

SERMON

Sermon in the First Week of Advent, 26 November 1947

Gustaf Wingren

John 18:36–37

In Helsingborg's Maria.

Text: John 18:36-37.

Psalms: 242:1ff, 118:1-3, 597:6.

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

O King, who standest over all,

All the world depends upon thy word,

Yet full of grace thou dwellest still

With him who from the heart believes in thee. (Sw. Ps. 193:8)

The question whether Jesus was a king or not was for Pilate the principal question in the criminal case he had to decide. For a Jewish king was a clear rebel against the emperor in Rome. Therefore he hung the wooden tablet above the middle cross with the inscription: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." And that picture from the first Good Friday holds for all time an essential image of Christ's kingly dominion—the dead man with bowed head and above him the words: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews."

We gladly look for signs of better times for Christ's dominion in the world. We need not be ashamed of that. So also thought Jesus' twelve chosen apostles, and the Master preached in vain three times to them: "Behold, we go up to Jerusalem, where I shall be mocked and scourged." They could not grasp it. And we now cannot quite grasp it either. We do not want a crucified King, a king who has difficulties here in the world—if he is to be king, then he shall be successful and acknowledged by all. When it is not so, when on the contrary there will always hang, as long as the history of mankind continues, a veiling covering over Christ's

kingly dominion, that depends, however, on the fact that He is the King of the Kingdom of Heaven. Let us devote this evening to thinking through together the connection between Jesus' humiliation and his eternal kingly power.

Everyone easily discovers what sort of people it is that usually obtain power on earth. Jesus himself says in our text: "If my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants have fought that I should not be delivered to the Jews." One ought not to be too sure that these words imply a condemnation, a rejection of the life of the political states. So it must go if one is to hold one's ground on this satanic earth; one must fight and defend oneself. "But now is my kingdom not of this world." My task is another; the peculiarity of my dominion expresses itself precisely in this, that I do not defend myself. The earthly kingdoms strive now as in Jesus' time; he did not lift a finger to reorder the world's political life. No, these kingdoms that rest on power, they struggle and grope now as then, they succeed one another in constant change, they rise to honour and they sink into ruin. So it will remain also in the future, an uninterrupted struggle for power that never brings anything wholly new to birth. While a kingdom lasts it celebrates its national days, but when it has fallen one forgets those days. Not a single one of the kingdoms that ruled our world in Jesus' time exists today, and we must not imagine that the powers which in 1947 contend for world dominion rest on firmer ground—they too belong to that which passes away. But through this confusion of the unfolding of power and of destruction there sounds a voice that never changes. In a short month people will rise one morning and silently listen in many lands to the description of how the Eternal King was born: "And Mary brought forth her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn." Why does one stand and hear this everywhere? Whence does this message obtain its irresistible attractive power? When all present rulers have crashed to the ground and entirely new thrones have arisen, one will still with the same emotion listen to the speech about the child in the manger, this child who was to become nothing else than the man on the cross.

Already this little observation is important. At no time is Christ the earthly holder of power; always it is others who rule. But one forgets those who rule; they lose their power. He, on the other hand, has a kind of power that he retains—he passes through all times and is not blotted out. He remains the same yesterday and today and forever. Therefore it is also the case, as we know, that when people become sick and old and come into distress, then they begin to think of Christ, while he often has to stand pushed aside in the days of health and prosperity. This one usually laughs at; one means: when life has gone from people, then God becomes

significant, then they seek a religious surrogate. But the reality is the opposite: that which is usually called “life” is after all only a will-o’-the-wisp—is there any sense in chasing after such things as are doomed to perish and which in the moment of death will totter and disappear? It can take about seventy years to see through this mixture, but what one then sees or suspects when one reaches toward God is not a surrogate but the truth that has been there the whole time. In distress and the threat of death one looks deeper than otherwise; few things act so confusingly on judgment as success. This grasping after Christ in distress and danger is a sign of his eternal dominion and of the fragility of the other powers.

But again: why is it so? Why is his power eternal and the others’ perishable?

It is simplest here to take an example from purely human circumstances. Let us suppose that I have two old acquaintances from childhood. The one has a single goal: to push himself forward at any price and win power. He succeeds also, and at last becomes my chief, who has the right to command over me. No one has greater external power over me than he; he disposes over my life’s destiny, can dismiss me, prevent my rightful advancement and rob me of my income. The other is once placed in a decisive choice, whether he shall think only of himself or seek to rescue distressed people out of distress—and he chooses to live for these other people, for this good cause which he makes his own; he gives out his life instead of keeping it. I myself am such a reasonably honest mediocrity that stands midway between these two acquaintances. The one has power over me, then, but he has no power over my heart. I obey him daily without inwardly esteeming him highly; the day that man dies, his power over me is ended—for it consisted only in that he in this world was set over me. But the other, who is poorer than I and cannot command me to anything in the outward, he constantly occupies my conscience; as soon as I see him I think: so ought I myself to live! That power is far stronger; it is not choked in death; on the contrary: if that man dies, perhaps his power over me becomes still stronger. When people of love die, they grow, and no one can take from them their mysterious power.

Now we approach the secret in Christ’s eternal kingly power.

It is so: by the fact that we are human beings, we have a determination over us, a meaning in our life, a will over us, from which we can never escape. God’s determination with us, which it is to escape from our own body. But no human being realizes that which is God’s meaning with him; all of us are allured by temptations and driven by desires which we cannot master—we are led and we let ourselves be led to that which breaks down our own determination.

