

SERMON

Sermon for the Day of Christ's Transfiguration

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Matthew 17:1–8 · 1940

7 July 1940

Gamleby Church

Text: Matthew 17:1–8

Hymns: 424:4–5; 140:1–3; 212:2–3; 50:1–5; 199:1–3

In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Let us pray.

O Jesus Christ, our brother dear,

who for our sake was crucified,

with your wounds you heal well

a wounded and afflicted soul.

Grant that with you in this hour

we rightly renew our covenant.

Your grace is rich, your power is great:

Amen, blessed is the one who believes it. Amen.

(Swedish Hymnal 190:9–10)

We cannot now picture for ourselves the thoughts and ideas that lived in the minds of the twelve apostles at the beginning of their wanderings with the Master through the villages and towns of Galilee. The four Gospels were written by men who had already seen him crucified and risen, and who held in their hearts the certainty that he was the Messiah and the Son of God. It had not always been so. We see from the story of the walk to Emmaus that this

conviction wavered back and forth. We see from John the Baptist's question, "Are you the one who is to come...?" that doubt and faith struggled with each other even in those who stood near the Lord. So what happened in the region of the city of Caesarea Philippi, up there at the foot of Mount Hermon, must have had a thoroughgoing and shaking significance in the little circle of disciples. There Simon Peter put the faith of the Twelve into words for the first time. "But who do you say that I am?" "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." We can tell that this was something new and unheard of from the Savior's answer: "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven." The reward of the confession is the change of name: Simon becomes Peter, the man of rock.

Why did this faith have to waver and totter and be threatened with destruction? Now, after all, it had been solemnly spoken and confirmed by the Lord himself. Why did it not hold when Good Friday had come to an end? Why did doubt live on even when the witnesses of the resurrection came with their message to the band of disciples behind locked doors?

Because Jesus of Nazareth was not what people generally expected the Messiah to be. Even the Twelve lived in the people's usual ideas about the coming Savior. They imagined that he would bring victory in an outward sense, strike down the Lord's enemies, and crush the resistance to the congregation of the faithful. But their Master wanted to break down this whole current faith in the Messiah, bring it to nothing, and replace it with another view of the things of the spirit. That is why we see him, immediately after Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi, set about teaching his twelve disciples in earnest. Now they knew that he was the Promised One, the one whose coming generation after generation had looked for. Now they had confessed him together, through Simon Peter, as "the Son of the living God." "From that time," it says right after the passage about Peter's confession, "from that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things... and be killed, and on the third day be raised." He began to show them... The same thing, the same words about suffering and death, he had to repeat time after time. This teaching comes three times in the Gospel, in the time between the day at Caesarea Philippi and the onset of the week of calamity in Jerusalem. Wasted. It was like sowing on rocky ground. The very first time he foretold his suffering, Peter began eagerly to contradict him: "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." And the resistance to his patient teaching went on. Even on the walk to Emmaus the same contrast comes into view between Jesus' teaching and the disciples' stubborn clinging to good fortune and victory. The two disciples on the road grieve

that their Lord had been handed over to death and crucified — “and we,” they add, “we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.” But the stranger on the road, who is none other than their risen Savior, takes up the task of teaching again, though it looks hopeless. “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe... Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And so he began to go through Moses and all the prophets... he interpreted to them... he taught them, as one teaches children.

Now the background of today’s text is clear.

The sixteenth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel tells of Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi. Jesus, who stands in their midst, who eats and drinks with them, who bears the form of a servant — he is “the Son of the living God.” Now his teaching begins. “You expect victory,” he says, “not defeat. You expect good fortune and prosperity, not suffering and death. But I — I who am God’s Son, I who bring God’s life to the children of the earth — will fall into the power of evildoers, be shamefully treated, and be killed. Then, after all this, I will rise and live forever.” Then little man comes into the picture, and he does so in the form of Peter, the very one who had just confessed. “This must not happen! The one God deals with cannot go into such a defeat. All people are to listen to him and bow before him.” “This shall never happen to you.” So man thinks in every age. These are human thoughts. But they are not God’s thoughts. The answer Peter receives is this: “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me.” The Father’s work is to be completed through suffering and apparent defeat. “Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will find it.”

