

SERMON

Sermon for Trinity Sunday

Gustaf Wingren

John 3:1–15 (16–17)

Sermon, Holy Trinity Sunday, 19 May 1940

in Gamleby Church.

Text: John 3:1-15.

Hymns: 27:1-3, 24:2-5, 3:5-6, 251:1-4, 443:4-5.

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

Let us pray!

O Lord God, infinite,

Grant us grace to praise thee

And set all our grace thereto,

That thou art eternally good and mild.

O Jesus Christ, who took manhood,

Help us ever to remember

Thy bitter death, thy pure word,

In which our soul is saved.

O Holy Spirit, give us thy grace

Always to follow thy counsels.

Guide and protect us with thy hand,

God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen. Sv. Ps. 23:1-3.

The festal part of the church's year is at an end. The whole time that stretches from Advent to Ascension Day holds Sundays and holy days in which Christ's work is unceasingly set before our eyes: his birth, his suffering, his death and resurrection, and his presence with his disciples. Most recently we have celebrated Pentecost and listened to the words of the outpouring of the Spirit.

And now begins the series of Sundays which would direct attention to our Christian life, to what we ought to do, the demands that are laid upon us.

But before this time begins, Holy Trinity Sunday stands there and speaks of the mystery of God's own life, its rich content — it is as though it would sum up for us the message of Easter and Pentecost, the message that God in heaven has become man, suffered, died and risen, and the message that his work comes to us through the Spirit's hidden work in the depth of the heart and in the Christian congregation, through Word and sacrament.

Nicodemus was a pious and believing Jew. He was therefore not a stranger to faith in God; he must rather have been considerably more certain in faith in God's reality than many of those who today busy themselves with spiritual things. But he was still uncertain, questioning, seeking. Therefore in secret to Jesus by night. He knew of no other revelation of God than the law and the witness of the prophets, and he had an uncertain feeling that God had created something altogether new before his eyes, though he did not quite know what.

So stands also the Nicodemus of our days and questions and seeks. The old freethinking has died, and here and there one wants once more to let the word God enter the language as something inevitable and natural. But then comes the uncertainty. How can God be almighty when he lets such things happen as we now witness? And how can he be love? Where do we meet him tangibly and simply and clearly, so that we can obtain certainty about him and believe?

The same instruction which Christ according to today's Gospel gave Nicodemus, the same instruction we also receive today. It is emphatically impressed upon us that our uncertainty and doubt are natural so long as we want only a part of him, not his whole reality. We are so shy of really grasping God's revelation in Christ. We can indeed speak also of Christ, but then we do not see Christ as God's revelation for us, not as something that has come from heaven down to earth, but rather as one of us, a radiant figure in the past, but a man who himself stands on the same plane as we, one who seeks God, not as a revelation of God himself, sunk

down upon the earth. This is now the first thing the text would teach us: that Christ is “he who descended from heaven” and who was “lifted up” (as the serpent in the wilderness), that is, hung upon the cross, so that all eyes should be directed thither, instead of out into space, so that God should suffer himself into the life of the earth and not be far off in a distant heaven.

Already in this lies an answer to many anxious questions about God — if only we would hear that answer! We ask how God can be omnipotence and love when he lets so much evil happen in our world. Merely to ask thus, to come with such questions, is an unambiguous sign that the cross is not a reality in our Christian faith — we speak of it but we do not know what it means. When has there ever been greater occasion for doubt in God than when Christ was lifted up on the cross? We must really try to enter into what that meant. God takes the decision to take form in a human being, to reveal his love, to show who he is, in Christ Jesus. But his revelation is crucified. Why do you not ask why God could let this happen? Why are you not appalled by this horror, but read of it, as you have done all your life, with closed eyes, as though it were something self-evident that he should be crucified, while on the contrary it is incomprehensible how God can let people now die, or let a people be assaulted with violence and crushed to pieces. Our astonishment in these days is a proof that we have not been astonished at Christ’s cross, not appalled by it, not in earnest seen what stands in the NT, but have only passed it by in a kind of spiritual blindness.