Christ alone shows us quite clearly how human life is to be lived. His power over us is the power in our own determination; his lordship over our consciences rests on rock foundation and cannot be abolished by any effort from our side. Some submit willingly to his dominion, others kick against the goad—but over both he is lord; no one can get rid of him. For one can never get rid of one's own determination, not even by dying. And this is something of the riddle of the last judgment: even if we plunge ourselves into death, God's command, God's determination with us remains hanging over our course; after death we are placed before the question: "Did you fill your life with that which was the meaning with you?"—and to stand before that question is to stand before Christ's face, the Son of Man's face in the last judgment: "Then shall the King sit upon the throne of his glory..."—then shall the covering be torn away and all deeds laid bare, then shall the whole world see that He reigns...

But if we thus hold clearly before us that he alone of all human beings has conquered the tyrannical powers that hold us human beings captive, that he alone is the unbroken righteousness, then we also understand in another way this about the "wonders" in the New Testament. Where He is, there exist no longer any prisons and hindrances. Have we clearly perceived that we never complete the meaning of our lives, that we never realize the true human life, then it becomes impossible for us to go to the New Testament's narratives with that measure: Christ could do what we can—the rest, "the wonders," are only legends. That which is said in the N.T. about Christ's power over sickness and death is to be seen from within the deepest secret: Christ is the one who does not let himself be conquered by self-love and unrighteousness—nothing of that kind gains entrance into his will and his heart: therefore Life breaks forth wherever he goes. All the New Testament's wonders are gathered into one single wonder: Christ's resurrection. In this world, which is our own and which we know so well—it is after all the world of treachery and of decay and of death—in this world God the Creator has once entered as a true and pure and free human being... and then death must give way; it cannot hold him who is Life: Christ goes as the King out of grave and darkness to live eternally.

(The following paragraph struck out, probably before the delivery in 1953)

But we—yes, how our life is, that we know best ourselves. It is now and then a dream of the great, good deed, but in the quiet meeting with reality nothing but small measures of caution and defeats. A constant feeling that this which we actually do and accomplish never becomes what we thought—yes, that the whole life is something of a constant failure, and so farthest

away, as conclusion, death and the grave. One and another is inclined to paint the picture of his life a little brighter, but that depends on the fact that he or she can just now rejoice in something whose emptiness has not yet been seen through. The last that a human being has of light is usually memories; childhood memories, youth memories. That flight into the memories shows more clearly than anything else that human life is a dream that is not fulfilled, a dream that we are not able to give flesh and bone.

And under this our powerlessness there lies at the depth that state of slavery which is the origin of all emptiness: we are prisoners under the great Evil will. Against God stands God's enemy, and under the satanic power the whole race toils. Our irritability in small matters, our envy, all our absurdities are only expressions of a captivity that we share with all human beings. Only Christ has won the victory, only he is King in the human race. Therefore he is risen from the dead on the first Easter morning. (end of the striking out)

The meaning of his resurrection is therefore this, that he now lives. When we in the New Testament read about Christ's deeds with sick and fallen human beings, we read about deeds that Christ now does. And to believe—that is this simple thing, that I in all such narratives insert myself as the sick and the fallen: now the Lord acts thus with me, for Christ is not dead but living—now, when I read or hear the Word, he is here with me and gives me forgiveness, health and life. (The following two sentences struck out 1953) For then, two thousand years ago, he acted by uttering his mighty word. The same word we possess now, with the same power, with the same presence of Christ. If we ask how Christ on this day exercises his kingly dominion, the answer becomes: through the Word. (struck out) His word is present when a child is baptized; that means: He, the King, now takes the child to himself. His word is present when the Lord's Supper is distributed; that means: He, the King, comes anew to us. And everywhere, wherever and whenever he comes, he comes as the Lord over the Evil power inside us—he comes as Satan's conqueror and our liberator: with the word of forgiveness and with promise of life in the eternal world.

And in this, that Christ now today exercises his kingly dominion through the Word alone, not with violence and splendour but with the sound of a voice only, which speaks quietly and which can be drowned out by other, screaming voices—in this lies now his lowliness, his manger and his cross, his conscious weakness, one might say. He himself stated clearly before Pilate wherein his kingly realm consisted. "Art thou then a king?" says the wondering Pilate. And the answer becomes: "Thou sayest it thyself, that I am a king. Yea, for this was I born, and

for this came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice." Until our death Christ's lordship consists in this, that he speaks to us the Word of Life. (struck out) We do not see his kingly mantle and his crown, but we hear his word. And therefore, only therefore, can it be a question of faith from our side (if we saw everything we should not need to believe). Christ appeals to our faith, his speech summons us to open, he stands at the door and knocks without our seeing him.

A day shall dawn when the time of the Word is ended, and when Christ's kingly dominion is seen by all. That is the day of judgment. Christ's resurrection was his entrance into the eternal world that after death awaits us, each one. No human being is granted to look in advance into this Kingdom of Heaven; it is closed to our eyes. But the wonder above all wonders occurs every day, that He who is King in eternity, the King of the kingdom of heaven, speaks down to us so that we hear his own words and receive all his gifts by listening to what he says to us. When he walked on earth, sins and death gave way before his mighty word, and the same creative power his word will show itself to have upon every one who in faith receives it today. If I hear Christ's word I go calmly into death, whither he has gone before me: he stands and waits over there in the final darkness, he who is the Prince of Life and who "has delivered, purchased and won me, a lost and condemned human being, from all sins, from death's and the devil's power, not with gold or silver but with his holy and precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death, that I should be his own, become and live under him in his kingdom and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence and blessedness, even as he is risen from the dead, lives and reigns for ever. — This is most certainly true." Amen.