

Sermon for Septuagesima

Gustaf Wingren

Jeremiah 9:23–24 · 1975

26 January 1975

Djursholm Chapel

Text: Jeremiah 9:23–24

Hymns: 297:1; 299:5–8; 298:1–4; 296:5–6

An American television man, a specialist at interviewing people and at drawing out what is innermost in the person he is speaking with, used to put one standard question: “What is it that keeps you going?” We all grow tired, disheartened, low, as it were empty. Then there is one thing that can make us take hold again, that touches our inmost point, that “presses the button.” We start once more. What is it?

That is what the text is pointing to when it speaks of “boasting,” of having one’s “glory” in something.

We laugh when we meet someone who boasts that he is six feet tall, or that he has white teeth. We grow more respectful when someone can boast of being “foremost in his science,” or of “belonging to a party that is on the way up.” At the same time, behind the backs of such people, we are a little scornful of them — these “established” persons, these who always “float on top.” The contempt in our tone is not wholly without cause. Every person who has power over others is corrupted by that power, more or less.

If we have met someone who at first sight seems a “low person” — that is, a person without power — and we come nearer to him, and he grows before us and becomes greater, then the growth of our reverence is often bound up with this: here is a person with little power. He matters to a few. But all those over whom he has even the least power, those he loves. Those he lives for, so that his “glory” is that those he loves receive life, receive room to move. When we meet such a person, living for others, we meet greatness. Behind his back we still speak of him with respect. Such a person never needs to boast. The content of his life lies outside

himself. It can even be a pleasure for him to be wrong, if someone he loves is right. When one loves, it is sometimes a real feast to be wrong about a thing.

This is a common human thing. We all recognize it, I think.

Now let us go on, in imagination, and picture such a person, whose joy is to give “glory” to others. And with this person, let us suppose, it goes thus: the whole company around him fails him. The leading authorities of his people condemn him. His nearest friend denies that he knows him at all — “I do not know who that is!” — and so it goes on, downward. He is stripped, naked, beaten, spat upon in the face, until at last he is utterly without glory. And so he is wrong, at the bottom, in everything, and is executed at a mean place of execution. And he goes on, unbending, giving “glory” to others, crying out concerning his own executioners: “These are innocent. They do not know what they are doing. They are only being used. At bottom these executioners are clean.” He turns to the others, the criminals executed with him, and goes on “giving glory” in that direction also.

If we could picture this in imagination, we could also understand that this person “without glory of his own” possesses a greatness unique in history, and that this person also “receives glory,” receives that strange respect which makes all who come near him trust in him, and in him alone, forever, as long as the world stands.

We have tried, in “imagination,” to picture such a person. It is of him that the gospel speaks when it maintains that he has existed, and has been crucified. I myself believe that such a person cannot be held by death. I believe that he has risen, and that he lives, new, the only one who in truth “is.” But even the one who does not believe this has, of course, met the common human thing of which we are speaking.

What we have said here about “boasting,” about “glory,” and the rest, is all of a piece with the doctrine of justification by faith alone, without “works.” And we shall try to come nearer to that matter.

The point is just this. God, the source of life, the Creator, gives glory freely — righteousness, respectability — to the one who does not seek his own glory, who does not build up works that are to be respected and honored, but only trusts God: receives life, and gives life away to others, instead of being occupied with himself. This is justification by faith, without merit, without “works.”

And there is a “ground of security” in this, a security that each of us in this Swedish society would need today — yes, today, in the Sweden of achievement, in the Sweden of competition, this society in which one is always comparing oneself with others, on the basis of something one has oneself accomplished and of which one “boasts.”

Per Gunnar Evander, in his book *The Story of Josef* (seven years ago), told of two human destinies: the rolling-mill worker Josef Blomberg, who lives in our time, and the so-called Yngsjö murderer, who sat twenty-three years on Långholmen and afterward lived several years in his home district and supported himself by a craft, until he died in 1918. Blomberg was an able worker who was never declared “guilty” of any wrongful act, but who became sleepless and was laid off — and thereafter wholly unable to live a real life. Per Nilsson, the murderer, was declared guilty, punished for a long time, and lived inwardly intact, “whole,” and fit for life, through the years that remained to him. He died of tuberculosis of the lungs. According to the papers he left behind, he lived daily on “the forgiveness of sins,” as he himself put it.

