

SERMON

Sermon for Rogate Sunday

Gustaf Wingren

John 16:23–33 · 1940

Prayer Sunday (Rogate), 28 April 1940

Gamleby Church

Text: John 16:23–33

Hymns: 306:1; 337:1–4; 216; 339:3–6; 593:2

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

Let us pray.

Guide and govern how I live;

make holy mind and deed.

Let my path and all my walking,

to your praise and to your honor,

aim where you are leading.

Let my prayer and song,

which I bring to your glory,

please you and bear fruit. Amen.

(Swedish Hymnal 137:6)

Over all the texts today stands one word: “prayer.” It has been said that prayer is “the breath of the Christian life.” And many who have studied the world of religion, or tried with their thinking to sound the secret of the life of faith, have come to rest at this: that “the prayer of the heart,” or “the praying attitude,” is what most deeply marks life in fellowship with God. That is a reminder that the source of all good is God. We call on him and pray — or we thank

and praise him when the gift has reached us. Prayer, like faith, is the empty hand stretched up toward the Father. Or it is the hand the Father has filled, which bears witness to the Father's goodness.

Our meditation today, however, must stop at the instruction Christ has given us about prayer in the Gospel for Prayer Sunday. We heard it read at the altar service. In it, as the heading puts it, "Jesus teaches us to pray in his name." These words of Scripture are part of Jesus' farewell discourse to his disciples before the Passion began — that long discourse of comfort and exhortation which takes up nearly four chapters of the Gospel of John, and which is followed by Christ's high-priestly prayer in the seventeenth chapter.

Suffering and death cast their shadow over the whole of this last, intimate time the Lord spent with his small, faithful band. "Now you believe," the Master says at the end of the text, "but the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone." This prediction came true to the letter in the night that ended with one of the Twelve betraying his Lord in the dawn of Good Friday, when the band of enemies came out to Gethsemane with clubs and weapons and torches in their hands — and with another of the Twelve, the most zealous confessor, denying him at cockcrow. During the terrible day that followed this night, "they all forsook him and fled," in the hour when the cup of suffering was filled to the brim and the cross began to be raised toward heaven out at the Place of the Skull. But after this day of despair, Easter morning slowly dawned. The Lord saw the despairing again, and joy was given back to them, as faith in his victory and in his constant presence with his own was given to them anew.

When the Lord teaches about prayer, he sees before his inner eye both of these events that the near future carried in its womb. The hour of suffering had come; indeed it has already come. This is the time of "figures of speech." "I have said these things to you in figures of speech," it says at the very beginning of our text. Heaven will be shut, as it were, and in what happens on earth there will be nothing to support hope and trust. But after the time of suffering, when faith has flickered and gone out, comes the resurrection and the victory. "The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures of speech, but will tell you plainly about the Father" — the time when the Spirit will be given to the disciples, the Comforter and Helper. Then the veil is taken away, and the disciple's eye sees. It sees that the Lord "has overcome the world." It sees that suffering itself is the way to victory. It sees the meaning in the hard dealings of God under whose weight the heart's faith, a moment ago, lost its hold and went

under. And “on that day” — now comes the chief word of the text — “on that day you will ask in my name.” This “prayer in Jesus’ name,” which is to be prayed “on that day,” carries the promise: “Whatever you ask the Father, he will give it to you.” “Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive.”

Over the centuries this promise of Jesus, that prayer will be heard, has caused much spiritual anguish. Surely everyone in church today has at some time in his life had something to pray for that he brought before God without turning back — perhaps for a long time — holding to that promise: “Whatever you ask for, you will receive.” But God stood like a wall of bronze against all our prayers, and in the end bitter reality crushed every hope. Why must this happen? And if God’s will cannot be shaken, why are we commanded to pray?

A deep secret lies hidden in today’s text, in the word about “figures of speech.” There are times when the Lord speaks to us in “veiled words” that we cannot understand and cannot grasp with firm certainty and clarity. And there are other times when light falls on the word, and everything opens before our eyes in such wonderful simplicity that we are amazed it took us so long to see God’s purpose. These are the times of faith, the times of clarity, which for the faithful always follow the days and years that were filled with waiting, with longing for the morning. In the times when the Lord’s speech is veiled — when Scripture is a closed door, when the service refuses to open its hidden riches to the heart, when the hymn singing in church roars over our heads without taking hold of us, and when no sermon, however good, can make the note sound in the dark soul within — in those times we do not know what we should pray for, and if we pray, it does not happen in faith. “But,” says the Lord, “the hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures of speech, but will tell you plainly about the Father. On that day you will ask in my name.”

