortunate to leave precisely that word without a translation. For from the beginning it is an everyday word, a term with a worldly ring.

Our sermon today will have three parts, as usual in church, but the parts will be unusual. First comes a lecture on historical conditions and on the Greek language in the text. Then comes a section about ourselves and our human existence. Finally comes a short piece about worship and the meaning of worship.

Now the lecture. In ancient times there was an occupational group that had a special professional language. There were no newspapers or radio, no telephone or telegraph, but there were couriers who ran with a message, heralds who cried out a piece of news to the population. Such a herald is called *kēryx*, and what he does — cry out, proclaim — is called *kēryssein*. It is this latter word that stands in our text and that is translated “preached.” “Jesus preached the gospel of God” means that Jesus cried out a herald’s message. That is, something has happened now. The content of the event stands in the first clause: “The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come,” that is, “D-Day has arrived.” The kingdom of God “is at hand,”

as our Swedish Bible has it. The kingdom of God has “landed,” one might say: “The invasion has begun.” With that we have come to the term “gospel.”

Let us imagine an unfree, occupied population whose hard rulers cannot be defeated by the enslaved population itself, a population that must wait for someone else to strike down its tyrants. Then the situation is this. If a courier comes and says, “Your cruel masters are defeated,” the courier’s words contain freedom for the people he speaks to. Their everyday existence is changed by the word they hear. Such a courier’s message is “gospel,” literally “good message.” In the Old Testament we have several such messages. When the Persians defeated the Babylonians, the Babylonian captivity came to an end for the captive Jews. “How lovely are the footsteps of the messenger of joy, when he comes over the mountains to proclaim peace and bring his message” (Isaiah 52:7). What is proclaimed then is a worldly event: one great power has defeated another great power. But because the message is brought to prisoners — prisoners of the defeated tyrant — the message becomes a good message, “gospel”: “How lovely are the footsteps of the courier when he comes running with the gospel.” The term “the kingdom of God,” which also stands in our text today, denotes just such an accession to power, one that brings freedom to prisoners.

With that, all the words in the text have been explained. Jesus cries out that D-Day has arrived, that God has begun his reign. Believe this. Think otherwise. Rise up. Trust the message. Be free and rejoice.

After this we turn to two texts about Jesus’ work, to get a better view of what is at stake. First, the driving out of evil spirits. “If it is by the finger of God that I drive out the evil spirits, then the kingdom of God has come to you” (Luke 11:20). Then the accession to power has taken place. Then the tyrant’s rule falls — that is, then sick people become well. The whole of Jesus’ work as a physician belongs here. What Jesus gives is not norms and rules in the first place. It is freedom and health. In this the kingdom of God comes and goes forth victorious against the dominion of death. Next, the lame man in Mark 2:5. There, then, lies a sick man, and the coming of the kingdom ought to show itself in the sick man becoming well. But now Jesus first says something entirely different: “Your sins are forgiven you.” In that text the power to forgive sins is greater than the power to heal bodies. “So that you may know that the Son of Man has power to forgive sins — take up your bed and walk.” The lame man takes up his bed and walks. Conclusion: Jesus has power to forgive sins.

The dominion that Jesus breaks down can be summed up in two words: guilt and ill health, or, in the traditional language of dogmatics, sin and death.

That was the lecture on the language of the text, a historical lecture. Now the second part, about ourselves and our existence. Two points are important there.

In certain respects we are very free. We can do almost anything. We can fly quickly around the whole globe, build space stations far out in space, go deep down into the oceans and into the bowels of the earth. In our private lives we can travel to the places where we used to live, take the old things in our hands again, and be amazed at how small everything is. It was so big back then. We are grown-ups now. It is we who are big. But in one dimension we can never move freely. We cannot change the direction of time. Time runs relentlessly in one direction only, forward. We never come back to an event that has happened. Without mercy our time goes on, with us as prisoners inside time, toward the limit of our time on earth. When we truly experience this very simple fact, we experience the tyranny of death. This tyranny does not break in upon us far off, on the day of our death. We taste the dominion of death now, in the relentless movement of time in one direction. That is the first point.

Second. In the past time to which we never return, however much we may want to, lie our actions and — worse still — our omissions, all the occasions when we did not act. Nothing can be undone. Nothing can be repaired. What happened, or did not happen, in those past moments goes on working in other people's lives without our being able to do anything about it. We remember another person's face, how the joy went out of the eyes. We would like to blot out what we did that time and kindle joy instead — but it is too late. Time goes only one way, forward. When we truly experience this very simple fact, we experience the tyranny of guilt.