One may think that Per Nilsson received very little “glory.” But it was enough. His integrity was unharmed. The rolling-mill worker, on the other hand, had his “glory” in this highly skilled work — and there was nothing that could “keep him going” when that “glory,” the glory of works, the glory of achievement, was taken from him.

Now one may suppose that the person who is “low,” and without glory of his own, belongs to a special group of the socially low. Especially in our time, when one speaks of “classes” and “social groups,” one readily thinks in such lines. But it is not so. Every person is at some point “low,” or “weak.” We all have tender and sore places in us, which we hide. It is this sore and wounded thing that we are to bring with us into the service. The service, and prayer, are for this.

Often we do the opposite. We tidy ourselves up, as it were, in church, and we name at once various achievements that “we Christians” have accomplished. We are so hard of hearing that we do not hear how God in heaven says to such a church: “I abhor you. I find no pleasure in you. Do not boast of yourself. Come to me, in the service, with your wounds, and I will heal you.” The “glory” that God, in such a healing, bestows upon a person makes that person strong in the world as well — as the Yngsjö murderer, against all odds, became strong.

There is a place in Luther where he speaks of the difference between himself and Melanchthon. Philip Melanchthon — “Philippos” — was Germany’s finest humanist, learned

in philosophy and in the languages. It was a great gain for the Reformation to win him for Wittenberg as professor. Had Melanchthon lived in Sweden in the twentieth century, he would probably have become a member of the Swedish Academy. Luther would never have been elected.

“It is a strange thing about Philippos,” says Luther. “He is never afraid of being rejected by God in the last judgment. That is my anguish, and I have only one refuge: the gospel of justification by faith alone, without any works.” But then he goes on: “When Melanchthon is to answer before the diet, meet kings, face the emperor — then he is uneasy. Of such things I am never afraid.”

There is an enviable boldness, a childlike boldness, which rests on this: that my glory is kept by another, one who is far stronger than I, the Lord of heaven and earth. And therefore my glory cannot be damaged by my failures, nor by anything that goes wrong for me. That is to rest — to rest in the midst of all that swarms about one.

Haquin Spegel, who lived in the time of Charles XII and tasted both victories and shame, has that childlike boldness of tone when he sings, sings with unexpected combinations of words. We shall soon sing that hymn:

You are my sun in the cold;

in strife you are my shield

My faith you can kindle;

turn all evil away from me.

Give me grace and glory,

and let me become blessed

(Swedish Hymnal 207:11)

Now we fall silent, and pray. With Olaus Petri, once condemned to death — at the instigation of Gustav Vasa, whose sentences were not to be trifled with — the sentence softened to heavy fines, paid by the city of Stockholm. So: Olov Pettersson of Örebro leads us in prayer, and each of us thinks of his own wound.

God, it is not my own boldness that makes me come to you now. I come at your clear command and at your bidding. Through Jesus Christ you have told me to pray, and promised that to the one who prays it shall be given. On this your word I rely. On your own promise I call. You know best what distress presses me to the wall, or lies in wait at the door. I cannot overcome it unless you give me strength for it. Do not look upon my unworthiness, but do what you have promised in your word. Amen.

Translator's notes. "Ära" is kept as "glory," because Jeremiah's "boast / glory" and the doctrine of justification are the same word in Wingren's argument; "honor" would flatten it. "Låg" is "low," not "humble," since he sets it against power. The Luther anecdote is given as Wingren tells it; it has not been corrected against the Weimar text. The Spegel stanza is translated for sense and singability, not as a metrical hymn. The closing prayer is Olaus Petri's, led by Wingren; the archaic "skall varda givet" is rendered in ordinary English.

Gustaf Wingren · draft translation ·