

Sermon for the Day of Penitence

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Matthew 5:20 · 1980

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Text: Matthew 5:20

This is a word to the disciples of Jesus, that is, to us, we who are now holding the service. But when we now hear the word, we are in a wholly other situation from the one the disciples were in then. For they stood at a distance and looked at another, very fine group in the people, “the scribes and the Pharisees.” If we today were to try to point out people who are “scribes” — who, that is, “know” the Bible — or who have “separated themselves” from the coarse people, turned away from God — “Pharisee” means “the separated” — then we must say to ourselves: “That is we, that, we in the churches.” We read the Bible. We hold to strict norms, norms that draw boundaries between people.

And on that point it is exactly the same in the Church of Sweden as in the free churches. The bishops’ meeting answers “public-moral” questions and thereby separates itself from the slacker rules of the general public. And the free churches arose once, quite recently, only about a hundred years ago, on this very ground: that they wanted to gather “the personally believing,” those who took the word of God seriously and who thereby separated themselves out of the gray mass.

We ought in righteousness to surpass Pharisees and scribes. But in the present we have no Pharisees and scribes round about us. If there are any, then it is we, we ourselves. The others are not “learned in the Scripture.” The others do not separate themselves. On the contrary, they only go with the stream. How are we to manage with a text like this, on the Day of Penitence 1980?

Let us begin with one word in the text, one single word, the chief word: “exceed,” “surpass.” It says: “If your righteousness does not exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees” — then you are

in a bad way. This “exceed” is in Greek *perisseuein*, and it means to overflow, to run over. When one is to give someone a ration of food and drink, and holds the plate out to him, and then it runs over all the edges, he gets more than he is to have — then the righteousness “overflows.” So Jesus meant that one should live. That is why the Pharisees do not think Jesus is stricter than they themselves are. That is what one thought of John the Baptist, out in the wilderness, he who lived on grasshoppers and wild honey. No, one thinks Jesus behaves badly: “he eats with tax collectors and sinners.” He is immoral. He is not strict enough.

Otherwise one could imagine that if there is already a moral group, Pharisees and scribes, and there comes in addition another group whose “righteousness exceeds” the first group’s morality, then group number two is still more stone-hard in the face, still more implacable in its scrutiny of other people’s way of life, still more unwilling to give forgiveness. But it is not so here. When the disciples of Jesus “overflow,” their “morality” is different. It is such that it appears as a sort of immorality.

In the work of Jesus his “immorality” comes out especially at one point, namely in relation to the Sabbath commandment. It is as a rule so, in every cultural age, that the conflicts are sharpened to one point. “Now we shall see,” say the enemies of Jesus, “whether he means to heal someone on the Sabbath. Then we have him fast. Then he does not hallow the Sabbath. Then he breaks the law of Moses.” And Jesus heals. Where he goes forward, the lame rise up, the blind see, songs of praise rise. In plain words he says: “The Sabbath was made for the sake of man. Man was not made for the sake of the Sabbath. Therefore the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27–28). That is how it goes when righteousness “overflows.” It bursts the fences the law sets. It bestows freedom. And life flowers. As it says in an old song: “Life, life, life, life — here is life this moment for you.”

There we are. Now we are there again. Exactly where we began. Think. Who is it in the Sweden of today who thinks of the day of rest and wants to make it a Sabbath, rest, a service? It is we. It is the church bodies that fight for the holiness of Sunday. It is, besides, a live question just now. However we turn, we come, again and again, back to this: that we — as churches — stand in danger, point after point, of getting the role in our people which “the scribes and the Pharisees” had in the people of Israel. How then is our righteousness to be able to “exceed” the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees? This is what Jesus requires of us in today’s text. It begins to be plain that our text is a text for a Day of Penitence. “Penitence” means to “think otherwise,” to turn — to think otherwise wholly and entirely, *metanoiein*.

One point to begin at we have already seen: round about Jesus and his disciples something shoots up, namely life and freedom. What it is round about the Christian congregation that chokes freedom and gives death to people, that is not in the Bible. In the time of the New Testament it was Jewish statutes and rules, but in other times it is other choking powers that have brought death: slavery, drinking, superstition, one thing after another. And health and healing have gone out from the preaching of the gospel and from the praise of the service. People have risen up out of bondage into freedom.

What is happening now here in our land? Is it not strange that these life-alien settings are allowed to grow, that the sparsely settled country is to be emptied, that lifeless housing areas are to grow up without fellowship, that some people's incomes are to rise, while immigrants from foreign lands come in and become our servants in the lowest of all jobs — they sweep and wash up and clean for us, and they look up at us, at us who are Christian, fine, rich, and dumb, with an atmosphere of distance and disdain, which can be tasted in the air around our movements, our climbing movements to higher and higher positions, with higher and higher incomes, villas, fences, models of cars. And in the midst of this unbroken course of events, which marks our streets and workplaces and means of travel, in the middle of the middle of this: high, fine church buildings, into which we stream as we have done today, buildings where the word sounds: "Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has not a place where he can lay his head." Or: "You know that those who are reckoned the rulers of the peoples act toward them as lords, and that their mighty make their authority felt. But it is not so among you. Whoever would become greatest among you, let him be the servant of the others, and whoever would be first among you, let him be the slave of all."

And — as the uttermost sign of this new form of life, his form of life: "In the night when he was betrayed, he broke the bread... Eat, drink. Here you have me myself, my broken body, my blood poured out for the world. I am given out. It falls to you to give out. Look at the streets and the squares, the lifeless faces, the absence of smiles. What is it that is lacking? It is life and freedom that is lacking."

Penitence is to think otherwise. When we "do penitence" — this is what we are to do today — it is important not to find, too quickly, some "measures." Then everything can drown in an unthought practical activity that fills days and hours, and that makes it so that one in fact does not "think otherwise" at all. If we today get no further than this, that we in our imagination — in our "heart" — are bound to the picture of Jesus in Sweden, then we have come far. If this

picture, a broken, sacrificed servant-life, bestowed on us in the service, in the middle of this Swedish society, where the whole movement goes in the opposite direction, where all climb and secure themselves — if this picture of two wholly opposite directions of movement is stamped into us this day, so that the picture sits there and we do not get loose, then the first and decisive thing in our penitence has taken place.

And then it can happen that one day we see a practical way for the churches in Sweden, so that they can become what they are appointed to become: bearers who overflow and give away. Then there happens what is promised in the seventy-second psalm of the Psalter, that “the people in the cities flower like the plants of the field.”

Let us give thanks and pray.

God, nothing happens. My heart is dry and my life has stiffened. The people I meet are far from me. I do not reach them. And I know that they — as I — thirst for living water. You have promised: “Whoever believes in me, out of his inmost part streams of living water shall flow.” I believe. Help my unbelief. Lord, give us all of that water. Amen.

Translator's notes. “Övergå” is kept as exceed and as overflow, because he stops on the Greek perisseuein. “Bot” is penitence as thinking otherwise, metanoein, not a mood of sorrow. The person of Jesus, and the one who would be great, stay he. The social paragraph is translated as he spoke it in 1980, not softened and not extended. “Ingenting händer” in the prayer is read as “nothing happens,” not “nothing binds.”

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