Among the most devastating things about guilt are the wrong actions it gives birth to. We behave as if we could still set things right. Parents who are driven by their guilt to keep on protecting their children, children who do something similar with parents they once failed — they do not repair the damage. What we can do, really do, is to turn our eyes forward and see to it that in new situations we do not act as badly as in the past. That we can do, for forward, time is open. Backward it is closed, inexorably closed.

All in all, this means that we live as prisoners — to speak the old language — “prisoners under sin and death.” What, then, is “the gospel of the kingdom of God”?

The gospel is that God is Lord where we are not lords. He has charge of the powers that we cannot control. And here it is important that, according to Jesus' words, power over guilt and conscience is a greater power than power over ill health and the body. If we were totally free from all guilt, we could die with ease. This is a profound New Testament word: "The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin comes from the law" (1 Corinthians 15:56) — from the claims, from the demands all around us.

What, then, does the gospel say to a person who today looks back on his life with discouraging results? It says this: "You know, surely, that the injuries that struck you in the course of your life God took care of. He made something good out of them. In the same way God is Lord over the people you have injured. He follows them day by day. He can heal where you cannot heal. It is his business to repair the damage. It is not yours. To you God says something else: 'Your sins are forgiven you. Rise up. Go into the future as a sinner whose guilt has been taken away.'"

It is certain that if we could take this to heart, we would become free to serve our neighbors, and our life would become a life full of blessing for others. Why is it so hard to receive the gospel of forgiveness?

Now we come to the law: "the power of sin comes from the law." And with that we have arrived at the third part, about worship and the meaning of worship.

We can incorporate into our personality the ideals that we meet and affirm. We can practice, train ourselves in new patterns of life. All this means, in some way, that we shape ourselves according to certain demands or "values," as we say nowadays. In the language of the Bible all such things are called the law. They are "works" that we are to perform. Such things we can incorporate into our person. But we can never incorporate the gospel of forgiveness into our personality. As long as we live, the gospel remains a foreign, incomprehensible word, a word that speaks of another kingdom than the earth, a word that must be spoken to us and given to us ever anew. That is why there is worship, repeated worship with the same texts, the church year coming round again, "Advent" once more, arrival. There stands a herald with a text: Think otherwise. Turn your thoughts away from the law and hear the gospel. You are free. You are without guilt through God's forgiveness. You can live.

Until the end of the world the gospel will be proclaimed in this way. Thousands of years ago people made their way into worship with an old language and cried, "We are tormented by our

enemies, sin and death. Lord, have mercy.” Today we come with an entirely different language, but really with the same cry: “Set us free. Take away our darkness. Visit our heart, give us courage.”

Now the sermon is near its end. When in the second part we thought about our human existence in the present — how we are shut in by time that always rushes forward, how we are unable to repair the damage of the past — memory was filled with different contents in each one of us. Each one returned, for the hundredth time perhaps, to his own life. Beside him in the pew sat another person. In her mind an entirely different life rose up, her life, with other events and other guilt. What happened then within us is exactly what is meant by the confession of sins at the altar, that row of words we seldom really listen to. If what ought to have happened in us during the altar service has instead happened here during the sermon, then it is also fitting that the sermon should end with a word from the altar, a bright word that raises us up, one that is almost never spoken from the pulpit:

“If you desire with a sincere heart the forgiveness of your sins for the sake of Jesus Christ, then it is also, by the power of God’s word and promise, firm and certain that God by grace forgives you all your sins. And this forgiveness of your sins I declare to you, at the command of our Lord Jesus Christ, in the name of God, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

[Note in *Postilla*: The sermon was preached on 5 December 1976 in Djursholm Chapel. Gustaf Wingren and Greta Hofsten had been married since 7 June that year. Greta Hofsten grew up in Djursholm (1927–1942), and one may guess that it was she who led Gustaf Wingren to preach so regularly in Djursholm Chapel (nine sermon manuscripts from the years 1973–1981 have been preserved).]

Translator’s notes. The source is the printed text in Postilla (2010); the date and place in the heading come from the editor’s footnote, which is translated in brackets at the end. “Tänk om” is rendered “think otherwise,” the style guide’s rendering of metanoein, since Wingren uses the newer Swedish wording on purpose in place of the “gören bättring” (“repent”) of the 1917 Bible. The Greek kærux and kærysteîn of the print are given in Latin letters as keryx and keryssein. “Dagen D” is rendered “D-Day.” The closing absolution follows the wording of the Swedish service book and is translated in full.

Gustaf Wingren · draft translation ·

SOURCE

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