

Sermon for the Third Sunday in Advent

Gustaf Wingren

Matthew 11:2–10 · 1987

13 December 1987

All Saints Church (Allhelgonakyrkan), Lund

Text: Matthew 11:2–10

First, a few words about the course of the sermon that now follows. We begin with a modern, critical question that is put to Christianity. It is a very common question. Many here in the church surely ask it sometimes.

The preaching text from Matthew's Gospel, the text that was just read from the altar, answers this question from people of today. But to discover that this very text answers the question of our time, one has to go through the text step by step, an inquiry that takes its time. The listener will have to be patient with the preacher for quite a long while.

At the end the text takes hold of modern man, of each single one of us, and begins to attack us, to call us to account. It attacks in order to cure and heal us.

First, then, the critical question. If God has all power, and if he is love, why does he let all the evil happen? Here evil piles up every day. Either it is the case that God cannot: he does not have all power. Or else he can, but then he is not love.

Now to the text. It speaks of John the Baptist in prison, where he is going to be executed. Now he wonders whether Jesus is "the one who was to come," that is, whether he is the Messiah. He receives an answer: "The blind see, the lame walk, lepers are made clean," and so on — nothing but remarkable deeds. These words are taken from the book of Isaiah, from three different places freely joined together, from chapters 29, 35, and 61. The meaning ought to be clear. The prophecy is now being fulfilled. Jesus is therefore "the one who was to come." But here problems lie hidden, hard problems.

Jesus had belonged to the circle around John the Baptist and had been baptized by him in the Jordan. He had listened to the Baptist's preaching, for example this: "He who is coming ... will clean the threshed grain and gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn in a fire that never goes out" (Matthew 3:12).

Jesus goes out, and he too speaks of harvest and of cleaning the grain. He does so in a parable about the weeds and the wheat. But there it is the other way around. The servants are eager. They want to begin weeding. But their master says, "No, you might pull up the wheat while you are pulling out the weeds. Let both grow until it is time to harvest" (Matthew 13:28–30).

The contrast between the Baptist and Jesus becomes still clearer when the ax at the root of the tree is to strike. Listen to the Baptist: "Already the ax is laid to the root of the tree. Every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire" (Matthew 3:10). Now listen to Jesus: "A man had a fig tree in his vineyard, and he came to see whether there was any fruit on it, but found none. Then he said to his gardener ... 'Cut the tree down.'" It is clear that Jesus understands himself as the gardener. He pleads for the tree, the unfruitful tree. It is a prayer against the command "Cut it down." He prays, "Lord, let it stand one more year, and I will dig around it and put on manure. Perhaps it will bear fruit next year" (Luke 13:6–9).

The Baptist had spoken of punishing judgment and of death. Jesus appeals to God for mercy. But now comes the most important thing. It is John the Baptist with his threats who is in agreement with the Old Testament. It is true that the prophet Isaiah prophesies about the blind who see, the deaf who hear, the lame who "leap like deer," it says. But inside these remarkable promises of miracles it also says, "Behold, your God comes with vengeance" (Isaiah 35:4). It says, "a year of grace from the Lord," and it also says, "a day of vengeance from our God" (Isaiah 61:2).

It is precisely this that Jesus has struck out in his answer to John. He picks out the merciful deeds, but he takes away the hard ones. He strikes out the judgment.

Only now do we understand the last line in the answer to John the Baptist: "Blessed is the one who does not fall away because of me" (Matthew 11:6). In the 1917 translation — which on this point is better — it says, "Blessed is he for whom I do not become a stumbling block." Behind the word "stumbling block" in the original text lies *skandalon*, scandal. We recognize the word from Paul: "We preach Christ crucified, a scandal to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks" (1 Corinthians 1:23).

Now we have come to the heart of the matter. John the Baptist was waiting for a Messiah who would carry out the judgment and let the ax strike, a Messiah who would separate the evil and the good. Jesus uses exactly the same images — the tree that bears no fruit, weeds and wheat growing together — but he uses them with the opposite purpose. He does not want, in some sort of mildness, simply to take away the punishment. He is infinitely more radical than that. If the punishment must come, well then — let the judgment strike me. If the weapon must strike, well then, let the spear go through my body, let the nails fasten me to the crossbeam of the cross.

In inner freedom Jesus Christ chose to take the suffering on himself instead of judging. In this he reveals the mystery that lies hidden within God, the Almighty and Holy One. He is a God who himself suffers under evil rather than judge. This is God's secret as long as the world stands.

Now the inquiry into the text is finished. The text answers the modern critical question put to Christianity. It answers like this: "God has all power, and he uses his almighty power to suffer himself, to bear the evil, in waiting and in hope." We get no other answer. The last word runs: "Blessed is the one for whom I do not become a scandal." Go on, if you like, being dissatisfied with that answer. There will be no further explanations all the same. But now the text turns against us. It goes on the attack.

You who ask the modern critical question: what have you yourself done? Not thought, but done. Thinking you are good at. But now it is a matter of doing.

When Jesus takes the suffering on himself, he does something that he finds carried out in nature around us. The sun shines on the good and the evil. The grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies. All life that comes into being rests on someone giving away some of his own life. God's creating love goes through the whole world, not only through the church. All of us who live have received love in a world where evil has power. Yet love breaks through, right through the evil. You who put the critical question to God — for it is to the suffering God that you put it — you have been given love. Otherwise you would not be alive today. From birth onward we do not get by unless we receive care and attention, unless we make use of other people's work and services.

This is God's love going through the world.

But what do we ourselves do to increase the goodness in the world? How much of our own life do we give away to others? I am the unfruitful tree, without fruit. And yet I am allowed to live, to stand “one more year.” Although the darkness only thickens, a ray of light falls “into my soul,” as Geijer puts it. He is remarkable, this Geijer. One can read his lines every day — and it is especially fitting to read them when it is Advent and dark, as now.

Darkness for Geijer is ordinary darkness. But it is more than that. Every day ends with the darkness thickening — and yet there is a dawning to wait for. Every human life ends with the road growing dark, and yet there is hope of a morning. Every December is lived through in a darkness that grows, grows down toward the wonderful point there at the end, the winter solstice, where the light wins, and where at the same time the radiance was kindled around the child in the manger. The light of the world.

*The day is sinking,
space grows nightlike.*

Soon I see only the eternal stars.

*But I do not grieve
for the fleeing day.*

The coming night does not terrify me.

*For of the love
that goes through the world*

a ray fell also

into my soul.

Translator's notes. The source has three typed pages followed by sixteen notebook pages of Wingren's handwritten manuscript of the same sermon. The translation follows the typescript, and the handwritten pages were not transcribed. The last manuscript page appears to close with a blessing (“Till sist: Må friden ifrån Gud...,” the peace of Philippians 4:7) that the typescript does not have; it is not added here. The heading reads “den 13/12 1987,” that is, 13 December 1987. Greek skandalon is given in Latin letters, as Wingren writes it. The closing poem is Erik Gustaf Geijer's poem beginning

“Dagen sig sänker”; it is translated for sense, not as verse, and the line “föll ock en strimma” is rendered “a ray fell also.” Wingren’s underlinings are not reproduced.

Gustaf Wingren · draft translation ·