This reality — that the Lord puts an end to his “veiled speech” and “speaks plainly” — is stated in other places in the New Testament, in other words and ways of speaking. Paul testifies in the letter to the Romans: “We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us. So the Spirit helps us in our weakness.” And the evangelist Matthew has kept this word about prayer for us: “Whatever you ask in prayer with faith, you will receive.” The prayer of faith carries a promise. The prayer prayed in the Spirit carries a promise. The one who believes, or the one who is in the Spirit, prays in Jesus’ name, and for him the Lord’s speech is not hidden behind a veil. For the one who does not have faith and is not in the

Spirit, the Lord's speech is veiled, and his prayer does not truly become a prayer in Jesus' name, even if his tongue says the name.

Here a misunderstanding must be cleared away. We must not take the words of Scripture about prayer that occupy us now to mean that the prayer we pray in distress is a prayer without faith, without the Spirit, and without a promise of being heard. It may be that times of outward distress are also times of unbelief and of lacking the Spirit. So it was for the disciples at the Lord's shameful death, as all the Gospels testify. But outward distress came back many times in the hard life the apostles of the Risen One had to endure, as the book of Acts tells — and then the outward distress was met in faith.

In our Christian life today, too, it may often turn out that adversity and faith belong together. It may happen that I succeed in everything I take in hand, and friendly people come and speak words of praise to me, praising the way I speak and act. But in the midst of it all I know: right now I am further from faith than I have been in years, more lacking in the Spirit than ever. I find it harder to really pray with inner certainty than I did in the days when I was looked down on. The word, and God's dealings with me in everyday life, have less to say to me than at any time I can remember. The veil hangs over my existence. And it may happen that no success comes my way, no one speaks a word of encouragement to me, not a single person really understands me. But in the midst of it all I know: right now I have come right. There is an unshakable certainty of faith deep in my heart. The words of Scripture and the events of everyday life speak to me in clear and distinct language. The gray veil is taken away, and prayer lives in the soul without wavering, without doubting that prayer is truly heard. Prayer in outward distress, of all prayers, can often be a prayer in faith, a prayer "in spirit and truth," a prayer "in Jesus' name." Prayer in outward success is not seldom a prayer without real faith, without the Spirit — or, in the words of the text, a prayer that is not prayed "in Jesus' name."

So when we receive no answer to our prayer, we should not call God into question and make him the problem. On the contrary, we should call ourselves into question and make ourselves the problem. We live in the world, after all, and we always have the spirit of the world in us, more or less. We ask for help in what we undertake in the world, where the goal is always power and happiness. Christ himself did not reach these desirable goals in his earthly pilgrimage, from the manger in the stable at Bethlehem to the cross on the hill of Golgotha. Whoever prays in Jesus' name makes himself a disciple of this Man of sorrows, "and the disciple is not above his teacher." He must be prepared for God's will with him to be like God's

will with his own Son. And God's will with the Son was the cross — and, through the cross, the victory. To pray in faith is to pray in fellowship with this crucified and living Lord, to pray bowed under his will of love, which looks to the neighbor's good and not only to its own. Whoever stands in fellowship with this King has peace in spite of the tribulation of the world. For "Christ has overcome the world," as the closing words of today's Gospel put it. He has overcome the spirit of the world in one's own self as well — the false spirit that disfigures prayer and robs us of faith in our prayer.

But if we do not have faith, if we stand outside the world of the Spirit, if the Lord's speech is "veiled," so that we cannot truly pray a "prayer in Jesus' name" — what can we do then? What good does it do me to know that there is a prayer that is heard, if I cannot pray that prayer?

The first thing to say is this. I may go to God just as I am. I may say: "Here I am, Lord. I do not want to pray for your kingdom and your will. I want things for myself. I want to get this and that here in the world. Such is my perverse mind. Create another heart in me, Lord." People today do see their estrangement from the world of prayer, but they do not see it as a perversity in themselves. They think: "Christianity is meant for others, but apparently not for me." In actual fact, the Christian life does not suit anyone's nature — not even the Christians'. The Christian life is a life in which natural self-will must be broken down again and again, even in the most godly. The one who cannot pray, who stands outside and wants things for himself, is a sinner — and much is gained if he plainly and simply admits that he is one. Even for someone who has prayed for many years, the selfishness that rises in his heart is a familiar thing that holds sway there every day. But there, in the Christian's heart, it is called by its right name: selfishness and sin, something to be fought against. And instead of making prayer stop, it makes the prayer for God's power grow stronger.

