

SERMON

Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after Easter

Gustaf Wingren

John 15:26–16:4

Sermon on the 6th Sunday after Easter, 5 May 1940, in Gamleby Church

Text: John 15:26–16:4

Hymns: 37:5–7, 129:–, 28:–, 510:–, 251:3–4

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

Let us pray.

O Holy Spirit, make the soul pious,

Gentle and unoffended.

Make the heart a sanctuary,

Where God is honored in all.

Give strength, give comfort in all our lack,

Help that we believe in Jesus Christ

Both now and always. Amen. (Swedish Hymnal 24:5)

There are unassuming people, people who do not want to be anything for their own part but are what they are as servants to others. In the same way there are unassuming Sundays in our church year. This applies especially to the Sundays before our three great festivals: Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. The 4th Sunday in Advent, which comes just before Christmas, has as heading for all its message the words: “The Lord is near.” It is only a pointer that points to Christmas’s great subject of joy: the Lord’s coming in lowliness. And Palm Sunday gathers its gospel into the single word: “Farewell.” The “silent week” enters, and the gaze is directed forward toward Good Friday and Easter. And today, on the 6th Sunday after Easter, we again meet such an unassuming Sunday, over all whose texts sits the gathering motto: “The

awaiting of the Spirit,” the awaiting of Pentecost’s wonder, the joyous feast of the outpouring of the Spirit and the founding of the Church. Our gospel, which is read from the altar and which is our preaching text, instructs to the utmost how “Jesus promises the Spirit.” It is as if the whole Sunday wanted to get us to await in prayer Pentecost’s feast, as if everything only pointed to the great festival and wanted to say: “It is fitting for me to decrease and for this one to increase.”

Next Sunday this temple, which today is rather sparsely attended, will probably be filled with a congregation that has gathered to take part in the young people’s joy, those who have then been confirmed and stand ready to receive the gift of the Lord’s Supper. There is always in a congregation one or another, perhaps many, who await Pentecost, wait for this festival and look forward to it. But how often is this awaiting at the same time an awaiting of the Spirit? Is not the young people’s first communion for many more a beautiful and careful spectacle than a spiritual reality, a gift and a power from above, which is poured into our congregations throughout the land, where they lie with their white churches, in which the bands of communion youth gather. When the Spirit one day comes over our people and our church, then it certainly does not need to bring with it overturning novelties for us to be able to perceive that it has come among us. The Spirit does a wonder that is great enough if it restores to us the insight that the ordinary, which we already perform, is not only a beautiful custom but a tangible reality, just as immediately clear and graspable as the war, the violence and the unrighteousness. The Spirit shall restore to us the faith in Word and sacrament as living acts of a living God. Such a Spirit has hitherto not seriously made itself noticeable in our Swedish people, despite the distress that stands at the door, and despite the pressing need of a revival, a spiritual renewal, that now prevails. If we want to speak of the Spirit or think of the Spirit’s work in the congregation, then our speech and our thought get no hold in the condition that now prevails; then our gaze and our distress stretch of necessity forward, toward years that are coming, toward days that come, away from what is now, to that which the future may be expected to bring.

But our text today has precisely this errand to us, that it wants to turn our gaze forward. It wants to prepare us for a Pentecost that is coming, a spiritual renewal that we await. It may take time before it comes, but we have no right to despair of God’s dealings with us and our church. Today’s text instructs us about the conditions of such a spiritual renewal. We want to listen to its message.

The whole text speaks of the future. We perhaps think that the text's first part must refer to an entirely different time than the text's later part refers to. In the first part is predicted a good and welcome, longed-for promise's fulfillment: "I will send to you the Spirit of truth from the Father, the Helper, who shall bear witness about me, after I have left you without me on earth." But in the later part of the text is predicted pure pain and suffering: "They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, a time will come when whoever kills you will think that he is thereby performing a sacrificial service to God." We perhaps find such persecutions and misdeeds little suited to the fact that the Spirit's time has come. When the Spirit comes, then humankind as a whole should give up all its evil and in peace listen to and obey God without disturbances and discords. The text's two halves speak indeed each of the future, but—we perhaps mean—it cannot well be the same future they speak of: the Lord clearly predicts a time of persecution and a time of spiritual renewal, two separate times, each with its own character.

Through a word that has not been preserved for us in the Gospel of John, from which our text today is taken, but which on the other hand meets us in all the three other gospels, we however get good guidance to rightly understand our text and to correct our mistake: Jesus says: "When they now lead you away and drag you before courts, then do not be anxious beforehand about what you are to speak; but what is given you in that hour, that speak. For it is not you who will speak, but the Holy Spirit." There we see how the time of persecution and the time of the Spirit are knotted together into one single, a time of struggle and Spirit at once. The Spirit is a Spirit that is given in the utmost distress, a Spirit "who gives of his comfort good in earthly distress a heavenly courage."—The two halves of our text speak in reality of the same time, not of two different times. The time of spiritual renewal is the time of struggle and distress, no other.

