

SERMON

Sermon for the Tenth Sunday after Trinity

Gustaf Wingren

Luke 19:41–47 · 1940

28 July 1940

Hjorted Church (and Motala, 29 August 1943)

Text: Luke 19:41–47

Hymns: 154:1–3; 205:1–3; 260:4–5; 88:1–2; 42:5; 80:1 ff.; 43:7

(205:1–3; 159:4–6; 217:3; 88:1–2; 43:7)

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

Let us pray.

O God, when all things tell me

that I do not linger here,

help me to consider

how precious time is,

and to gather fruit

from the hour that I possess:

the next is not mine.

(Swedish Hymnal 350:1)

Our Gospel text, which we heard just now at the altar service, is made up of three clearly separate passages. The first passage is the longest. It tells of Jesus' grief, to the point of tears, over the spiritual blindness of the people of the capital. That is why the heading over the whole text reads "Jesus weeps over Jerusalem."

The second passage is shorter. It tells of the Lord's hard and merciless treatment of the businessmen in the temple. Of all four evangelists, Luke — from whom our text is taken — gives the sparest account of this event. He says nothing about “the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves,” as Matthew and Mark do, and nothing about “the whip of cords” in the Savior's hand, which John speaks of. Only a few words about the whole event: that Jesus drove out those who sold in the temple.

But the third passage in our text is the shortest of all. It is one single sentence of seven words: “And he taught daily in the sanctuary.”

So this was the meeting between the promised Son and the chosen city: Christ and Jerusalem. The Lord had worked in Galilee before, but to force the final decision he had gone up to the capital. When he saw its walls he burst into tears, certain as he was of its hardness of heart and its fall. “Your enemies will dash you to the ground, you and your children within you. They will not leave one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation.” A week later this word of the Lord seemed to be shamefully disproved. It was not Jerusalem that was broken down. It was he himself. Two criminals were to be put to death out at the Place of the Skull on the Friday before the holy day, and the troublesome cleanser of the temple was crucified beside them. The traders took their places again in the city's sanctuary, and life went on as before. This happened sometime around the year 30. Four decades later the Roman army came under Titus, conquered Jerusalem, and turned the city into a heap of ruins. When this happened, the congregation of the Crucified and Risen One had begun its victorious march. The gospel of Good Friday and of the open grave of Easter Day was already sounding in Europe, in Rome and in Greece, and new voices kept joining in the song of praise to the one Jerusalem had rejected. But the holy city lay in ruins. For Jerusalem had had its opportunity, but in incomprehensible blindness it had let it pass by. After that there was no more sparing.

For God is at once the God of mercy and the God of judgment. He seeks in love for as long as he wills, but afterward he visits in wrath. It is just this double nature in God that our text today sets before our eyes. Christ is the image of the Father, and to see Christ is to see the Father. God in heaven really is as Jesus is in today's text, with its three separate passages.

I. There are the tears of love, the sorrow of a seeking goodness at the sight of a people who want nothing to do with any grace or any mercy. Just as there is joy among God's angels over

every person who turns and repents, so there is sorrow in the heart of God the Father over every person who pushes his gentleness away.

II. But there is also the irrevocable judgment, the wrath, when the day of grace is past. We see God's wrath in the figure of the Master from Nazareth with the whip in his hand, as he drives the dove sellers and money-changers out through the open gates and overturns the counters and tables. We sense a foreboding of God's judgment already in the Lord's tears over the impenitent city, when he prophesies its terrible future. And we know that when the time was fulfilled, reality fulfilled to the letter the words the Savior had spoken. God gives us opportunities. But wasted opportunities he does not give back to us.

III. And the third, shortest passage in our text tells us how these "opportunities" are given to us. "He taught daily in the sanctuary." The Chosen One, the Savior, into whose power the Father had given both rescue and judgment, stopped for the woman at the well of Sychar. He took time for Nicodemus. He stood quite still for now one person, now another, and taught them about the things of the spirit. Even in the last week, when darkness came down over him, when the cross loomed as the end of his way — even in this last week he went up "daily" "into the sanctuary" and "taught" people about the kingdom of God. So he teaches still, through conscience, the word, and the church, quietly and without remarkable fuss. It is quite possible to despise this teaching of his, just as it was quite possible then, in Jerusalem, to crucify Christ. If one pushes him aside, nothing happens to disturb one's life — no more than Jerusalem's everyday life was disturbed by the bloody deed at Golgotha. That is, nothing happens at once. In time one does notice what one has done, as Jerusalem came to find out. For all the teaching from the Lord's mouth — yesterday, today, and from now on — is opportunities that God's mercy gives us. And when the time of opportunities is past, it is past.

God lives, and he is now as he was of old. Of us too, as a people and as individuals, it is true that we are in the hands of the one who in all circumstances deals with us, in mercy or in wrath. Today, with the words of the text before our eyes, we want to consider what this means. And first, then, we ask what this means for us as a people, the people of Sweden.

