

SERMON

Sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity

Gustaf Wingren

Luke 7:11–17 · 1940

8 September 1940

Gamleby Church

Text: Luke 7:11–17

Hymns: 572:1–2; 478:1–6; 476:4; 479:1–3; 592:9

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

Let us pray.

Enlighten us, Lord, with your word,

that on this dark earth

we may not turn from your way.

And lead us at last in the faith of Christ

from “the shadow of death,” where we dwell,

to the light in your kingdom. Amen.

(Swedish Hymnal 480:5)

The church year not seldom follows nature in its changing course. During the weeks of April and May, when the new life bursts its covers in grove and field, we go from the tender green in to the temple and listen to the words about his life, “who overcame death in the morning hours of Easter,” and the words about the Spirit: “your young men shall have dreams,” as it says in the epistle for Pentecost. Now the sighing has become darker in its tone in our forests. The light has become sparer, and the green has become older also in its look, with a good many reddish-brown or yellow patches. And when nature thus speaks of autumn and decline

and ruin, then the Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity comes and commands us, in our high masses round about the country, to consider “the shadow of death.”

There rules, however, a certain contradiction between the heading over our Sunday as a whole — “the shadow of death” — and the headings over the single texts: “The Spirit gives the inward person power” (the epistle), “Jesus raises Lazarus” (first high mass), “Life conquers death” (first evening service), “Jesus’ power to give life” (second high mass), and “Christ gives courage both to live and to die” (second evening service). And in all the hymns we sing today, autumn hymns and grave hymns, the tone of hope is after all the strongest, like a leading motif in the background of all lament for the dead, a leading motif which works its way forward and wins the victory in the finale of the last verse. So also our last hymn verse in today’s high mass is to be pure praise.

And this light — this conquering joy — in hymns and texts, the strange shimmer over the reality of what passes away, comes in one way or another from Christ, “God’s living Word given to us.” As all light and all warmth in the world of nature has in its uttermost origin come from the sun, so also all light in the world of the Spirit streams from the sun that rose three days after Golgotha, when the stone was cast aside and the open grave witnessed that “death was killed.” “And his appearance was to look upon as lightning, and his clothes were white as snow,” the women witness of the wonder of Easter morning, according to the first evangelist. A strip of shining white light rests since that morning over all that passes away, and no one can screen off that light. No one can wholly black out human life after that day — as little as any denier of God can put out the sun in the vault of heaven. Christ has died and risen. His disciples can therefore never speak of death, never sing of death, without at the same time singing and speaking of life. These two, life and death, dark and light, have been twined together by God himself, both in the work of creation with its changing of night and day, and in the work of redemption with its mysterious unity of cross and resurrection, Golgotha and Easter.

Anguish shall bear the hope that gladdens us.

Torment shall be turned into health and healing.

Sorrow shall die.

The seed of blessedness

shall burst into flower in the heaven of heavens.

Christ in the middle of the world of death, the sheaf of light over the bier — that is also the picture which today's gospel sets before our gaze. The short and simple text has just been read from the altar. It tells us of "the widow's son in Nain." It stands in the seventh chapter of the evangelist Luke, but nowhere else in our New Testament. The author of the third gospel, who according to his own explanation in the opening verses of the first chapter has "carefully investigated everything from the beginning," has surely found also this little story, which was well known and went from man to man in the little town of Nain in Galilee, far from the great highways, but which was surely forgotten and disappeared among people outside that insignificant place. They had so much else to speak of: the raising of Lazarus in Bethany, which lay just outside the capital; the raising of Jairus's daughter — her father was after all a ruler of the synagogue — other remarkable events, to say nothing of them. Nain was a community of small importance. The town is not named in the whole Bible in any other place than here in the seventh chapter of Luke the evangelist. And the mother was a widow, nameless like her son. We never get to know what either of these two was called. But we are glad that Luke, alone among the four evangelists, thanks to his zeal as a collector, has been able to set also this pearl into the jewel that his gospel is, and so has preserved for us the few lines about the widow in Nain and her young son.