The faith in development sits in us a thousand times stronger than we ourselves suspect, this the previous century's dogma before all other dogmas. And the great mistake of the faith in development in the spiritual area is this: culture goes forward and barbarism goes backward; in the spiritual progress the power of the evil decreases and the power of the good increases. We need only cast a glance in a newspaper to see this glad faith thoroughly refuted according to all the rules of art. But we continue nevertheless to cling to this faith in development as soon as it concerns the future. The present condition is of a passing nature, we mean; soon the world will come right again, and then hatred of peoples and war shall be banned from our earth. Yes, when the present condition is over, then evil is tired, that is true enough; it will rest a while and devote itself to lesser tasks: class antagonisms and division between

individuals, these things that filled our people's life before the war came and created unity. Evil does not die, but it moves a little now and then.—And how reality-promoting are not many wish-dreams about the church's and Christianity's future! Everything shall be set in order and it shall no longer be joined with affliction to belong to Christ. One notes with touching gratitude the great newspapers' usual words about the Christian faith, words and statements that can herald that the time of struggle is over and that it shall soon finally become pleasant to believe in God and bear witness about him.

So the modern person dreams as soon as he looks forward. It is as if he were on constant flight from reality, as if he meant that faith were the same as the art of shutting one's eyes. And at the same time as he flees in order to get a hold and a support in a spiritual reality, he continually pushes from himself the only support and the only hold that exists in the world, the old Christian faith without all novelties and additions. No, he cannot understand that old thing, about sin and the cross and trust in Christ's power. It is too old; it appears so unreal. He cannot. He continues to chase toward the imagined future when all his wish-dreams shall be fulfilled.

But the cross stands where it stands and bears witness about reality and about a God who is in the midst of reality, the harshest of all realities. The cross says: you believe that the evil shall cease in order that the good shall get a word in the matter. You are mistaken. Here God has taken form and clothed himself in a servant's form on earth; he has let his goodness go into the world, sought up the straying, in infinite mercy stretched his hands toward the children of men. These hands of God were struck bloody, but precisely with wounded hands God grasps the one who believes in him and himself takes hold of his hands. Christ suffers as one defeated, but the power, the power of mercy, which he brings to earth, becomes only stronger in the face of evil's assault, impossible to kill or erase from the earth. The cross says: you mean that the time of the good is one time, and the time of the evil another time. The purest goodness the earth has borne you see here, nailed to a cross that the darkest evil raised up—do you then not understand that evil and good are contending powers, that the time of goodness is precisely the time of evil, that both evil and goodness at the same time grow and clash—do you not understand that persecution and the Spirit belong together, that the spiritual renewal means struggle and distress instead of rest and comfort?

If we rightly understood the message of the cross, then we should not dream so much and not need to shut our eyes so desperately. Then we should also with calm trust look to the future,

even if the horizon seems cloudy. Then we should know this, that struggle and distress for God's church and congregation are signs of the Spirit's times. We should stand there with the gaze toward years that are coming, and we should not tremble if there are heard voices and tones that fling the words of contempt for Christianity in the face of us: if the struggle comes, then the Spirit comes, which has now long enough been far away. Then we should say in our hearts:

"O God, you remain the same,
and good are you, the God of zeal,
So let us come to know your zeal
In purifying pain and distress.
Let prove our being and separate
From the slag its pure iron,
And harden and strengthen our will
To truth's watch and defense." (Swedish Hymnal 533:2)

It may well happen that the number of Christian confessors may come to sink if it comes to a struggle of faith in our century. But those who remain perhaps hold instead the old message about the Cross and about the grace of salvation alone so much higher in the struggle. And it is by no means impossible that many who now cannot recognize the strong and holy God in the dissolved and flattened modern Christianity and who therefore keep themselves far away, by no means impossible that many such—quite unexpectedly—show themselves to have the tongue of faith when the Spirit's time is at hand, the Spirit's time that we await. It may happen that he stands up and joins the band of witnesses with this prayer to God on his lips:

"Let me become a hammer swung
Against false gods by you,
A message-staff, restless and winged,
that calls to the Lord's war." (Swedish Hymnal 533:3b)

For the bearing of witness belongs to the Spirit's times. The Spirit is the spirit of the witness and he bears witness through poor people who in themselves are nothing but who have seen and become aware that God lives. "You also can bear witness," it says in our text—"You can stand up and speak of God's deeds, bring forth him as a graspable reality before seeking people who grope after a ground to stand on and a hold to hold on to." What marks the Spirit's times is surely this, that the witness goes forth in the human world and separates faith and unbelief, separates love for the gospel's God and hatred of God, so that the lines clear and the blurriness yields. In the Spirit's times no one, as now, can with preserved indifference hear God's word spoken; one takes a stand and one wants something. It is precisely therefore that the Spirit and the struggle hang together—it is precisely therefore that spiritual renewal and persecution are grown-together magnitudes. The witness leaves no one untouched but calls to decision, to the right and to the left, to the evil or to the good. The two halves of our text belong together; they speak of the same time, and what holds them together is the witness, this witness that creates the struggle and of which the text likewise speaks. And the core and center of the witness in the Spirit's times is Christ. "When the Spirit comes, then he shall bear witness about me," says the Savior in today's gospel. "You also can bear witness, for you have been with me from the beginning." If the cross comes to its right place as the hold of faith, then also the cross's King, Christ the Lord, comes to his right place. The certainty of faith and the trust awaken precisely in the moment when the true humility has matured and when all reliance on one's own piety and excellence has been swept out of the soul, when all faith and trust is directed toward "The Right Man."

"Ask you what name he bears

—Jesus Christ it is

He is the Lord God,

who, clad in victory's garb,

has founded his throne for eternity." Amen

[Subsequent pages of the manuscript contain only illegible handwriting or are blank. Not guessed.]