

Sermon for the Third Sunday in Advent

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Luke 3:1–15 · 1983

11 December 1983

Västerkyrkan, Lund (preached again on 14 December 1986 at Hammarö, Karlstad)

Text: Luke 3:1–15

Hymns (Hammarö): 42:1; 43:1–4; 48; 40:4–5

The heading for today is “The One Who Prepares the Way.” By that is meant John the Baptist. The gospel texts of all three series are about him. Our text this year is from the third series, Luke 3:1–15. It is the beginning of the Baptist’s preaching in the wilderness. But today we shall also speak of the gospel of the other two series.

Today’s text, which was just read from the altar, is thus called “gospel,” but it does not name Jesus Christ. The last verse does speak of the Christ — or “Messiah,” as it is called in Hebrew — but it only reports what the people were asking themselves: “Is John the Baptist the Messiah?” Further on in the gospel that question is answered with a clear no. The Messiah — or the Christ; both words mean the same, anointed, that is, King — is Jesus, the Messiah, the Crucified One. The Baptist belongs to the gospel because he prepares the way. He is the forerunner.

Between John and Jesus, however, there was not only a connection but also a tension. One can see it at several points if one reads the New Testament carefully. John expects that the coming Messiah will let judgment go over the people, God’s avenging wrath. “He has the winnowing shovel in his hand. He will gather the wheat, but he will burn up the chaff,” the Baptist declares. Jesus takes up the same imagery in his preaching but pushes the judgment aside. “Let everything grow together” — wait for the harvest, wait in patience. Or still more clearly: John the Baptist says here in our text that “the ax is already laid to the root of the trees.” Jesus uses — again — the same imagery. He does it in his parable of “the barren fig tree,” this tree that the owner wants to cut down. But the gardener, Jesus says, pleads for the tree: “Let it stand one

more year” — wait, wait in patience. It is quite clear what that word means. It is Jesus himself who pleads for the unfruitful people and will not let happen what the Baptist had hoped for.

It is not strange that the Baptist sends word from his prison: “Are you the one who was to come — or shall we wait for someone else?” That is in the gospel of the first series for this day.

This tension between John the Baptist and Jesus Christ is the tension between the law and the gospel. In the tension between these two we live now, this year, in Sweden. These two persons, far away, carry in themselves the whole foundation of our existence. Neither of them died very neatly. Both were executed, the one by beheading, the other by crucifixion. But we listen to them now. They contain our own existence. They give us more than so-called cultural personalities give.

What, then, do the law and the gospel say? Let us listen. First, the law.

God’s law is about my neighbor, not about me. Listen. “Whoever has two shirts” — in the 1917 translation they were called “coats” — “must share with the one who has no shirt.” Whoever has bread, yes, give to the one who is without bread. So speaks the law. And notice that the law speaks in the same way to “soldiers” and to “tax collectors,” that is, publicans. Israel was at this time an occupied country, and both of the occupations named here were in the service of the Romans. One would have expected a proper preacher of the law to say, “Stop your shady jobs.” The Baptist does not say that. Perhaps he expects Rome to fall when “the judgment of wrath” comes, that is, when the avenging Messiah he hopes for comes. But now, on earth, in the state of corruption, the law — with the neighbor at its center — speaks its word to soldiers and tax collectors too: “Do not think only of yourself. You have power. Do not use the power against your neighbor.” “Collect no more than is fixed.” “Do not extort money from anyone by violence or threats.” Let your power become service.

This is spoken straight into Sweden. We are on the way to becoming a people of cheats. Those who are hit hardest are the poor in low-paid jobs. When the simple necessities of life — milk and bread and other everyday food — go up in price, when the rent is raised, they have no “deductions” to flee to. They have to pay their taxes. Those who have power toss the millions back and forth among themselves, while very often they hypocritically speak of “care for the weak in society.” Or take these famous authors who have had great success, who — when they want to say something — can get their words printed anywhere in the newspapers of the capital, and get paid for it. These people no longer want to live in Sweden but try to settle

abroad. It is too hard to stay here, they say in a whining tone. Meanwhile those who really have a hard time stay silently in the jobs they have and quietly do what they must do. How they feel inside is never published in any newspaper.