Now one can certainly wonder what comfort we can fetch out of a text such as this. There is surely hardly anyone here in church today who has not at some time walked behind a coffin — perhaps we walked as small children behind father's or mother's coffin, perhaps as adults behind a child's white wooden cover. Or else it was another, equally dear, who was carried away. But none of us has belonged to a funeral company which, like the mourning train in Nain, was stopped on the way, commanded by the King of life to stand still. Perhaps you prayed a desperate prayer that it should happen so. But the bearers went on inexorably, with weary steps, and when they had come to their goal they lowered without mercy their burden into the depth. Then one went home and tried to accustom oneself to this: that that voice was no longer heard, that the well-known steps in stairs and rooms would never come back. And now we get to know that once, nearly two thousand years ago, there was a widow who had prepared herself for this dark desolation, prepared herself for worse things than that, for complete destitution, now that the son had followed her husband in his tracks — but she got, through a wonder, to see the comfort of her eyes again, to hear him come and go, sing and

work. If I have lost a treasure, it is of little joy to me to know that a woman two thousand years ago won a treasure. I cannot find any real comfort in such a text-word.

When Christian preaching through the centuries has stood before such comfortless sorrow, it has taken hold of a rather strange way out. The human being mourns a beloved one who has gone, and wants the lost one back to life. The word of God says to the mourning human being: you yourself shall die, follow the lamented dead on the wandering out of the land of life into the kingdom of death. Even the widow in Nain ended her days at last, and the same fate befell her son. No one lives eternally here, not even the people whom Jesus, the Lord, during his earthly wandering raised from the dead. But the word of God goes still further. It says to you that on the other side of the dark river you shall answer for the life you have lived here. How this judgment shall proceed we do not know for certain. The Lord's various words about "the last day" cannot be fitted together into a single and clear picture, but leave a wholesome dark in the disciple's mind. We mark, indeed, that certain of our acts "come again" already here in time. One gets to "reap what one has sown" of untruth, lovelessness, and slackness. It can take ten years or twenty years, but one day it happens that through the outward life itself one receives punishment for something one has done and thought buried in forgetfulness. We can be convinced that the same law of sowing and harvest keeps its validity also after death. How it shall happen we do not know. But the law by which the judgment shall go, that law we know, and no one can escape it: "He has told you what is good, O man. For what else does the Lord require of you than that you do what is right and apply yourself to love and walk in humility before your God?"

So the word of the Lord says nothing but bitter things to us. Our whole existence is swaddled in death and decay. And over every child who plays in the street this fate hangs: whatever you do of evil in your life on this blood-stained earth, you will get it back. People take revenge. The state takes revenge, through courts and prisons. The peoples take revenge after twenty years of peace with new wars. Woe to the conquered, and woe to the conquerors: next time it is their turn. Life is one single seething kettle of revenge. This is the Bible's conception of the world to which we are born. And to make the matter still more sure, the Bible lays it down that death and wrath with full right cast their shadow over the earth, for "human beings are evil." God's judgment is the uttermost threat, on top of everything else.

To this the writers of the Bible now add certain other features, of which the most important is the following. In the middle of the shattered world, in the middle of the so little edifying

history of the world, there stands a cross, raised up toward the sky, and on that cross a man hangs and struggles with God one Friday evening. All that is evil and all that is bitter has banded together against him in order, if possible, to bring it about that he also becomes evil in his heart. For it is so, that when all this evil in the world strikes a poor human being, that human being becomes bitter, that is, he himself becomes evil, and it is in that way that the powers of corruption spread and keep themselves up, time after time. Until this Friday evening the man on the cross has held the whole misery off from himself. "This man has done nothing evil," says one of the robbers at his side, and that was a true word from the lips of an evildoer. But now it was the great final struggle, which went on from the third hour to the ninth hour. And not one evil word came out of his mouth, not one evil thought rose in his heart. An unbroken and unconquered love it was that fell silent when the man on the cross bowed his head and gave up his spirit. This was something altogether new in the activity of evil up to that time. It was the first time that evil got nowhere, however it turned. Evil's twin brother, death, thought on the contrary that he had every reason for satisfaction that Friday evening. He had not failed. Dead was the man on the cross in any case, "crucified, dead, and buried. Descended into the realm of death." This joy lasted until Sunday morning. Then some women came out from the grave, and they wept and laughed by turns. He was not there. The stone was rolled away. Soon after, Peter came. He had denied him during the night before the crucifixion and since then had wandered about in the surroundings of Jerusalem, hither and thither, in pangs of conscience and despair. But now he had seen him, living. It was a conqueror he had seen, not a crucified and mocked man. He did not understand how it had happened, but live he did. And so with the two from Emmaus. They had sat and eaten with a stranger from the road, and when he broke the bread they saw that it was he. It was just as on Thursday evening, when he broke the piece of bread and spoke the strange words about his blood and his body. He must have risen in some way. He must be alive. And now they talked. Each told his own. They barred the door. No one could know whom the Jews next meant to drag before the Great Council. Then he stood in the middle of them, suddenly: "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I also send you." He sent them. They were a few in a room in Jerusalem, plain men and women, fishermen and tax officials. But they obeyed him, their Lord. They began in Jerusalem. Others took it up, Paul, the man of fire. The gospel of the cross and the grave swung over to Europe, fought its way north step by step. Even at this moment this message sounds, today, now, through word and sacrament, through the church in the middle of all its lack. Now the Spirit from the man on the cross has reached you, who attend a high mass in 1940. For he really lived, and he lives still today.