So ends the sixteenth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel. And the seventeenth begins: “And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John... and led them up a high mountain.” That is today’s text, the Gospel just read from the altar. It tells how the three disciples are allowed to see their Lord and Master surrounded by the radiance of the Father. They see him together with the godly men of the Old Testament: Moses, the mediator [?] of the law, and Elijah, the forerunner of the Messiah. They see, then, this: he, Jesus of Nazareth, is the Chosen One. In this way the Master wanted to tell his own: “What I have just told you is true. I will suffer and be crucified. But I am still the image of the Holy One and the Lord of the world. Hold fast to your faith in me, whatever happens. Do not doubt, but believe.” And when the hour of transfiguration is over, they see nothing of all this glory — “no one but Jesus only,” clothed in lowliness as before. The way leads down into the valley again, where an unhappy father is waiting for them with his sick son. It leads down into everyday life, down into the struggle

against Satan and his followers, down into the conflict that was to end with the cross of Golgotha.

What does this text have to say to us now? If our hearts were open in the right way, it would have a great deal to say to us.

Like the first twelve disciples, we have made our confession to Christ as the Son of the living God. We have stood before him and seen his power over peoples and centuries. We have seen our own people as his people, with his sign on its banner. We look out over the world, and we like to view all the changes of history from this angle: does this help Christ's cause, or does it harm Christ's cause? Does it advance his victory in the world, or does it delay his victory in the world? We look out watchfully over ravaged Europe, waiting for the success of Christ's church.

When we do this, there is a danger that we are in fact living on in the twelve disciples' false faith in the Messiah. Our Lord and Savior must teach us, just as he taught the Twelve. We need to let our ears be opened to his word, so that we really hear what he says. "Listen to him," ran the cry from heaven on the holy mountain. And if we then listen, it is the same teaching about suffering and the cross now, today, as once at the foot of Hermon. He wants to snatch us out of our human thoughts. He shows us the way of crucifixion as God's own way in the world. The persecuted and suffering churches, the trampled gospel in our world today — all this is Christ himself, condemned again to death and annihilation. It is not self-evident, as we think, that the work which is God's must move toward honor and glory. In spite of its being God's work, it must, as true goodness, be veiled in every age in disgrace and lowliness, and endure its walk to Golgotha, so that through the destruction seen by the eyes it may live forever as a hidden glory that no eye sees. The victory and the radiance around Christ are no lasting victory and no abiding radiance until this age has come to an end, when "new heavens and a new earth" have been created. This life, this world, is what it is. The day never dawns in the earth's life when the cross is not raised somewhere on the surface of our planet, when what is good and pure is not somewhere oppressed and trampled into the dust. There are times when we do not seem to see such things close to us. And the longer such times last, the more thoroughly we learn to shut our eyes to wickedness, and the more foreign to the message of the cross we become. Then, when wickedness moves close to us again — in the form of war, perhaps — the awakening is all the harder, and doubt of God's reality and almighty power and

love is all the greater. Only the faith that reflects in earnest on what the cross means truly grasps the God who lives in Christ, who still today is the trampled King of mercy:

For your people you suffer;

by the cross we stand

Through all the ages

so shall you hang

Hopeless and wretched

your ordeal goes on.

The earth is forever

a place of the skull.

This is a hard saying. We rise up against it, as Peter did the first time Christ spoke of his suffering. “This shall never happen to you, Lord!” We demand at least to be shown some features in the face of the world that testify to Christ’s final victory, some signs of our church’s bright future. Did the disciples get any signs that the defeat of Good Friday would pass? They got the Master’s word, and that was all: “I will suffer and die, but on the third day I will rise again.” And they got the hour of transfiguration on the holy mountain, the momentary vision of their Lord and Master as Lord of the world and King of the ages, which our text tells of. So it surely happens still. With an inconceivable clarity, the picture of Christ’s figure can sometimes rise above the fog of the times and the farce of politics. The picture of the one who bore all the world’s sorrow, but always had his eyes on the lost and not on the proud, is sensed by the praying heart above the world our newspapers report on. And it can suddenly stand alive before the eye of faith that all history will, after all, at last flow out into the last day, when the one who has been hidden for thousands of years will at last sit down on “the throne of his glory.”