For a thousand years the teaching of Christ has reached Swedish men and women from the sanctuary. The voice of the one who was crucified outside the walls of Jerusalem, but after three days broke through the barrier of death, has reached even to us. It has been sounding a long time now, and no book is more widely spread than the book of books. As a rule there are as many copies of it in each home as there are confirmed people within the walls of that home,

and most Swedes are still confirmed. His word reaches our ears at every baptism, every burial, and almost every wedding. That means our whole outward life is sheltered by him. He is present whenever something important happens: at life's beginning and its end, at the founding of homes, when the nation's elected representatives come together for the Riksdag. In his name the day begins in our schools. And in these unquiet days his word is not missing either where the crowds of men gather who must defend and guard our freedom. Here too, among us, "he teaches daily," just as in the temple at Jerusalem. This is opportunities. The question is whether it is "wasted opportunities." It may be that today in God's heaven words are spoken that we do not hear: "Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes."

But if we think we have the right to claim that our people is wasting its opportunities and despising God's grace, let us remember that the Lord's wrath against Jerusalem did not fall only on the city and the people. On the contrary, it fell first of all on the temple and on those who haunted it. It was the house of worship itself that was defiled by unholiness. The spirit of mammon and of bargaining had taken possession of the sanctuary itself. And when the Master swung his whip to bring judgment on what was perverse, it was the temple that was cleansed. "It is written, 'My house shall be a house of prayer,' but you have made it a den of robbers."

That tells us something. No Christian in these days may complain about our people's spiritual blindness and pass judgment on it without first examining, earnestly and searchingly, how things look in the sanctuary, among those who are used to being found in the church of our fathers. Do we stand in living fellowship with the one who came to serve, and who at last gave his life on the cross without thanks and without wages? Or are we ruled, in our work for the Christian faith in Sweden, by a calculating mind that is willing to serve only as long as the service is appreciated? Do we in fact serve for gain — and if not for the gain of goods and gold, then at any rate for the gain of success and honor? It may happen that when the Lord of the church at last comes again and the wind of the Spirit begins to blow, it is not only the ungodly who are thrown out of their security and indifference. It may happen that the whip comes down on us — who have certainly not kept ourselves far from the temple, but on the contrary have been used to being at home there.

So the text presses in on us. It is stern, but not only toward those who now go about outside the walls of the church. It is stern toward us, who have chosen our place inside them. And

with this we have come to the second question for today: what does today's Gospel have to say to us as individuals? What does it want to impress on you and on me?

When a young person hears the words “wasted opportunities,” he probably sees in his mind an old man or an old woman whose life has run out through his fingers, and who now stands there, bitterly sorry, looking back on the possibilities he threw away. It is quite right to think so — if only one remembers that what the old man often looks back on with the greatest bitterness of all is the time of youth that he squandered on meaningless things. The decisive things happen in the years of strength, and in time they will stamp the final verdict on a life. One does not notice at once whether one chooses wrongly or rightly. For a long time the body has plenty of strength in reserve. And above all, one has so many illusions to live on, and illusions always obligingly take over from one another. It is quite possible to reach old age, strong and successful, without ever having taken one's life seriously. Jerusalem let Jesus be crucified, and lived happily for a whole generation after Good Friday before the destruction came. But the one into whose path the Savior sent by God has come, without being received, will look in vain for something to make up for it elsewhere. One day he will answer for it. It will be slow, but the day comes.

Until then the teaching goes on. We all know how the heart can tremble when a word of Scripture sometimes strikes us with its power and its earnestness. We all know how quietly and persistently conscience works within us, without letting itself be silenced and without letting go of us, even though we keep giving way. It is the Lord who “teaches daily in the sanctuary” — in the heart, which is also meant to be a temple and a dwelling for the Holy Spirit. All these impressions made on us are words from God, the speaking of God's voice. We can very well push them aside, though only somewhat [?] with impunity. The heart that was meant to be a house of prayer cannot be turned into a den of robbers without harm. If we really want to live, we must begin — without sentimentality, in spiritual earnestness and spiritual sobriety — to take heed of all that comes from God: the word, the commands of conscience, and the gifts of the Christian congregation in baptism and the Lord's Supper. We must look on them all as realities, as real as health and good fortune — yes, more real, more lasting, more dangerous to reject, more fateful to waste, since they hold not only for time but for eternity.

Death will transform everything. In its light our whole life may look like only a short day, a “wasted opportunity.” But at the end of our life it may also happen that we look back with

thanksgiving on our few days of life, and look forward with boldness to the crossing of the river of death. How it will be for you depends on how you use your time, on what you make of the present. In this hour God looks at you. He looks right through the surface you show to others, straight into your heart with its uncleanness and its longing, and he says: "I have loved you with an everlasting love." Amen.

Translator's notes. The second, bracketed hymn list in the heading is the one for the second use of the sermon, at Motala in 1943. Wingren counts the closing verse as seven words in Swedish ("Och han undervisade var dag i helgedomen"), and the English is given in seven words to keep his count true. "Helgedomen" is rendered "the sanctuary" throughout, since he carries the word over from the temple to the church and the heart. "Ehuru någolunda ostraftat" is odd as written (the sense seems to call for "not with impunity"), so it is rendered literally, "though only somewhat [?] with impunity." The hymn stanza is translated for sense, not as a metrical stanza.

Gustaf Wingren · draft translation ·