

SERMON

Sermon for the Eighth Sunday after Trinity

Gustaf Wingren

Matthew 7:15–21 · 15 August 1943

In Motala Church.

Text: Matt. 7:15–21.

Hymns: 134:2, 510:1–4, 395:1–3, 229:4–5, 475:8–9.

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

Let us pray.

Help us, Lord, God of all the world,

That the faith of the fathers we may not lose.

Forgive our sins against thy commandments,

Make whole what threatens to break.

Thou God of the fathers, who hast stood by us

In shifting, hard destinies—

From heart and soul we pray thee:

Guard us from the uttermost distress,

From the creeping, evil death. Amen. (Swedish Hymnal 491:2)

Of false prophets it is spoken in the gospel text that was read during the altar service.

Our people in this time lack all prophets, both false and true. This is in fact a particularly characteristic mark of the age in which we live. One no longer hears any strong voice sounding, proclaiming something, stubbornly carrying out a spiritual message. For the question how life is to be lived, in order to be lived rightly, that question no longer fires men's

hearts. One does not seek with any passion the truth about human existence, and God is something one neither bothers to deny nor to believe in.

Those who are now beginning to grow old remember, no doubt, that even in their childhood ordinary sound people out in the districts of Sweden could fall into serious disagreement because they had different interpretations of a passage of Scripture, and even a couple of decades ago the ring of a message was heard in our national poetry: the poets and writers who then lived, but who have now one after another passed away, regarded life as an art. Nowadays one is certainly not at odds on account of differing opinions about the teaching of the Bible; the little company that still asks after Christian faith closes itself together instead in increasing peace and unity. Nowadays one hardly meets any prophets in literature any longer: a modern novel only reproduces, like a camera, a piece of life, and preferably a life without beauty, without aim.

Spiritual questions, questions of life, no longer mean anything, and therefore there are no prophets either. The man of today acknowledges only outward things as real; he lives in a world of things and bodies and money, and he conceives himself as such an outward thing with life in it. The only question he can in a natural way take an interest in is the question how the outward things ought to be ordered, and he thinks they are well ordered here in Sweden. The burdens of preparedness are borne patiently, for the good order of things that has been built up in this country must be protected. One and another has indeed believed that out of this new love for one's own country a spiritual, a Christian awakening would also spring. But this has not happened. The last years have rather confirmed men in the conviction that only outward things are real, and directed everyone's mind still more toward the earthly good.

But the gospel speaks not only of false prophets; it speaks also of fruit, evil fruit and good fruit: "Beware of false prophets.... By their fruits you shall know them. A bad tree cannot bear good fruit.... Therefore you shall know them by their fruits." Now it is so with the fruit that it does not show itself at once. A plant takes root, but there is not fruit straight away. The years pass—of the plant a tree comes—and the fruit comes at long last. He who looks for the prophets whose evil fruit we are forced to eat today shall not seek among the voices of those now living—if these false prophets still live, they mumble with an old man's voice. The generation that has now grown up believes nothing else and thinks nothing else than what the older generation taught them, for it was in that older generation that it happened: then the denial of God won the day, then there were prophets, and the prophets who carried the masses with

them in the struggle of world-views of that time were prophets who hated the church and who mocked Christianity. They preached freedom, freedom from what stands, freedom from God's commandment and from the whole Christian inheritance. They themselves lived on this Christian inheritance, for this is the strange thing, that he who preaches something so passionately, he who is a "prophet," bears within himself that which he preaches against—these "freethinkers" had Christianity in the breast. One tore down, but one set no new spiritual values in its place, only man's own right to live in freedom. And at last the young man grows forth who has not the least beginning of a faith in his breast, and who therefore does not hate Christianity and church either, but only ignores it, only feels his own body and its desires. Decent, but spiritless.

No one is so short-sighted as to believe that this human type is the end, the last thing in the development. The fruit shall ripen, and it goes slowly, but we have already had a taste of half-ripe fruit, at least, though it has not been Swedish fruit but foreign. The heart longs for faith, and when outward conditions are marked by distress and false prophets arise anew, one believes them. If it does not become Christian faith, it becomes superstition and heathenism. The violent, heathen teachings that have seized the youth in several European countries, and that in different forms are found on both sides in the great war now going on—this heathen view of life only fills an emptiness that sooner or later must be filled in the heart of the modern man, the emptiness that arose when the Christian faith disappeared from it. They are new masters, with hard boot-heels, but the work they take in hand is prepared by the old, somewhat aunt-like freethinkers with a large neckerchief and long hair. Here there runs a straight line over from the one to the other, and the whole of it is at bottom one great deed, one single connected work of the Devil, him whom no one any longer believes in. And if Satan is allowed to carry his work through, then it will surely show itself that even the outward falls to pieces: state, society, home, and prosperity. "You shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?"

But God lives. He lives even in this time, and he carries out his work even when men do not believe that he exists. "The king's heart is in the Lord's hand like streams of water: he turns it wherever he will." When Christ was set before Pontius Pilate, who condemned him to the cross—then the thorn-crowned said to the earthly holder of power: "You would have no power at all over me if it had not been given you from above." God gives men power on earth, and they have power so long as God wills, but not one day longer. God's work can take place in the midst of evil, and with the old man as instrument. Of this Christ's cross bears witness, which

is the triumph of evil and which is yet a source of life and strength for us. We are not to believe in any necessary development toward “the decline of the West,” not so long as God’s word sounds among us and wakes men; and we are not to believe that the number of serious Christians must steadily sink: such things have used to go back and forth in the world. Our God is a God who for long times seems to sleep, and during such times people shrewdly reckon out how it shall go—but then it runs like a wave through the world of men, and men begin to leave their old ways. The peoples now throw themselves into one godless form of life after the other, but everywhere they will at last have to eat the fruit, poisonous and rotten fruit, the destruction and falling apart of life. At last it may happen that even the many understand: all this must be wrong—God has given us his commandments, and they shall be obeyed; God has sent his Son into the world, and he is the eternal life. This can happen. It has happened before.

But if this happens—and in a small way it does happen in every time with some souls—if this happens, then it is important that true Christians be found. Now the text begins to become unpleasant. “By their fruits you shall know them.” He who seeks his way in toward Christ’s congregation, after he has to the point of weariness tasted the world’s bitter fruit, looks for the traces of faith in the Christian’s life. If the tree is good, the fruit must be good. Perhaps there is someone who never reads the Bible, but who in secret watches me to see whether there is any power in the Christian faith. You who go to church are perhaps a hot-tempered and unreasonably selfish man out in the weekday—what conclusions do people draw about the tree when they see such fruit? Our text also holds the ghastly words that ought to reach us into the very marrow: “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and cast into the fire.” We may not bear our evil fruit for as long as we please—one day the axe falls. The way of repentance and amendment stands open, and it can be entered already today. The first steps on that way are always taken in solitude, before God’s face, and it then leads ever deeper into the life of the congregation, into God’s word, forward to the Supper.

We live in a time of which it was already said before 1939 that it “shall bring forth as its only essential fruit the great war.” The ravening wolves are many. And some gentlemen almost pride themselves on their wolf’s face, while others on the contrary never come forward without first putting on the sheep’s clothing. Out of this strife, this struggle for power in itself, nothing good shall come, whoever wins. Let us not direct the gaze outward toward the mighty of the world, but upward toward the God whose will shall be our rule. The good fruit grows forth in silence through the life in God’s nearness. It is true, as it stands in the Epistle of

James: “The fruit of righteousness comes of a sowing in peace, for those who keep peace.”
Amen.

[The pages after the Amen are manuscript. The hand is not secure, and nothing is supplied from it.]