It is frightful that war should exist. It is frightful that crime, murder, sickness, sin should exist. It is frightful that the world is such as it is. But he or she who has not discovered it until 1940 or 1939 has unceasingly lived on the surface of existence, in a kind of sleep, under the idyll which he has regarded as natural. He who has had his eyes open must surely have seen all this even in peacetime: now it happens on a large scale what normally, day by day, year by year, happens in secret. War is not something astonishingly new, foreign to the normal course of human life, but it is a witness to what the world is, a sign of the character of reality from beginning to end. In this reality, this world, the good exists as a struggling power and as a suffering power. If anyone thinks himself good and does not suffer, this is a sign that he also stands outside the good of life and lives on the surface of life. In this world the good must suffer, even in peacetime, in everyday life, even in a smaller circle. Of this the Cross bears witness, Christ, God’s message to us. He himself, God himself in human form. But the cross also bears witness that God takes this suffering upon himself, that he does not withdraw from the earth but is near, with us, with his unsearchable mercy, however dark it looks. He who believes holds fast to this; he does not seek to wriggle free of it, so that the cross is regarded as

a gateway which one passes through and gradually gets rid of. The world remains world so long as the earth stands, and therewith also all good on earth remains afflicted with suffering so long as the earth stands. He who holds this fast ceases to ask about God's omnipotence and love: he is prepared that it shall go as it goes. Why should Christ's weak and frail disciples have it better than Christ himself, who yet was crucified? If Christ's crucifixion could not shake God from his throne, but the Son's ignominious death must rather serve to establish his dominion, then neither can the assault of evil today shake God's throne from its place by one millimetre.

What good then is it to struggle for the good if we still cannot reach visible results on earth and transform our world into a world without all this misery? "The kingdom of God does not consist in food and drink but in righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."

With that we have come over to the second thing the text would say to us. The first is that God is in Christ. The second is that God is in the Spirit. And "the Spirit blows where it wills. You know not whence it comes or whither it goes."

In our text it stands: "The wind blows where it wills." The word which the evangelist John wrote at this place can mean both "the Spirit" and "the wind." It is truly the text's meaning that "the Spirit" and "the wind" stand under the same conditions. If there is calm, no human power in the world can produce wind. Man must wait until it begins to blow. And if there is storm, no human power in the world can produce calm. Man must wait until the storm abates. So it is also with the Spirit. We can by no means take the Spirit to ourselves if it is not given us. We must do our duty without the Spirit and we must pray and wait. But if the Spirit comes, it cannot be forced even by a dictatorship: it breaks forth irresistibly and creates life. It has of old pleased God to let his Spirit blow when an age has burned down in distress and anguish, in the midst of chaos and decay and darkness. Such a thing can happen once more, now, in our time. And if it happens, everything is born anew: in the devastated land where one least of all expected the Spirit, it can flame up in a fire of faith which is purer than elsewhere, because there it is not mixed with human thoughts but is born directly out of despair. But we must consider that the new birth, the rebirth, belongs to that which must have happened if the word "God" is to have any true meaning for a human being. If we have said before that much spiritual uncertainty, much groping, has its ground in that faith has not grasped Christ in full earnest, there is still greater reason to say that the uncertainty and the questions have their ground in that the Spirit is not given in the heart. He who has the Spirit is a new man, a child

of God, and the child sees the kingdom of God even when it storms round about. Whither has Christian childlikeness taken its way? He who will not spiritually be simple as a child can never understand; he cannot see the kingdom of God. It is perhaps this which most is lacking to us: a childlike mind. It is lacking to us so thoroughly that we do not even want that mind. We want instead to set up problems about God and solve them with our power of thought, to discuss God and Christ — all this despite our Saviour having told us that no one — not even the greatest genius — can “see the kingdom of God” unless he “turns and becomes as a child.”

But it is surely so: neither can we take the childlike mind to ourselves. We receive that mind when the Spirit of sonship is given us. Then we are born again to see the kingdom of God. Then it loosens in the heart, and the “new life” begins.

Thus our text speaks to us of the uncertainty of our hearts. It tells us that we have not received enough of God’s riches, and that it is therefore we stand questioning. God is triune. He is not only Father in heaven. He has also become man; he has taken manhood and in his only-begotten Son suffered on a cross. But he is also Spirit, dwelling in our hearts and in the congregation, giving us new birth as his children. This is God’s message to us on Holy Trinity Sunday. May we never speak of God without turning our hearts to this whole threefold riches! May we never forget that if we stand questioning before God, it is because we are too poor in insight into the Son’s suffering and too empty of the Spirit, not because of God’s poverty and powerlessness. And so we will pray: Thou God, who art richer than we all, direct our gaze to the cross in the distress which now prevails! Give us the Spirit, who gives us new birth! Amen.