

SERMON

Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent

Gustaf Wingren

Luke 11:14–28 · 1940

25 February 1940

Gamleby Church

Text: Luke 11:14–28

Hymns: 76:1–2; 123:1–4; 206:4; 266:1–4; 77:6

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

Let us pray.

O holy fire, comfort of all the world,

let love burn in our breast.

Give us of your good consolation,

in earthly need a heavenly courage.

On the way of the cross strengthen and lead us;

against temptation arm us with power,

that here we may fight like men

and through death go on to life.

Hallelujah, hallelujah. Amen.

(Swedish Hymnal 134:3)

We are now in the season when two texts meet us each Sunday. Anyone who looks more closely at the different texts will notice that only one of them tells of Christ's suffering. This text, the Passion text, is the newer of the two. The older text deals with quite other things, often with the power of evil.

This goes back to an age-old tradition. In the ancient church the newly converted Christians were baptized at Easter, at least as a rule. During Lent these young Christians were prepared for the sacrament of baptism through instruction and through liturgical acts. The chief weight in all this was laid on the fact that these new Christians were now to be taken out of the dominion of heathenism and darkness and made part of the kingdom of Christ. So the texts for Lent came to be given over especially to those passages in our New Testament that deal with the break between Christ and the devil, the struggle between good and evil. On the First Sunday in Lent, “Jesus is tempted in the wilderness.” On the Second Sunday in Lent, “The Canaanite woman” — that is, a heathen woman before Christ. Today, on the Third Sunday in Lent, the old Gospel tells how “Jesus teaches about the strength of evil.” And over all the day’s texts of the older kind stand the words “Attack and defense.” That was surely something a young Christian in the struggling ancient church needed to be taught before he received baptism at the joyful festival of Easter.

Our Gospel text, read from the altar, is rather long and may seem disjointed, as if it were a collection of sayings of Jesus spoken on different occasions, with no connection between them. But anyone who studies the text carefully will soon notice its inner unity and clarity.

It begins by telling how Jesus drove out an evil spirit. On the occasion of this outward event Jesus begins to teach about himself. In his ministry, and with it, the kingdom of God has come on earth, and the struggle with the kingdom of Beelzebul has begun. The battle between evil and good is under way. Every person takes part in this battle. No one stands outside it as a mere spectator. The Lord impresses this on us with the words: “Whoever is not with me is against me.” All take part, on one side or the other.

This struggle goes on without a break. It never stops. Evil does not leave the battlefield. The Lord expresses this truth in two different images. First, in the image of the strong man who guards his house fully armed, always on watch, never entering into any disarmament or truce, well aware that the evil enemy is strong too — strong enough to defeat the weak and the weary.

Next the Savior impresses on us that the struggle never ceases, in the image of the unclean spirit that has gone out of a man. The man who has been freed from an evil power has evidently believed that the struggle was now over. He has stopped arming himself, and instead has swept and decorated his heart, in the belief that sin was now driven out and he himself was quite holy. Into that man’s heart eight evil spirits move, and his condition becomes worse

than ever. The struggle never ceases, and it does not end on earth. So one must be armed. One of the best weapons there is — the very best, and at bottom the only one — is to hear the word. The text ends, too, with a reference to God's word: "Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it."

But the text wants to impress on us not only that the struggle between evil and good is always going on. It stresses just as strongly that in Christ the victory is won. "If it is by the finger of God that I drive out the evil spirits," says the Lord, "then the kingdom of God has come upon you." Christ is Lord over the host of the evil ones. Where he goes forward, it is conquered.

And now we must surely ask: if we really are in Christ, if we really live in the world of faith, then surely the power of evil will be conquered in our lives too. Surely, at any rate, we will see sin steadily giving way, so that we become better as time goes on. Today we want to stop at that question.

First. The statement "Day by day I am getting better and better" is false. It has no support in the Bible. Whoever talks like that is not reckoning with the fact that our life is a struggle. He thinks it is a development. And the doctrine of development is a very new invention — one that, moreover, has proved wrong in every way where the spiritual life is concerned. What age has had to live through such barbarism as ours? We, who were supposed to have come further in development than our fathers, behave far worse than any generation before us. No one who sits down in earnest and compares old and new believes that we have come so especially far in spiritual things compared with past generations. The truth is the simple one: existence is a struggle between evil and good, a battle that surges back and forth. It is the same in the life of the race as in the life of the individual. Times of victory and progress alternate with times of darkness and defeat. Every one of us sitting here today can look back in his life on bright, beautiful, pure times, when the will was strong enough to keep evil at a distance, and when it was easy, as it were, to love and to be good. After those times the way went downhill into the world of sin. Now perhaps it is climbing again toward light and strength. But in the middle of this way upward the soul sometimes stumbles and falls. The battle takes hold again. Victory is won — and new temptations meet us. If we consider in earnest what the word "struggle" means, we understand that an unbroken development forward is not given to us. Nor will an honest and sincere person claim that he is now better in every respect than he has ever been at any time in his life.