But our text speaks still more strongly to us about our individual life of faith. You and I, each for himself, have put ourselves under Christ as our Lord and King. We have probably all made the confession to Christ as the Son of the living God in some form. We turn our eyes inward on our own hearts, searching and anxious, and we look for signs of the new life in us. If we really stand in covenant with the living God, it must show — in victory and power and

spiritual success before people's eyes. We scrutinize our own lives, on the watch for features of Christ's glory, signs of his power and his kingly rule over the soul and its drives. Are we not once again victims of the twelve disciples' false faith in the Messiah as a prince of good fortune? Our Lord and Savior teaches us again, and once more we can take part, word for word, in what he said to Peter after the confession at the foot of the mountain of transfiguration. It is not only his own cross he teaches about. The disciple too must go the way of the cross. "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." "For whoever would save his life will lose it..." Are we, in the midst of our piety, so entirely free of the wish to save our life?

On the contrary, is not the greater part of people's religious life a last desperate effort to save one's life — to rescue the tarnished self and bring it through to a reasonably decent self-respect after many failures in this world? Whoever seeks in this way has no promise from the Savior. He demands that we really give ourselves up — so far that we "lose our life," so far that nothing is left that I want to keep. No righteousness that is mine. No piety I can boast of and trust in. No glorious religious feelings in the soul that I can enjoy, and from whose passage through my heart I can tell that I am at any rate a "believer," as people say. As long as I go on patching with all this, I am constantly busy "saving my life." Christ tells me to throw all of it overboard and "take up my cross." The cross is the simple duty of everyday life toward the neighbor God has put in my path. The cross is obedience and faith — faith in a righteousness that is not mine but God's, faith in a life that is outside me, in the word about Christ.

This is a hard saying. We rise up against it. We demand to see clearer signs that Christ is the Lord of our hearts. We want, on the whole, to see — not only to go on believing, always and forever. We want to feel something inside, in the soul, to experience it and live it — we must have something more than naked faith if we are to endure. And from time to time we get what we want. We are allowed to leave this valley of toil and go up the mountain of transfiguration. It can come over us suddenly and unprepared, that we are allowed to see Christ's glory even in our own lives. The Lord lifts the veil that usually lies over his work with us, and lets us see how our poor life, which otherwise lacks all glory, has a glory all the same, one that will be revealed one day.

It may be plain, meager duty that the light of transfiguration falls on. You have work on earth that you are to finish, as conscience and plain duty tell you. When you go about in your poor everyday life, it is not easy to believe that your occupation has anything to do with Christ. It

looks purely human and purely worldly. But every such everyday work that serves the whole, every meager fulfillment of duty, is Christ himself — living, but hidden, wrapped in the cloak of lowliness, just as he was in his earthly life. To catch glimpses, with the eye of faith, of his figure, the figure of the great Servant, in all quiet, humble striving and in all simple, earthly servant's work — that is to be on the Mount of Transfiguration.

It may also be the word, the service or the sacrament, that is surrounded by the radiance of transfiguration. What is more hidden away than a baptism in a remote cottage, or a thinly attended Communion in a church in central Sweden? And the quiet word itself, which meets us from the page of Scripture and sounds in our services while our thoughts wander off around the world events out in Europe! To our understanding it is inconceivable that this cast-off word is what will endure on the day “when heaven and earth pass away.” But sometimes the veil that hides the work of the Unfathomable One is lifted, and faith sees in all this outward lowliness the Risen One himself — who lets himself be rejected and crucified and despised again, but who is King forever all the same. To sense the breath of his Spirit, perhaps during the altar service at an ordinary Swedish High Mass that lacks all adornment — that is to be on the Mount of Transfiguration.

Like Peter, we would surely like to stay on the mountain when such a thing is given to us. But everyday life is waiting. The way leads downward again, down into the valley of toil and labor. It may happen that we complain about this. But it may also happen that little by little we come to sense the deep meaning in this: that he himself does not stay on the Mount of Transfiguration, but goes with us down the slope, down into the valley — goes there without radiance, as one of us, stripped of all his glory.

*He will shed tears as we do,
understand our need, and stand by us
with the power of his Spirit. Amen.*

(Swedish Hymnal 55:3)

Translator's notes. The typescript underlines very heavily, sometimes twice, for stress. As in our other translations the underlining is not reproduced, and the stress is left to the wording. “Medlare(?)” in the typescript is kept as “the mediator [?] of the law.” “Huvudskalleplats,” the Swedish for Golgotha, is

rendered “a place of the skull.” “Plåstra” (to patch, apply plasters) is rendered “patching.” The hymn stanzas, including the unnumbered one on the cross, are translated for sense, not as metrical verse.

Gustaf Wingren · draft translation ·