

SERMON

Sermon on the First Day of Prayer (Second in Lent)

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Jeremiah 14:19b–21 · Gamleby · 18 February 1940

Sermon for the First Day of Prayer (the Second in Lent), 18 February 1940, in Gamleby Church.

Text: Jeremiah 14:19b–21.

Hymns: 158:1, 154:3–8, 426:3, 158:6–9, 96:2–4.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Let us pray.

Thee, Holy Spirit, we pray,

that with thy strength thou stand by us

in times of trial

and hard battles,

most of all in the last,

when it draws toward the end.

O God, have mercy. Amen.

The text is read.

Blessed are they who hear the word of God and keep it.

One feels a sense of oppression when one hears this prayer of the prophet Jeremiah, which we have now read, if one lets the thought go on forward in time and considers how it really went with the people for whom the prophet prayed. Jeremiah himself saw his countrymen carried away as captives to Babylon. That captivity came to an end, but only for short times in the centuries that followed did the people live the life of a free people. The dominion of Babylon

was succeeded by new campaigns of conquest from new great powers: Greece, Syria, Rome. At last Jerusalem was leveled with the ground, and the Jews became the scattered, wandering, homeless people that they still are today.

And now this prayer has been set before us as the preaching text on our people's day of repentance in the year of horrors: 1940. Shall the prayer for the people of Sweden, which many nevertheless now bear before the throne of God, be just as little able to move the Holy God as the prophet's prayer was able to do it, when he prayed for his people? His people was the peculiar people, the people chosen by God. We are a people among many others, a people that cannot appeal to particular promises of being allowed to remain on the earth. Perhaps someone still regards it as self-evident that the people of Sweden shall for all time to come be allowed to enjoy a place in the sun. It is with peoples as with individual human beings: if life has rolled long enough in the accustomed tracks, if year has been added to year without sickness, distress, or danger having shaken the foundation of a human being's life, then it soon enough becomes impossible for that human being to understand that distress can befall him at all. Our long peace as a people has set us Swedes in a like position. Even the one who in his private life is familiar with the thought that misfortune can reach him as an individual human being, even he often finds it very hard to believe in earnest that misfortune can reach us all as a people. The first thing the day of repentance calls us to make clear to ourselves is surely this: the danger hangs over us, and God remains God, even if that danger becomes more than merely a danger. That God is love does not prevent him from being able to send suffering and death upon his children: he has shown that when he drove an enemy host upon his peculiar people — but above all he showed it when he sent his Son into the death of the cross. God remains God, whatever happens. God remains love, whatever happens.

And it is not only so, that God remains love. Through the outward distress of which we now speak, through the suffering over Israel and through the suffering over the Son, God carried out a new work of mercy for his whole created world. It was in that distress that the gospel came into being, was set in as a force unknown before. In the outward suffering God let spiritual gifts, spiritual riches, come into being, a spiritual riches that could not have come about in any other way. The gospel of mercy cannot be thought of without the cross of Golgotha.

Therefore: God and his work never hover in danger, not even now in this dark time. God carries his work through, whatever comes. But we hover in danger. For it is so: when God

carries out his work, his will enters into the world of men and seeks after instruments that he can use. He looks for human beings who will obey and serve. He seeks faith on the earth. And where he does not find this faith and obedience, there he thrusts the human beings aside as chaff and does his work in spite of us, without us — does his work with instruments over which we are astonished, instruments which we thought were good for nothing. We hover in danger, because it may happen that we stand to the side of God's way, where he goes forward in the world. And it is dreadful to stand to the side in this way: it is something far more than the mere loss of a chance to "be allowed to be in it" — to speak in a human manner. He who stands to the side of God's work, he stands in fact not only to the side, but he stands in the way of God. The Savior says: "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters." There is no one who is "neutral" toward God.

