

SERMON

Sermon for the Transfiguration of Christ

Gustaf Wingren

Matthew 17:1–8 · 1943

8 August 1943

Motala workshop

Text: Matthew 17:1–8

Hymns: 212:3; 140:1–3; 210:4; 118:1–3; 378:5

Swedish Hymnal 50:3 is read.

When in our days one takes hold of spiritual things, attention is easily directed to what the human being is to do: how he is to act and work as a Christian, what is required of him, in what way he is to win others, and so on. Sometimes one can come into talk with such a Christian person, who seethes with activity, but who in the middle of all his zeal half and half doubts that Christ is the King of the world. When this happens with those who are our Christian leaders, who are stronger than we, then it is not strange that it happens also with us. Christ easily becomes only a [illegible word] or a pattern, a breath of warmth and love in a barren world — but he has no power as a King over heaven and earth. He is not the Ruler with the scepter, before whom the kings and the dictators stand powerless.

This feebleness in our faith is partly due to the decay of the time, and as marked as this feebleness in faith now is, so marked it has never been before. But in some measure it has always, in all times, been hard to believe that Christ is the Lord of the world. It was not easy to believe it in the apostles' time either. Peter confessed at Caesarea Philippi: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Something enormous. God, the Creator, who held the whole earth in his hand, gave life and breath to everything, the plants and the flowers in the spring, all the beasts of the wilderness and their [illegible word], Lord over the life of the peoples, who led the mighty strife of history — and who toward every single human being has his fearful weapon, death — this God has taken form in him whom Peter has before him: you are that. Of Jesus from Nazareth all the prophets have witnessed. They have stretched toward

the future, longed forward through the centuries, and seen Someone standing there in the time of fulfillment. Now he has come, born in Bethlehem, walking on the roads of Galilee. He, Christ, is the one whom “God has appointed to be judge of both the living and the dead.”

This — Peter’s confession — is told in Matthew 16. “From that time Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, suffer much, be killed, but — rise again.” Here the disciples set themselves to resistance. Was he who was God’s Son to be handled shamefully by uncomprehending people? The disciples’ unwillingness and inability to understand this stood the whole time. They were terrified at Golgotha, and at first they did not believe the Easter message of the resurrection. For it is hard for people to believe that he who is weak and crucified and despised is Lord over those who crucify him and despise him. It is only sometimes, at certain moments, that it works — when one thinks one sees the glory of Christ.

Peter’s confession stands, as was said, in Matthew 16, and after that comes Jesus’ teaching that he shall suffer and die, together with the account of how this teaching was met with resistance in the circle of the apostles (still Matthew 16). Immediately after, in Matthew 17, beginning at the first verse, comes our text: the transfiguration of Christ. Some disciples see Christ in the nearness of God, irradiated by the radiance from God. He is God’s Son. He stands over all on earth. A moment this lasts. Then it is everyday again. Jesus and the disciples go down from the mountain, down into the valley, to heal a sick man, to take up the struggle again on earth in the gray kingdom of strife and toil.

How is it with us? We stand in this gray kingdom, where the good must struggle and where lack of regard and egoism tramp on, tramp on. Christ has come here to earth and his church is among us — but has Christ then no power?

We can be quite calm that Christ has all power in heaven and on earth. He is crucified, but he has the power. The history of human life is no farce. There is an eternal, invisible kingdom after death, and there all must meet Christ as a “King on his throne.” It is a wretchedly short time that Stalin and Mussolini and Hitler rule, but Christ is an eternal King. Stillness and peace stand around him in every generation, not some great noise, but incalculable is he, impossible to conquer and shut out. His holy and strong word can free from the pressure of guilt and sin and give light in the dark of the soul — and in death all fail except him. He holds in the hour of death. The longer we live, the more we surmise that this short life is only a beginning, and that death is the great gate to life, the entrance to the world where Christ reigns and where the great and mighty of this world have this question directed at them:

“Have you loved anyone on earth? Have you served anyone? For the King, Christ, is Servant, and his hands are pierced.”