That brings us to the second point. If we go to the great people of prayer in the history of the church, we will notice how often they pray for faith itself. Faith belongs to right prayer. But if one does not have faith, if one stands outside, then one must pray for faith itself. Let us open "A Little Prayer Book," which stands in our hymnal after the texts and the Small Catechism. There we find: "Let us pray for delight in God's word" (Augustine), "Let us pray for the certainty of faith" (Henric Schartau), "Let us pray for the increase of faith" (Anselm), "Let us pray for humility" (Johann Arndt), "Let us cry to God for patience" (Birgitta), and so on. These are examples. Faith exists only in the struggle against unbelief, never at rest. To go into the world of prayer means, all one's life — even for the heroes and heroines of faith — to go into a

new world, one that is unlike our unbelieving heart, and where we need help to get in through the narrow door. The Lord Christ knows this too. That is why he has not only told us to pray, but has given us a prayer we can always pray: “When you pray, say: ‘Our Father, who art in heaven.’” Whoever can pray nothing else, let him pray the Our Father alone — kneeling, if he can, in a closed room — and reflect on each petition. At the fifth petition, “Forgive us our debts, as we also forgive,” let him examine himself and ask whether there is anyone he is unwilling to forgive. If he then notices that there is someone he will not forgive, let him know that he is not praying “in Jesus’ name.” But the very fact that we have been given the Our Father shows that “free prayer” is not the only kind. We need to be taught to pray. A good teacher is just this “A Little Prayer Book” in the hymnal, where we can learn to pray by using the prayers of others. In the same way we pray the prayers of others — that is, of the Christian church — in our High Mass and other services. To take part with one’s heart in the prayers of the service matters more for true worship than listening to the sermon. For whoever does not pray in church listens to the sermon in a false spirit. In reality he does not hear what is preached.

But in the third place: even the one most foreign to the world of prayer has, at some time, a clear sight, as it were, of God’s will for his life. It may be a frayed spot somewhere that needs to be healed and made well, a deed that must be done. In such things no one can give another person clarity. Let each one judge himself. If you have such an unclear spot in your life, one not yet fought through, then you also have something to pray for. Pray for the same thing without ceasing: clarity about the way, and strength to walk it. Pray, if you can, alone, with the door shut, and on your knees. You need not talk with others about your prayer if you do not want to. It is not written anywhere that this belongs to the life of prayer. On the other hand, you will probably have to pray for others, if you have such a sick spot in your life to pray for healing for. Most sick spots arise in our relationship to our neighbor. While you pray, you will notice the power of prayer yourself, and you will also find more to pray for than at first seemed necessary. And one morning as you begin your day, or perhaps one evening as you go to rest, you may discover that your heart wants to thank God in the midst of difficulties and adversity. Then you should know that you have come deep into the secret of prayer, and that you belong to the Lord who said: “In the world you have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” Then you are praying “in Jesus’ name,” and with faith, the prayer for the healing of your sick spot — the prayer to which the promise is attached: “Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be complete.” But then, when your heart is also giving

thanks, your prayer is different even in content from what it was when you first began to pray about that matter, that spot not yet cleared up. For in the school of the Spirit our prayers are transformed. No one can go to another person and teach him how his prayers are to be transformed. God himself teaches us this while we pray. Whoever prays can testify to that truth. Whoever does not pray, let him begin this evening. “Go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” Amen.

Translator's notes. “Förtäckt tal” is rendered “figures of speech” where Wingren quotes John 16:25, and “veiled speech” or “veiled words” where he takes it up in his own voice, since he builds on the image of a veil being taken away. The heading he cites, “Jesus lär att bedja i hans namn,” is the pericope heading of the Swedish service book. “Anfäktelse” is rendered “spiritual anguish.” “En liten bönbok,” the prayer section printed in the Swedish hymnal, keeps its title in English, “A Little Prayer Book.” The Our Father is quoted in its traditional English form, as in a liturgical setting.

Gustaf Wingren · draft translation ·