

SERMON

Sermon for the Sunday after Christmas

Gustaf Wingren

Luke 2:33–40 · 30 December 1945

In St Peter's Monastery, Lund

Hymns: 51:1-2, 63:8-15, 40:4, 62:3-7, 462:8.

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

Let us pray.

O King, above all great,

all the world upon thy word depends;

yet full of grace thou dwellest still

with him who from the heart so believes in thee.

Yes, now and always near us stay,

all evil, O Jesus, from us drive

And us at last in mercy give

a blessed death, an eternal life. Amen (Sv.Ps 193: 8, 18)

Today's Gospel about the child and the two old ones in the temple of Jerusalem describes for us how Jesus already as a little child begins his dominion over the souls of men. And above all our Gospel text speaks of the joy and the security in the hearts where this Jesus Christ is received as Lord and King. Therefore we gather our thoughts around this theme: The security in Christ's kingdom.

First: There reigns security in Christ's kingdom, because Christ precisely in lowliness possesses his divine power.

The princes of this world were not visibly cast down from their thrones when the little child was born in Bethlehem. Right from the beginning there was indeed a company that received Christ, but this company did not rule on earth. There were the shepherds in the Christmas night, who gathered around the manger, while the guests in the inn beside slept their good sleep without suspecting that in the stable a stone's throw away something happened that one would preach about in coming millennia widely over the circle of the earth. There are the wise men, who followed the star and reached their goal, despite the mighty Herod. And there are the two old ones in today's text, Simeon and Anna, raised above the striving of the present and therefore equipped with the ability to see.

The power on earth was not in this company that received Jesus Christ. The power lay in others' hands, and it has since then wandered from ruler to ruler and from kingdom to kingdom: wherever the earthly power has ended up, so it has never wanted to stay. All the world's dominions have crashed to the ground and been replaced by new, self-conscious earthly kingdoms. Christ's kingdom must always lack the power of violence, it may not possess the weapon with which the world is governed: Christ's kingdom does not possess violence and coercion. This means: Christ's kingdom is spared from possessing that which always goes under, always wanders from power-holder to power-holder under the mockery-play in the world. Christ's kingdom may instead possess the unconquerable power that lies in lowliness and that has its peculiarity therein, that it always appears weak but instead never in eternity goes under but endures from generation to generation. The word

that is proclaimed for us today is the same as that which the early Christian congregation heard, unchanged and in possession of the same quiet power as then, while multitudes of earthly kingdoms during the past two millennia have become dust and nothing. How can that be?

It comes among other things therefrom, that Christ came here to us in order to be a servant to us. To serve is the same as to make oneself lowly: to serve is to seek others' best, not one's own. Because his kingdom is a kingdom of serving, it must always, for all future, be marked by lowliness. But since our world is such that it constantly is near to being consumed by men's mutual selfishness, so there is always somewhere in human hearts a hunger to meet the pure servant-mind. The message about the child on the straw-bed and about the man on the cross, who wanted nothing else than to serve, that message has an eternal power over men: until the

earth's last day the ones chosen by God will come to place themselves in the obedience of faith under Christ, the King of lowliness.

It is not so, however, that we are spared from weakness and poverty if we flee away from Christ. On the contrary: it belongs to our life with unavoidable necessity that we little by little lose advantages that we long enjoyed - the changes of fortune are our lot. But our anxiety before life depends on that we do not want to be servants but ourselves desire riches and strength. No one is so secure and so full of peace in his heart as the one who on his place in life wants to serve. How should the one who wants to serve be able to be harmed by any loss of power? The servant has his hold in lowliness: he rests in something that never can be taken from him, rests as a child of God and brother of Christ in an eternal, indestructible kingdom, for he rests in God himself. God is love. God lives in the servant's heart. Therefore the security reigns therein, the security and peace that dwelt in Christ and that he gives to us through his word. We often need to pray as we just did in the collect prayer during the altar service: "God, teach us in Christ's earthly lowliness to see thy heavenly power, that we may become secure under thy protection."

Next: There reigns security in Christ's kingdom, because Christ in the midst of the judgment is merciful.

The oldest Christian congregation has already posed the question, why not all but only a few receive Christ. An old prophetic word, which in different shape meets in a couple of places in the book of Isaiah, returns therefore time and again in the NT: the word about the "stumbling-stone", "the stone which the builders rejected" - the same discarded stone, i.e. Christ, is for the faithful a cornerstone, elect and precious, a foundation to build upon. Just this prophecy of Isaiah is it that echoes in Simeon's dark words in our text: "Behold, this one is set for the fall or for the rising of many in Israel..." A sifting, a division must happen as soon as Christ steps forth. For in his revelation lies a judgment over us, our thoughts and doings, and at his word to us we become aware that we are evil. Christ must therefore always be "a sign which shall be spoken against". Man namely does not wish to know that he is evil, and it belongs to his being that he always wants to push the judgment away from himself.

