

SERMON

Sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity

Gustaf Wingren

Isaiah 51:12–16 · 1984

7 October 1984

Enebyberg Church, Danderyd

Text: Isaiah 51:12–16

Hymns: 332:1–3; 357:1–2; 332:4–7; 329:5

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

The text from the book of Isaiah that we just heard read from the altar is a word of encouragement and comfort to a people in distress. They were probably in captivity far away in a foreign land, and they were certainly exposed to contempt and oppression. This is heard again and again in the text: “the fury of the oppressor,” chains, threats — that is what Israel has to taste. This people in distress was entirely alone in living without images of gods. All other peoples had gods that one could see with the eye and touch with the hand. Israel had no visible support for faith. In their law it was forbidden to make images. The one they were to believe in was the Creator, the Invisible One, he who has made all things, who “stretched out the heavens,” it says, and “laid the foundations of the earth,” he who “stirs up the sea so that its waves roar.” Trust in him. Only in him, him whom you do not see.

It is not easy for us, in our cultural climate, to make really alive in our feelings how strong the need for a visible god was in those days, a god one could take hold of. There is an experience that lies fairly close and that for some Swedish people would “taste” the same as a ban on images. It would be if someone reached into a car and tore apart the mascot hanging in there. A mascot is, after all, a protection against danger. It is an image of a god. And one is to tear mascots apart just when dangers threaten, when the car radio tells of chaos on the roads, of sudden black ice, of collisions. Then, precisely then, someone tears each mascot in two.

But the business of the mascot is only partly a related experience, comparable to Israel’s situation. We have science and trained critical reason. We know that a mascot is worth

nothing. It is air and empty nothing. Israel lived before all universities and was surrounded by peoples who all had images to worship. All the more remarkable, then, that our enlightened society is so rich in these idols: mascots, unlucky days, lucky coins, lucky numbers, and so on. It fills a need in us, the need “to have a God” — even though it is a need that in our time has run on and now locks us fast in emptiness.

Let us instead stay a while with reason, stay with something we can observe. We know that everything that makes human existence possible on earth — and everything that makes the existence of animals and plants possible — is given to us. Nothing of what is the very ground of existence has come about as the result of our work. The air we breathe, the water we drink, the soil and the earth that make it possible for things to grow for us — all this can be lacking, and then we are dead. It is lacking in most places in space, but it is here, on the planet Earth, where we have been given our home, “the lovely, good, warm Doris,” as Harry Martinson calls the globe, “the only globe where Life was given a land of milk and honey.” One could regard this existence as a kindness of the Creator. A mascot, on the other hand, is something we have made up, and it is therefore powerless.

Perhaps it was not such poor advice that the prophet Isaiah gave the people: “Believe in him who has created all this around us.” Believe in him who is not seen but who lets everything come into being. He makes life break forth every single spring. And now, at this moment, he lets the soil go to rest and lets the trees shed their leaves — so that something new can come. New again, fresh.

“What sort of nature romanticism is that?” someone sitting here says. Does the preacher really not know that nature is cruel, bloodthirsty and cruel, that it tears life apart and destroys it, a beast of prey? Yes, the preacher knows that, and the texts of the Bible know it more than well. That is why the Bible goes on to tell, not about nature this time, but about a Man who had to bear cruelty and suffer under cruelty — without becoming cruel in return. That is what is called “the second article.” It comes after the article on creation, and it is much longer, because it describes a human destiny: “born, suffered, crucified, dead, buried ...”

Of course one must defend oneself against cruelty, and for that we have a system of justice and an armed defense. But in the long run — in the long run — there is only one way to overcome cruelty: to endure it, to take it on oneself, to bear it, without becoming cruel in return. And he of whom the second article speaks was to do what holds in the long run — what holds for eternity. He was chosen for it. And he endured, even to death.

That is why he lives forever. He is with us now, here. That is the meaning of the service: that we are to meet him, his body given, his blood poured out.

In what way, then, does he solve our problems when he comes? We have “the fury of the oppressor” over us, close upon us, as it is described in the prophetic text for this day, the sixteenth Sunday after Trinity. In the Gospel Book this Sunday has received the new heading “Death and Life.” For more than a hundred years the gospel texts for this day have been these two: the story of Lazarus, the dead brother in Bethany, and the text about the dead son in Nain, the widow’s son. And now also Jairus’s daughter. Three stories about grief.

The enemy who in the Bible is called “the last enemy” is still our enemy, and he is filled with cruelty. It is death. No one can approach death and enter into death without anxiety. Jesus himself was in anguish in Gethsemane. The New Testament describes this in detail: “... with loud cries and tears,” the letter to the Hebrews says of his death struggle. Christ lives and is near us in every distress we come into, even in the distress of death. Only he can make death easy, for he has with him what he always has with him: “the forgiveness of sins.” It is possible to “hand over” everything one has done, to let it go, when one becomes certain that forgiveness exists.

When Jesus was to interpret and explain his own life, to interpret this being lost in the death of the cross, he took an example from the outward creation, an example from nature. What looks like uncleanness and loss — the grain that is thrown into the dark earth and dissolves — gives birth to life. At bottom it is not loss. On the contrary, it is birth. That is how a harvest comes about. Even if he sighs and groans in Gethsemane before it is to happen, victory lies hidden inside this pain.

And now he is with us. He follows us into our losses and, in the end, into our death, our struggle against “the last enemy.” And then the sighs themselves, the heavy breaths, the thing that makes it hard to speak — that is how it is with the dying — this is the Spirit, the Holy Spirit himself, inside us.

It is strange, but so it stands in one of the strangest texts of the New Testament. It is a mysterious word about the Spirit. It is Paul who speaks, in the eighth chapter of the letter to the Romans. The whole creation is full of “groaning,” of “cries as in the pains of childbirth” (8:22). These are pains in the service of life. There is victory in these groans. They stand in the service of birth. And there the Spirit comes in, the divine Giver of life of the third article

(verses 26–27): “In the same way the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know how our prayer ought really to be” — “what we should rightly pray for, we do not know,” it said in the old translation — “but the Spirit pleads for us with cries without words.” “Cries without words” — that is remarkable. That is how our life is in all crises, that is, in the renewal of life. For “crisis” is renewal. Crisis is birth.

And death too will be that. It is filled with resurrection, resurrection under “groans,” “without words.” Do not be afraid. Christ is risen. Over the depths he reaches from his future to us, into the days we have left. When the last day dawns, he stands as light in the gate. The mists are driven away. He is made manifest.

Let us pray.

God, one thing only we want to ask for today. Make us completely free from worry, so free that we could die at any time with glad hearts. Then we trust first in life, the life that cannot die, the life “that bears fruit according to its kind on the earth.” Hear our prayer. Through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Translator’s notes. The source has three typed pages followed by eight pages of Wingren’s handwritten manuscript of the same sermon. The translation follows the typescript, and the handwritten pages were not transcribed. The typescript heading reads “den 7/10 1984,” that is, 7 October 1984. “Mascot” (Swedish “mascot,” once typed “mscot”) means the good-luck charm hung inside a car. “Doris” is the name Harry Martinson gives the earth in his epic poem Aniara; the two quoted phrases are translated for sense. The Romans quotation follows the 1981 Swedish New Testament that Wingren quotes, with the older 1917 wording he sets beside it. Capitals used for stress in the typescript (“NYTT,” “FRISK,” “SORG,” “FÖDELSE”) and the double exclamation marks are not reproduced.

Gustaf Wingren · draft translation ·