The law, God's law, speaks like this. In every situation you end up in, you can refrain from demanding more from those around you, and instead turn your eyes the other way: "Is there anyone here who carries heavier burdens than I do?" If so, give him your hand. Give something up for his sake.

So says the law. What, then, does the gospel say? The Baptist — the voice of the law — belongs, as we saw at the beginning, to the setting of the gospel because he prepares the way for it. He is not the gospel. The one who is the gospel, he who comes, he who disappoints the law by not judging, by not letting the winnowing shovel do its work, by not letting the ax strike — he speaks in another of today's texts, the eleventh chapter of Matthew's Gospel. It is Jesus who speaks there, and he speaks about John the Baptist:

"Truly, among those born of women no one is greater than John the Baptist. But the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." "The kingdom of heaven" is the kingdom Jesus sets up, against all reason and against the demands of the law. "The least" is the one who is small, the one who is at the very bottom, the one who has no strength left ... All the groups spoken of in the text about the Baptist's preaching of the law are grown-ups. All of them have jobs, different jobs. All of them do works. Children are not mentioned. But when Jesus wanted to explain how one "enters the kingdom of heaven," then "he took," it says, "a child and set it in the midst of them." Like this — like this one enters the kingdom of heaven.

That is why the winnowing shovel was not allowed to do its work. That is why the ax did not strike. That is why no vengeance was exacted. What was to be revealed was the incomprehensible: God's mercy toward the one who has no strength to do the work — or, worse still, has already done the wrong works. Certainly there was violence and punishment when Jesus appeared too. But all the blows and all the thrusts suddenly took a completely different direction. He was struck. He bore our sins up on the wood of the cross. He stretched out his arms over the crossbeam where he hung, open and giving himself to all humanity. He is risen. He alone, he is the one who now lives and who moves toward the depths where the despairing dwell. The law, the Baptist, has not risen. He exists only for this earth and for order on this earth.

The Merciful One lives. He is near us in all our distress. He never dies, and he is the one who will step forth on the last day of the world. “And the world is filled with light.”

The law and the gospel — these two are the foundation of our existence. We live here bound to our neighbors. The destinies of others force their way into our own destiny on earth and fill us, inescapably, with guilt. Locked as we are in time, we approach, inescapably, our last day, where death waits. One alone has burst all prisons and bonds. One alone has conquered death and risen: he, the Merciful One, with his different kingdom, the kingdom where the law with its demands must fall silent and where the forgiveness of sins reigns.

He is our only hope. Amen.

Let us pray.

God, teach us to see what this earthly life is for: service to other people. Help us to turn our eyes the right way, so that we become aware of what others lack and of what we have been given. When our last hour comes and we ourselves lack everything, grant us then the miracle that in our anguish we hold fast to faith in him who alone owns everything, Jesus Christ, our Savior. He is our peace, now and forever. Amen.

Translator's notes. The source has three typed pages followed by eight pages of Wingren's handwritten manuscript; the translation follows the typescript, and the handwritten pages were not transcribed. The heading gives two occasions, “den 11/12 1983 i Västerkyrkan, Lund (och den 14/12 1986 i Hammarö, Karlstad),” and lists hymns for the Hammarö service only; “48:-” is given as 48. The same sermon is printed in Postilla (2010) as the sermon for the Third Sunday in Advent, in a lightly edited form and without the closing prayer. “Vägröjaren” is rendered “The One Who Prepares the Way.” The Swedish “livklädnader” of the 1917 Bible (“coats”) is contrasted with the newer “skjortor” (“shirts”). The capitals of “SVERIGE” are not reproduced.

Gustaf Wingren · draft translation ·