But just as we just saw that lowliness and adversity is not something one escapes if one flees away from Christ, so we notice well that something similar applies to the judgment: it belongs to human life. More than one suspects among us live in fear of men's judgments over their past life: that this or that misstep shall be discovered, revealed and become generally known.

And often, when men slander us behind our back, we must well before our conscience admit: it is a real, actual fault in me that I now am slandered for - we perceive the judgment, the just judgment, in the slander ...and then we flee to our good friends, who have forbearance with our shortcomings and who are not judging but merciful toward us. But herein lies no security, for one is never secure as long as one flees. Secure we become first when we turn completely around and ourselves - voluntarily - go straight into the judgment.

If we go to meet Christ without pushing his judgment away from us, then we get an own, personal certainty that he is not only a stumbling-stone but a firm cornerstone. No other security holds than this: to seize hold of Him who judges us harder than any men can do. Christ's judgment smashes our good reputation and lets our conscience rest at something that no man in the world can rob us of: the justification by grace alone, given to us in Christ's unshakeable word to every evil man, every spirit and contrite man: "Thy sins are forgiven thee".

Our security is thus not only the servant's security, which is grounded on the will to serve. Then we would without trembling take all setbacks and all lowliness, content with only being servants. He who shall have that security in himself without being shaken, he must be as unselfish as Christ is. But that is none of us. Our heart is full of self-will, and therefore anxiety often seizes us, therefore Christ stands against us as the "stumbling-stone". First in Christ's uttermost servant-mind toward us, his purifying judgment and forgiveness, have we an eternal hold, a rock to build our house upon, so that we manage to gladly work in our calling and patiently bear the misfortune when God lays it upon us - for this is our best service toward our fellow men. Let us thus never flee Christ's judgment! Deep within his strict judgment lies his mercy hidden. Therefore we are secure under Christ's dominion.

And now the third: There reigns security in Christ's kingdom, because Christ precisely in death gives us life.

The Jesus-child, whose birth we recently celebrated, was destined for the cross-death. This shameful end to life was included in his saving work. Some mean that one should not speak of such things at Christmas. The young Mary could have thought the same, when on her first church-going day after the child's birth she got to bear forth her firstborn before the Lord in the temple. But Simeon turns indeed also to her, where she stands at Joseph's side: "Yes, also through thy soul shall a sword go." The whole work of Christ, with death and with resurrection, lies prophetically already in the Gospel of Christmas.

If we previously have seen that Christ's secret power consists precisely in his lowliness and that Christ's mercy reaches us in the midst of his judgment over us, so can all this be summarized in the sentence: Life from Christ is reached to us in death. For the lowliness of human life, the inevitable poverty in our existence, it is only a prelude to Death, which one day shall come over us. And when judgments and hardness from different sides strike us and wound us in our innermost, so is all this enmity only a tool in Death's hand: soon is our life-tree cut off at the root. Human life stretches itself away from lowliness, away from judgment and away from death - we hunt after power, love and life without fully reaching all this, for we are men. But Christ - "whom the world cannot comprehend" - he moves unceasingly in opposite direction to men's hunting: therefore he is God and therefore he is "the sign which is spoken against". He goes out from the high, bright heaven and is born as an ordinary child in poverty and night. He comes with his pure and innocent heart and goes into Gethsemane, straight into the wrath's judgment over the race's all crimes. And instead of choosing the life that lay before him, he bowed himself under death, so that Death got him in its power. Just so should he become the Prince of Life. "For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men". As the entrance into Death and as Lord over Death is Christ an Eternal King. No one who dies - and dies does every man - shall escape one day to be placed before Christ's face and answer for his life on earth. One perhaps can "abolish Christianity", but one can never through any power-measure disturb the Risen King in heaven from his lordship over the world.

If whole states go to battle against Christ's kingdom, then is fulfilled only the word in our text: "So shall the thoughts of many hearts become revealed." The division goes on and shall continue through all world-history. Those who contradict Christ's sign do not thereby become masters over him. The only thing that happens is that they for their part choose to live for powers that end in death. Christ alone of all the world's powers can be with us even into the outermost darkness of death that awaits us all. He stands there in the gate of death and receives us one by one, when we go over the threshold to the other side. For precisely in death he gives us life, the incorruptible life in God's heaven. Therefore there reigns security in Christ's kingdom.

And now, in this hour, your "heart's thoughts become revealed". Every meeting with the Word uncovers how we are. Christ goes forth and the decision happens. But he is no heartless divider, who indifferently sees that some end up in faith, others in unbelief. The Lord searches in the confusion that your inner is, and he rejoices if he only finds a longing for faith

therein— "God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved." Thereof the whole Gospel of Christmas bears witness from beginning to end. Christ is "set for fall and rising," but it is not so that he is to the evil for fall and to the good for rising. But— his very greatest gifts he wants to give to those who have fallen and become ensnared in their own sin and who long for rescue:

"He seeks him who goes astray,
the weak in his arms he takes,
upright those who fall." Amen.

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