So the question of the day of repentance comes to a point and becomes a question to me alone and to you alone, not a question about the whole people as a whole — at least not in the first place. Where do I find myself? Have I bowed myself to God's will now, or do I stand against God?

In that question, which I bear within me, there lies enclosed that I know what God wills. The weight of this cannot be stressed enough. We have had all sorts of spiritual medicines prescribed for us during the last years. It almost looks as if the most important thing were constantly to hit upon a new medicine and try it. And it has surely already gone so far with us that we no longer need to know that a way is God's way in order that we should begin to walk on it — on trial. So we do with the medicines of the body — we make an attempt. All physicians are human beings, and no perfect one exists. This attitude, which is right enough when it concerns human beings and their counsel for the cure of our ailments — this attitude has a devastating effect when it presses into our spiritual life and is allowed to govern it. It drives us hither and thither; it makes us snatch at all novelties and devices under the sun. "Let each one be fully assured in his own mind," says the apostle. We must — in spite of all outward unrest, in spite of the time being short and pressing — we must yet first stop and become still in our hearts and our thoughts. We must first say to ourselves: let us be fully assured in our mind; let us not take unnecessary time in use in order, on trial, to go the one way first, and the other then, and the third then. The worst danger that threatens our faith in this time is that we fritter ourselves away, and lose the earnestness and the uncompromising character of our striving. The religious experiment is a corpse in the cargo, which we drag with us from the time that lies nearest behind us. "We waited for peace," as it stands in our

text. “We waited for the time when we should be healed.” We hoped to be spared the outbreak of hatred between peoples. We expected to be allowed to carry on our spiritual cures without outward disturbances. “But no good comes,” the text continues. “But behold, terror comes.” The cloud has discharged itself over our heads. The dreadful thing is already under way. Is it not possible that we, first of all, shall cease to look at different human beings and their “movements” and “directions”? From that there always follows this uncertainty, this hesitation, this devastating attitude of making everything into an attempt, an experiment. Here it is after all a question of God, the Holy and Almighty. It is his will that is at stake. And of his will the word of the prophet Micah holds: “What is good he has made known to you, O man. For what else does the Lord require of you than that you do what is right, and that you apply yourself to love, and walk in humility before your God.” We truly do not need to listen long to such a word before it begins to speak to us. “He requires that you do what is right.” Are right and righteousness in every respect the measure of your actions? Is truth unrestricted lord in your life? Do you not hide from the eyes of men something that is unpleasant for you? Or the commandment of love! That commandment means that you also take account of the one who does not take account of you. It means that you willingly refrain from something by which you yourself gain, while another loses reputation, riches, or joy. It means that you stop in your thought and change places with your neighbor, see everything from the other’s point of view, not from your own. Or the demand for humility! Who can step forward and say that he is humble? In the same moment he would show that he was not. To be humble is to think lowly of oneself in truth, not to need to strain oneself for that matter. He who is humble does not himself mean that he is humble; he only considers that he thinks of himself as he finds to agree with reality. He truly sees nothing remarkable in himself. He is “poor in spirit.”

God’s will is in one way uncommonly simple, namely simple to understand. We do not need to become wise and clever in order to see it; we need rather to become children in order to see it. But God’s will is dreadfully hard in another way, namely hard to do. We can never come so far that God’s will does not constantly remain outside us: do right, be true, love your neighbor, hold to that which is lowly! And it always points so strangely stubbornly at my limited world. In the midst of the dark time for our whole people in which we now live, in the midst of such a time, God’s word still drives me into distress of conscience for my life in my little world — if I set myself before it in earnest. God does not let me flee outward. He does not free me from love, truth, uprightness, faithfulness, in that which is lowly and simple — on the contrary: God’s clear word requires me anew for an accounting of the calling I have.

