

Sermon for the Annunciation

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1 Corinthians 15:55–57 · 1980

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The crypt of the Cathedral (the student pastors, HHN)

Text: 1 Corinthians 15:55–57

In a little while the polling places close. The ballot papers, put in by people who have openly accused one another of death-bringing deeds, are to be counted. We are gathered for a service in a short pause of waiting. Then the hard work of leading the country back into the ordinary everyday must begin.

This has not been an election campaign like those of other years. Then it was almost always, more or less, a matter of distribution, just distribution. The groups competed for advantages, and they wanted the advantages, the rises in the standard of living, justly spread. If a certain group did not succeed in the election, if the opposing side won, then an injustice would be done — but not murder. These last weeks, on the contrary, we have spoken of deadly threats to our existence, of dangers that put our bodily life at stake. Fear of death has been the very knot in the public struggle that has now raged for several weeks in our mass media.

That is the picture our society presents this spring. Not wholly without counterparts to this are the individual forms of life that turn up on our streets and roads, forms of life that disclose what the single person, privately, hopes and fears. Formerly, when one saw a young person running, it usually proved to be someone training in order to compete, in order to win points or a prize and, that is, in the contest, to “take something” from a possible competitor. Those who now run out over the fields have a goal: their own health, bodily and spiritual soundness, as long as possible, the rescue of their own I from death.

Yes, as long as possible. There is a limit. We know that. And at that limit, where the powers of death have already got the upper hand and where health can no longer be restored, at that

limit there are more and more who cry: "Help us to die!" A weak and flickering life is nothing to have. If I am to live, then I am to live with unbroken soundness in limbs and veins.

All these different features in the present point the same way. There is a sting in death, a sharp point directed in against our heart. We are very far from the smiling cheerfulness in the New Testament: "Death, where is your sting now?" Where is the sharp point you wanted to stick into us? It is broken off by him who in freedom took death upon himself and who now lives — and is our Lord.

We are far, yes. But we would wish that we were near, that we possessed this faith, this confidence, which — when it dwells in the heart — runs through the whole of existence and colors everything. Every difficulty "tastes" a little different when one believes. Every meeting with a hindrance becomes easier. The hindrance has no "sting." The hindrance's possibility of wounding me, at the depth, is gone. And therefore there are quantities of people who wish they had faith, that "Easter" could say something to them. But Easter says nothing. It lies far off and seems only strange, without real meaning, for a "modern" thinking person.

So the case stands today, for many single persons, perhaps for many who are sitting here tonight, and even for many who regularly, Sunday after Sunday, go to the service. For we live in a church where people do not speak honestly with one another about their doubt. About state and church one can speak, and about women priests one can speak, but about the heart's doubt at the inmost point of the gospel one cannot speak. And so one sings along in the hymns and behaves as if one believed. This outer shell makes the heart, in there in the hidden place, still more trembling and anxious. An atheist can fear death, he too. But because he has less unbelief to hide, he is sometimes more secure than a Christian. This painful thing, having to hide doubt and at the same time drag one's doubt along, inwardly, is heavier than pure unbelief.

Now Easter is drawing near, and we anticipate it tonight. Let us be a little prepared for what it has to say, when it comes.

Easter is not only Easter Day, the wonder of the resurrection. It is "the Easter of the cross," the shameful death of a pure and innocent man. And this death is described and painted for us as something good, as victory. If we were to learn that a grave had been broken open two thousand years ago, that the dead man had gone out and that he exists still today, this would not be anything joyful, unless what this Living One does today were life-giving and raising up

and healing and curing. Tyrants have lived and tormented people, and it would fill us with terror if we today were to hear that these tormentors are not properly dead, but live still — and can do something, now.

What is joyful in Easter is not that the laws of nature are broken. What is joyful is that the act which Jesus unceasingly performed — the raising and healing act — continues. He lives. He is near us, in all our need.

But now it is so with the act of Jesus, the act he performed on earth and of which the four gospels tell. It is so, that that act was not joyful for all. Otherwise he would not have been executed. His act broke down something that was in many people and that they did not want to lose, not for any price in the world. There were others who received his word and his act as something joyful. Euangelion. When Jesus stood there among the people, a conflict opened. Something in the human heart was broken down, and was to be broken down, and something else, something trampled and pressed down, was raised up, received power and courage to live. That conflict strikes us, now, when Easter is soon coming here, to us.

What is it, then, in us that is broken down, and what is it that receives courage? It is hard to know in which corner one should begin when one answers that question. I personally believe that Christ is risen. But when I am now to try to explain what this means, personally, I find it most right to begin in a very everyday thread within the skein that faith is.

I hear someone speak of me, very unfavorably, of me. This speech is untrue. In and for itself I could disprove this speech, with clear and good proofs. But I cannot do this without harming a third person, revealing things that ought to be left unsaid. The choice stands between two possibilities: either look after my own good name and harm a person, or, keeping silent, let the speech that is unfavorable to me pass me by, do nothing. Every person who has once chosen way number two knows that after that choice an unexpected power wells up inside the heart, a power that is mysterious, inexplicable. I have not won anything. The opposite. What sort of stream of power is it that I have now been given a share in?