This is sure: Christ is the only one who really has power when it comes to the end, when “heaven and earth pass away.”

But it is hard for us to believe it in the small events of everyday life. We easily reckon only with earthly power: earthly ruler-power and defense-power, influential people here in our parish, the power of the rich, and so on. Our gaze is directed so wholly on the business of this earthly life that, as it happens, we have lost our faith and mark that we do not really reckon with Christ as a reality, only something “beautiful.” When we then are to try to get Christ along, it easily becomes as we said at the beginning: Christ works in this way, that he influences those who want to belong to him, sets them in motion, so that they accomplish something. And this is true. It must never be taken away from us. But if we only believe this, then we do not believe that Christ is Lord over all, whether they are Christians or not. We do not believe that he is Lord over the whole earth, over death and heaven, and then we get no rest either, no security in our faith.

The Bible has much to say to us. Sometimes it drives us to work among people. Sometimes it drives us weary and sounds the hidden world of our own heart. And for us who attend the service it is so, that every Sunday has its text, its message, which wants to speak to us and teach us one definite thing each time. This day, the day of the transfiguration of Christ, has this message: Christ is the real life, God’s spiritual reality on earth, and he is Lord over all — the dictators are dust and absurdity before him — he reigns forever, and death only brings us nearer him.

Now, when the apostles had it hard to believe this, when they saw the weakness of Christ, his crucifixion, it is not strange that we have it hard to believe this, when we see the weakness of Christ, see how despised he is by people. But sometimes it stands so clear for us that Christ is the great King. Sometimes we, like the three disciples in the text, receive hours of transfiguration.

Almost every Christian person has such times in his life, when it went easily to be a Christian. There was a joy then. One gladly went after God’s will on the ways in the world. It is possible that someone is sitting here now today for whom it is so. But for most who have gathered here, it is surely instead so that they remember such a time in their life, a couple of

years ago — or far off. The person who has had an hour of transfiguration looks back on it and longs backward. The present is gray. It may run as it can. Memory lives on something past. One wants to stay on the mount of transfiguration, like Peter, who wanted to build booths up there.

But remember: not even the apostles were allowed to stay. The transfiguration is told of once. Then follow struggle and strife in the grayness. There was something they were to learn through the transfiguration. The voice from above cried: “This one — Christ — is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear him.” Hear him then under the suffering and the work. Listen to his word, even when you no longer see his glory but think that everything is poor.

Your glad Christian time, your time of transfiguration, had the task of impressing the glory of Christ on your memory, and if it is now poor and meager in your soul, you have it only as the apostles had it on the wandering toward Golgotha. The voice from the mount of transfiguration says nevertheless always the same: “Hear him.” Go to his word in the middle of the most meager everyday evening. Hear what he says, for he alone has life to give. He is Lord over all, though he is wrapped in the mantle of lowliness. And the word from his mouth is not far off. It is there in the Scripture, which we all possess. “Hear him.”

If we then listen to the word of Christ, we soon mark that there are only two things he says, steadily and continually. First: believe in God’s forgiveness. A burden is lifted off. Second: love your fellow human being. A power becomes free.

Do not fear the evil you have done. In the love of Christ you have certainty that nothing can hinder you from becoming a child of God, not the darkest sin you have done. Look calmly forward. That is the one thing he says. Hear him now.

Concern yourself a little with the person who walks at your side in the world. Ask after the welfare of others, and be willing to give up or give something in order to benefit another person. Love your neighbor. Be good to him. That is the other thing he says. Hear him now. Amen.

Translator’s notes. He gave this sermon no title. Stalin, Mussolini, and Hitler are named as he named them in August 1943, and are left named. The word after “a” in the opening, and the word after “beasts of the wilderness” is uncertain in the typescript and is given as “left blank.” The Christian person stays he. The neighbor at the end stays he.