What does he say to you? He does not say that the world is better than it is. Death and sin rule in the world. That you must put up with. But then he says: “Do not weep.” Death and life are twined together here, but what you call death is perhaps life, and what you call life is perhaps death. Merely to exist is not life. Here many people go about on the earth and manage their affairs, but they are dead. To cease breathing is not death. Many people rest in the churchyard, but they live, an imperishable life, which never dies.

After that he says: “How is it with you yourself? The one who went from you, the one gone, he or she whom you mourn and want back, I have in my hands. She dwells in my Father’s house. But how is it with you yourself? Do you live, or do you only imagine that you live? The only life that lasts is love. It ‘lives as God,’ lives as I myself, marked by the cross and conquering, despised and eternal, weak and yet ‘stronger than death.’ Whoever loves has passed from death to life. And if I am dead, then he says to me as to the widow’s son: ‘Stand up. What matters is to sow a noble seed on the wandering through the world. What matters is to love, before the sun has gone down. So rise up and stand on your feet.’”

But then I answer: “I cannot stand up. I want to love, but I do not do it. I cannot. Help me. Give me your life, Lord, which overcomes death.” And now he has at last got me on the right track. Merely to fear death, bodily death, there is something unchristian in such a stance. “Do not fear those who can kill the body but have no power over the soul. Fear him who has power to destroy both body and soul in the burning Gehenna,” the Master said to his disciples. Do not only flee death, but above all his twin brother, evil. Do not fear only this, that you shall one day fall asleep, but fear that of which we spoke before: this, that we must answer, the reckoning, the judgment. Do not only think that what matters is to live as long as possible. The question is how you live. Now for the first time you become in earnest aware of God’s love, revealed in Christ. The essential thing in the text today is really not the Lord’s power to raise the dead, but his goodness. “He was his mother’s only son.” “Christ gave him to his mother.” These sentences make it so that the wonder is not a naked wonder of power, but an act of simple goodness. The Lord came to Nain and did a poor woman a service. And the most important thing in the gospel of the cross and the resurrection is the same: the sacrifice, the gift, the witness that God in heaven is good. He can slowly help the one who cannot “stand up” — one step at a time, if you pray and hang fast to him. And so he can give me security before the judgment, though I remain a sinner to my last breath. But this is a matter by itself, which is not to be treated on the Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity, when “the shadow of death” is the subject of the sermon. What matters today is that we cease to fear bodily death and to

lament over it. There are other things to think of, which are considerably more serious, namely “eternal death” and “eternal life.” But whatever fear assails us, and whatever “death” frightens us — for everything there is healing in the word of God. And therefore we close, as we began, with this prayer:

*Enlighten us, Lord, with your word,
that on this dark earth
we may not turn from your way,
and lead us at last in the faith of Christ
from “the shadow of death,” where we dwell,
to the light of your kingdom. Amen.*

Translator’s notes. He gave this sermon no title. The world is left as he describes it in September 1940: a kettle of revenge, and human beings evil. That is not softened. The widow stays she. The son, the man on the cross, and the hearer stay he. Where he says the one who has gone may be he or she, both are kept. The hymn lines are for sense, not meter.

Gustaf Wingren · draft translation ·