

Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent

Gustaf Wingren

Luke 4:31–37 · 1986

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St. Hans Church, Lund

Text: Luke 4:31–37

The text from the Gospel that we have just heard may have struck us as a little primitive. A man goes around with an evil demon inside his body. When he meets Jesus there is a fight, a real battle between Jesus and the demon, and the demon is thrown out of the man's body. For the man this was lucky, of course. He got well. But what are we to do with a text like this? Surely we have no demons in our time.

The practice of putting texts of this kind into our services, by the order of the church, may seem still more primitive once we see why the demons are supposed to turn up in Lent, of all times, the season before Easter. These texts have had their place here for a very long time, ever since the days of the ancient church. The early church fathers tell us about it. The great baptism was to take place on the evening of Easter Eve, and during the weeks of Lent the candidates for baptism were instructed. That is why the texts speak of evil powers that hold people in bondage but are conquered, struck down, and driven out by Jesus Christ, the Victor. Soon the candidates go down into the water on Easter Eve. In the morning light of Easter Day they climb up onto the shore, to new life — just as Jesus broke victoriously out of the grave at sunrise on Easter morning. Prepared to bear witness: “martyr.”

This means that when the young heathen hears, on a Sunday in Lent — today — the word about the man who still has a demon in him, but only for a short while longer, and who soon, soon, will be freed from his bondage through Jesus' power, he hears his own situation described. And he rejoices over the text. It holds a promise. It is a bright text.

Yes, the church has a primitive history, that much is clear. But today, thank goodness, that sort of notion is over. So we think. Or perhaps: so we thought. What happened in Stockholm the

night before last may have taught us something. Whoever wants to heal the wounds of mankind must stand in the midst of violence and bear violence. In the midst of violence faith can live, and in such a faith there dwells not only darkness, but on the contrary, light. We are to celebrate a baptism here today, and to prepare for it we can, in our thoughts, pay a visit to a baptism in Denmark. It is quick to get there: it takes three quarters of an hour by hydrofoil.

The baptismal party comes forward to the font. The priest asks the questions, and someone in the baptismal party — often it is the mother — answers for the child. The first question goes: “Do you renounce the devil and all his works and all his ways?” “Yes.” “Do you believe in God the Father...?” “Yes.” “Do you believe in Jesus Christ...?” “Yes.” And in the Spirit: “Yes.” Baptism means that one renounces a dominion. One breaks away from an evil lord, and one chooses a new Lord, a good Lord, one who gives freedom.

That is how a baptism is to be done, according to Grundtvig. He had learned it from the old fathers of the ancient church. He loved them — more than he loved Luther. Why did he not love Luther? Well, Luther often put an equals sign between man as he is in himself and sin. Luther called the “old,” sinful, ruined man “the natural man.” It is that man who is unnatural, says Grundtvig. He is not himself. He is a prisoner of something. There is a foreign power in him that steers him and makes him do and say things he does not really want to. No, the natural man is the man set free, the man saved. He is the natural one.

And now at last we can go down into today’s text. One point is important. It is that the demons inside the man’s body see reality more clearly than Jesus’ own disciples do. For a long time a secret surrounds Jesus. No apostle has yet dared to say that Jesus is the Messiah. Peter will say it in time, and it is tremendous news. But the demon knows. “What have you to do with us — with us demons — Jesus of Nazareth? You mean to drive us out of human bodies, to kill us. I know who you are, the Holy One of God” — that is, the Messiah.

We in our culture hide reality. We hide the bondage and the captivity we are in. In the end it does not work. When we stand before death, we meet reality. Then we see that we are not the masters. And so in our time death has to become invisible. This hiding is an expression of the tremendous anguish in our culture: the gilding of life, and the anguish beneath the gilded surface.

But the mentally ill among us know that they are not the masters. They know the truth already, long before death. Those who were possessed by demons were the mentally ill of that

time, and Jesus stands on their side in the struggle against the powers that live inside them. “Be silent,” he says. “Be silent! Come out of him.” It is a matter of getting this man to become the natural man he really is. It is a matter of driving the occupying power out of him.

That is how Grundtvig understands salvation.

Now we must go into a little theology here. For Luther, guilt was the great injury. So salvation was forgiveness. And guilt, so to speak, turns inward, and easily comes to equal the self: the whole self is evil. The evil man becomes “the natural man.” But for Grundtvig the great injury was sickness and death. So salvation becomes healing, health, life, resurrection. The person who has sickness in him has something foreign in him. His healthy self is “the natural man.” I am created. I am a good creation that has fallen into the power of foreign powers.

This view of man is not dark. On the contrary, it sets free. Often, not least when one meets young people, one faces this strange thing: they say words they do not mean, and they do things that do not match their innermost will. The art of living with these people is the art of seeing through the surface, as Jesus did with the man in the text — the art of loving the true, hidden self into the open, for example in a young person; of lifting out what is so fragile that it has to be hidden away, covered over by a cocksure, haughty shell.

Now there is to be a baptism. Then we will sing Grundtvig’s hymn, number 332, all seven verses. Notice that the whole hymn speaks only of health and healing. The baptismal font is there, the bubbling spring of health, “the sun’s mild warmth, at the time of Lady Day.” And the enemy, all the way through, is death, not guilt. “O glorious lot, to live where death has found its master!” “O cleanse our dust of all infirmity and death!”

When the whole hymn sounds like that, verse after verse, it is because — Grundtvig would say — the whole Gospel sounds like that, chapter after chapter. Blindness ends, lameness ends, demons are driven out — and the healthy man is there, free. But that is not all. Because Jesus speaks as he does in the Sermon on the Mount, about lilies and birds, Grundtvig sings as he does — we will soon join in singing the hymn — about the bird that may live and need not die, about the wings that carry far beyond the sea, about the sun on the land of paradise. All of it, all of this, is true to the Bible. It is “pure doctrine.”

This turned into a lecture about Grundtvig and not a real sermon. On another Sunday we would sing other hymns and give a lecture about Luther — and it would be just as biblical,

about guilt and about forgiveness. For the Bible is a book of many voices. And all of it is gospel. All of it is restoration for man.

But today it is one feature among the many that is to come forward: the feature of healing. Today is the Third Sunday in Lent. Today is the driving out of demons — and it is baptism. [An alternative ending, written between the lines in the manuscript, is illegible.]

Then we pray together:

God, we know what torment it is to have the heart locked up in the desire for revenge, in hatred and envy. We have tasted the rule of these foreign powers in us. O God, through Jesus Christ drive all evil spirits out of our inner being. Make us free — so free of cares that we, glad at heart, can die at any time. Only then do we trust in life, the life of the Spirit, which never, ever dies. Amen.

Translator's notes. "What happened in Stockholm the night before last" is the assassination of Prime Minister Olof Palme on the night of 28 February 1986; Wingren does not name it, and the English does not either. The capitals Wingren uses for key words (SKULD, FÖRLÅTELSE, MÅNGFALD, DOP) and his capitalized "Människan," "Ljus," and "Frihet" are given in ordinary type. "Mångfald" is rendered "a book of many voices." The typist notes that an alternative ending, written between the lines, could not be read; it is marked illegible and not filled in. The Danish baptismal questions and Grundtvig's hymn (Swedish Hymnal 1986, no. 332) are translated for sense.

Gustaf Wingren · draft translation ·