And now we can widen the consideration so that it concerns our whole people. This faithfulness in the calling, joined with trust in God, was once the mark of our people. It is long since. Much spirituality from east and west has since then streamed over us and determined our view of what true faith in God is. Now we almost think that the old Christian faith is not real Christianity. We find it without feeling, and even a little worldly. For this faith had no other rule than the word of God, and it was so peculiarly bound to two points in existence: the home and the earthly place of work. No form of Christian faith has in later time been so despised as this. It has been dissolved both from without and from within.

It has been dissolved from without through the swiftly come prosperity of the Swedish people. He who still has any earnestness in him must surely have felt an oppressive uneasiness before the constant song of praise over our people's well-being, which of late has washed over us. The multitude of amusements and diversions has come to enter as a natural part of our life, and has turned the homes into places where one sleeps and eats. The same devastation has gone forward over the world of work. The center of gravity has been moved outside the work — to the sphere one has for oneself and one's own high pleasure.

At the same time as this dissolution from without, there has taken place a dissolution from within. We have received a spirituality that suits these human beings without root in home and work. Its foremost mark is precisely rootlessness, the wiping out of all clear boundaries. It is as if we had lost the backbone in spiritual things. We have betrayed the faith of our fathers. "Lord, we know our ungodliness, for we have sinned against thee."

But when we look out over our land today and think of the lot that will be allotted to it, even if we are allowed to keep outward peace, can we not then see and understand that God has begun a work with us. First of all the Merciful now seems to be breaking the Swedish prosperity to pieces. We shall surely by and by discover that the things we need in order to live are rather few and little remarkable. We shall surely have to limit our world rather thoroughly, if no wonder happens. If each one were driven back upon home and work as the two pillars of the outward life, that alone would be a blessed gift of God.

If we come to that point, it may well also happen that we wake up and see God's will. For God's will has precisely to do with my relation in my limited world — first and foremost. "What else does God require of you, O man, than that you do what is right, and apply yourself to love, and walk in humility before your God." In the hard time that is coming, spiritual health will be allotted to us if we bow ourselves to God and his will.

But if the misfortune comes and crushes our people, if we never have time to recover! — We have nothing else to do than to trust in God's grace and mercy. "For thy name's sake, cast us not away; remember thy covenant with us and break it not!" We are as the tree that bore no fruit, and for which the Savior prays: "Lord, let it stand this year also!"

Although the time is short and can entice to many unconsidered actions, we must quietly begin with ourselves. It is our faith; the new outward situation itself, which has come because God wills it, shall drive human beings in toward essential things, each one for himself. Our best act of faith as Christians is calm and earnestness in great things and in small. And prayer — prayer for our whole people, that it may once again begin to go the old way. For there are no shortcuts to God, even if a people stands on the brink of the abyss. No hasty and careless journey to God, which goes past the narrow gate, is granted to a people even in times of misfortune, least of all then. The way to faith is the old way: in under God's judgment and law, and forward to the throne of mercy. And the question of the day of repentance is a question to myself: are you going on that way? Amen.

The prayer of the Gospel Book.

[Pages 6–19 of the file are handwriting. They are left blank. Nothing on them has been guessed.]

Translator's notes.

The heading is his. "18/2 1940" is 18 February 1940. "Första bön dagen (2:a i fastan)" is kept as "the First Day of Prayer (the Second in Lent)," as he wrote it. The hymn lines are translated from the verses he set down; no English hymn text has been substituted. The hymn numbers are the numbers of the Swedish hymnbook, left as he gave them. "The text is read" and "The prayer of the Gospel Book" are his stage directions; the reading and the prayer are not written out on the page, and they are not supplied. The quotations from Jeremiah 14, Micah 6, Matthew 12, Romans 14, and Luke 13 follow his Swedish wording, not a later English version. "Lik i lasten" is kept as "a corpse in the cargo." "Han" is "he," including for the human being and for the one who stands aside; no woman is named in the text. No Luther citation appears on the readable pages, so no Luther's Works reference is entered. Pages 6–19 are manuscript handwriting the page does not yield; they are blank.