It looks as if this lies far from the resurrection of Christ. But that is wrong. It lies very near. There is a “life” which one snatches to oneself and wants to have, but which is death. And there is a death which goes over one, and which normally ought to harm, but which is life, a little bit of the resurrection life.

Part II

The example I just took was very everyday and lacked all drama. A person lets evil speech pass him by and does not clear himself, because he cannot do this without throwing dirt on a third. After some time this is forgotten. It is no great event. But there is an element in the event that matters, and that — in other situations — can be enlarged, grow, and become enormous in its weight. It is the element of sin. In the example I took there was hinted, dimly, one thing and another that was not as it should be. That is why it was hard to choose between keeping silent and speaking. If one revealed the truth, one harmed someone. In other situations there can be horrible sins in which people nearest to us are drawn in. There are parents who have had to bear burdens for their children — and the opposite: children have in all times had to bear lifelong sufferings for what the parents once did. The mystery of “representation” runs through the whole of human life and fills existence with blood and tears.

It is impossible to understand the fate of Jesus on earth unless representation comes in, this mystery: that death and loss can be laid on an innocent one. If he takes it upon himself, life can stream out of this silent thing, that he bore. And now I shall read an “Easter hymn” in which this mystery, representation, is present. It is no ordinary Easter hymn. When we listen to hymns we know we are to be devout — and it hardly works, in our time, to be devout without mixing in a little insincerity, that insincerity which veils the doubt, so that in the end one does not quite know whether one believes or only pretends that one believes.

No, this is a song about a night feast in a sparsely furnished attic apartment. Dan Andersson’s “The Feast in the Attic.” It is an excellent Easter hymn, because the stars and the whole of space are in it. Our notion of what is decisive for “salvation” and rescue has gone along in that respect also, so that we reason something like this: if a “salvation” for all living things is to be thinkable, if God were to deal with the universe, why should he then act on the earth, this little spot in space? We have come so far from the point of the gospel that we cannot hold fast the low, the little, the weak, as the right place for salvation — if we are to be able to be rescued at all out of our folly. In the song about “The Feast in the Attic,” the earth is a low point, which is the place of the wonder, and of which angels on the stars sing a song. The carpenter Jonatan Jonsson, who died last year, comes back in the night to a feast with his comrade, and toward morning he gets the question out: “How is it with heaven? May only the purest saints live on the blessed isles? And are there no heavens for those who are weak in faith?” He answers:

*I heard a song on a star once,
which I still remember a little.*

*It was the song of the pain of the sin of the worlds,
and of the Lord of heaven.*

*But a singer of the stars told me
that that was an earthly song,
which an angel learned for practice
when he once fetched a soul.*

*And the very highest song,
they sang that afterward,
and though I did not understand a word,
I burst into an unrestrained weeping.*

*It was outside all hearts
and a star-track before all sense.*

*It was what no ear has heard
and no eye has seen.*

This Easter hymn of Dan Andersson does not shy away from the wonder. For “the song afterward,” which is “the highest song,” deals with a bodily wonder, after the “pain” on Golgotha, “a star-track without all sense” — not beyond all sense, but before it. And that wonder is the incomprehensible course of events on Easter morning: “though I did not understand a word, I burst into an unrestrained weeping...”

If in small connections one has been in on this, that death and harm, suffered for others, become life and blessing at the depth, then one begins to believe, simply to believe by inference, that “Easter” is something possible. If there were found one who was totally pure, and if he got all hell upon himself and went in under it and took it, for the world, then death would not be able to hold him. An explosion of life, a fountain springs up — and a fountain that is still playing, in cascades. We are soon to receive health and power from this well of life, now tonight, in the Supper.

Not for a long time has the question of life and death, health and sickness, so marked the climate of our public conversation as is the case today. This is something that can point two wholly different ways. Those who are possessed with being healthy are easily driven to disdain the weak and the frail. But those who want the victory of health and of life can also be driven to set their vitality and strength in the service of the life that is threatened with destruction. To take part in the Supper means that one tests oneself, that one, examining oneself, searches out what it is, inside one's own I, that needs to be broken down, so that the life-building, the serving, shall gain in strength. In no other way than so — in an inward reckoning — can one meet the Risen One.

Therefore the Supper is joined with the confession of sin. So long as we thoughtlessly want to secure ourselves, without regard for others, so long we have an accusation against us, a “judgment of the law” against us, which makes all gains, at the depth, feel and taste like losses, joylessness.

In the text-word from the epistle for Easter Day, which we have circled about tonight and which at last leads us into confession of sin and eucharist, the Supper, it says thus: “Death, where is your victory? Death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin comes from the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord, Jesus Christ.” Amen.

Translator's notes. He gave this sermon no title. The heading is the day only, so none is added. “Korsets påska(??)” keeps his question marks: “the Easter of the cross.” The Dan Andersson stanzas are for sense, not as a metrical song. “Stellföretredande” is representation, the one who stands in another's place. The person who keeps silent, and Christ, stay he. The polling places are his words. The date is the day of the 1980 referendum, but that name is not in the sermon and is not put into it.

Gustaf Wingren · draft translation ·