Second. When it comes to gross, outward sin — what the old writers called “manifest” sin — when it comes to such things, we are to become better. And in such things we can become better. Here it is not a matter of being righteous and fulfilling God’s law without a spot. Here it is a matter instead of doing away with certain excesses, certain habits, that all the world can see. But we should note that the one who has to struggle with such gross sin is, in his heart, much better off than many of those who are respectable and spotless in the eyes of the world. He is often humble of heart. He does not judge others. This teaches us something very important. Sin moves around in us. The one who succeeds in conquering manifest and gross sin often enough gets new enemies to fight: pride, judging, lack of mercy. So the struggle against this new evil begins. I try to learn gentleness, a forgiving mind, patience with the shortcomings of others. But then perhaps I lose the earnestness instead, the incorruptibility in my own striving, the zeal. In this way the struggle goes on and on. The deeper I go into the life of faith, the more of evil I see. The sharper the eye becomes, the clearer the sight. So one can say of a child of God, a true disciple, that he always has a conquered sin behind him and always another, unconquered sin before him. He is always in the struggle, always in need of forgiveness — even though he is victorious. So it is in a real battle. The enemy is beaten back at one point, but at the same moment he pushes forward at another. Otherwise the battle would stop. But we know from God’s word that our battle against evil does not stop until the other side of the border of death, in the kingdom of heaven. The one who is in Christ must be able to say that he is gaining ground in the battle, that he has hope of victory over the sin he is fighting against. But he also knows that the battle will then begin again on another sector of the front.

Third. The further a Christian disciple comes, the less he looks at himself and his own victories. The one who stands really near Christ looks instead at Christ’s greatness. Our very question — are we not going forward, are we not getting better? — shows that we are not really children with our Father. We feel as though we stood there alone and had to fight a battle without help. Then we become so anxious to be able to record our progress. But faith is, after all, faith in God. The struggle is not between me and the power of evil. God fights for me, to keep me safe. When I discover this, I stop asking as I asked before. I pray instead. I give thanks and praise instead. I have been given a Father, a defense, a fortress in the world. It is as if I were inside a fortress. The battle goes on. It rages around me, and I myself am part of it and fight. But my eyes have found a new center. I no longer look at how strong I am myself. I look

at how strong the fortress is — the fortress that surrounds me: God, my Father in heaven. It is his power I count on, his strength my eye looks for, his firmness that is my joy.

O mighty Hero, stand by me;

be a fortress for me, where I

may fight with might.

By the host of darkness

I am surrounded:

O do not leave my side.

(Swedish Hymnal 341:3)

So the essential thing in the struggle is not our own victories and exploits. The essential thing is to choose the right Lord. The essential thing is to hold to the right King. And in our text the Lord Christ teaches us the way to the right King's fortress: "Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it." It is beyond our understanding that the word should be such a power. We are inclined to think that the word is among the weakest of the means the good has for holding its own in the struggle against the devil's power. The word is, after all, only words — spoken sounds or written letters. What use is that in a world where the roar of the cannons drowns out the human voice? What use is that in a world that has so terribly misused the word in the service of lies — a world where treaties, written promises, and the speeches of the world's mighty serve to deceive and to hide the truth?

Yes, the constant call of Christ and of the New Testament to heed God's word is something strange and beyond understanding. But name one thing in our Christian faith that is not strange and beyond understanding when we sit down and compare it with what otherwise meets us in this world. Is it reasonable that those twelve poor disciples who went about the towns of Galilee — is it reasonable that their message should re-create us, our whole people, up here in the far North? Is it reasonable that Christ, who died on a cross as a despised rebel, forsaken by everyone — is it reasonable that he should be the comfort and strength in the lives of millions upon millions through the centuries? And yet it is so. What was weak and lowly in the eyes of the world, God chose. Through such things it has pleased him to act. When all is said and done, it matters very little how great the strength and power of something is, if this seemingly strong thing is not lasting and eternal and imperishable. The seemingly weak holds

its own well, if only it is eternal, impossible to kill. So it is with Christ. “He is the Lord God who, clothed in the robe of victory, has founded his throne forever.” When the mighty of the day are forgotten and dead, he will still live as the light of men in the world. So it is with God’s word too. “All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.”

God the Father dwells in light that no one can approach, and Christ is now invisible to our dim eyes. Instead we have the word, which we can see with our eyes and hear with our ears. It is this word that has been the foundation of faith in all its struggle. It was in this outward word that Luther found the gospel of Christ again. And it is this word that today is the handhold for everyone who has come in earnest into the struggle between God and Satan.

So it is necessary to read and to hear the word. In the service, listen to the word of Scripture read from the altar just as eagerly as to the sermon — more eagerly, for the sermon is the word of men. If some word of Scripture speaks to you in your lonely struggle, which the rest of us know nothing of — if some word touches your heart — then learn that word by heart and use it as your daily bread. Hold on to it. Do not let it go. If you think you have come far as a Christian, then open your ear especially to the hard and condemning words: they are for you. If you are losing the struggle against sin, if you are unclean and stained and weak, then lay hold of God’s eternal promises to save sinners: they are for you and for no one else. There is no day in a disciple’s life when he could do without the word — the word read, or heard, or called to mind. For there is no day when he is wholly snatched out of the battle between God and the devil that rages in the world. And in that battle God wants to keep us safe from destruction. He wants to do it with his holy weapon: the word. So we pray:

O Holy Spirit of God, come;

tear apart the snare of Satan.

The word we have received from the Lord

keep safe within our soul,

that each one, made holy,

may sing God’s praise with gladness,

and that Jesus Christ’s precious word

may lead us all together

to the joy of heaven. Amen.

(Swedish Hymnal 25:4)

Blessed be God...

Translator's notes. Wingren says "eight evil spirits" where Luke 11:26 has the unclean spirit return with seven others; his number is kept. "Dubbla texter" refers to the two sets of readings, the older and the newer, given for the Sundays in Lent in the Swedish service book. The pericope headings he quotes ("Anfall och försvar," "Jesus lär om det ondas styrka") are translated. The hymn stanzas are translated for sense, not as metrical verse. The closing doxology is only begun in the typescript.

Gustaf Wingren · draft translation ·