

Sermon of the Wolf to the English

Wulfstan the Homilist

Imperial · Early Medieval · Sermon

STROMATA 30

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INTRODUCTION

Preached in 1014 by the Archbishop of York as Viking armies overran England and Æthelred the Unready fled into exile, this homily reads the nation's collapse as divine judgment on a people who have abandoned God's law. Wulfstan catalogues the sins of the English, broken oaths, plundered churches, widows forced into marriage, Christians sold into slavery, with the cadenced, alliterative urgency that made him the most formidable Old English prose stylist after Ælfric. The sermon stands at the headwaters of the English jeremiad, the tradition of preaching that reads national catastrophe as covenant breach. Expect thunder: this is prophetic denunciation in the mode of the Hebrew prophets, meant to terrify a people into repentance while there is still time.

Beloved men, know that which is true: this world is in haste and it nears the end.

And therefore things in this world go ever the longer the worse, and so it must needs be that things quickly worsen, on account of people's sinning from day to day, before the coming of Antichrist. And indeed it will then be awful and grim widely throughout the world. Understand also well that the Devil has now led this nation astray for very many years, and that little loyalty has remained among men, though they spoke well.

And too many crimes reigned in the land, and there were never many of men who deliberated about the remedy as eagerly as one should, but daily they piled one evil upon another, and committed injustices and many violations of law all too widely throughout this entire land. And we have also therefore endured many injuries and insults, and if we shall experience any remedy then we must deserve better of God than we have previously done. For with great deserts we have earned the misery that is upon us, and with truly great deserts we must obtain the remedy from God, if henceforth things are to improve.

Lo, we know full well that a great breach of law shall necessitate a great remedy, and a great fire shall necessitate much water, if that fire is to be quenched. And it is also a great necessity for each of men that he henceforth eagerly heed the law of God better than he has done, and justly pay God's dues. In heathen lands one does not dare withhold little nor much of that which is appointed to the worship of false gods; and we withhold everywhere God's dues all too often. And in heathen lands one dares not curtail, within or without the temple, anything brought to the false gods and entrusted as an offering.

And we have entirely stripped God's houses of everything fitting, within and without, and God's servants are everywhere deprived of honor and protection. And some men say that no man dare abuse the servants of false gods in any way among heathen people, just as is now done widely to the servants of God, where Christians ought to observe the law of God and protect the servants of God.

But what I say is true: there is need for that remedy because God's dues have diminished too long in this land in every district, and laws of the people have deteriorated entirely too greatly, since Edgar died. And sanctuaries are too widely violated, and God's houses are entirely stripped of all dues and are stripped within of everything fitting. And widows are widely forced to marry in unjust ways and too many are impoverished and fully humiliated; and poor men are sorely betrayed and cruelly defrauded, and sold widely out of this land into the power of foreigners, though innocent; and infants are enslaved by means of cruel injustices, on account of petty theft everywhere in this nation.

And the rights of freemen are taken away and the rights of slaves are restricted and charitable obligations are curtailed. Free men may not keep their independence, nor go where they wish, nor deal with their property just as they desire; nor may slaves have that property which, on their own time, they have obtained by means of difficult labor, or that which good men, in God's favor, have granted them, and given to them in charity for the love of God.

But every man decreases or withholds every charitable obligation that should by rights be paid eagerly in God's favor, for injustice is too widely common among men and lawlessness is too widely dear to them.

And in short, the laws of God are hated and his teaching despised; therefore we all are frequently disgraced through God's anger, let him know it who is able. And that loss will become universal, although one may not think so, to all these people, unless God protects us. Therefore it is clear and well seen in all of us that we have previously more often transgressed than we have amended, and therefore much is greatly assailing this nation.

Nothing has prospered now for a long time either at home or abroad, but there has been military devastation and hunger, burning and bloodshed in nearly every district time and again. And stealing and slaying, plague and pestilence, murrain and disease, malice and hate, and the robbery by robbers have injured us very terribly. And excessive taxes have afflicted us, and storms have very often caused failure of crops; therefore in this land there have been, as it may appear, many years now of injustices and unstable loyalties everywhere among men. Now very often a kinsman does not spare his kinsman any more than the foreigner, nor the father his children, nor sometimes the child his own father, nor one brother the other. Neither has any of us ordered his life just as he should, neither the ecclesiastic according to the rule nor the layman according to the law, but we have transformed desire into laws for us entirely too often, and have kept neither precepts nor laws of God or men just as we should. Neither has anyone had loyal intentions with respect to others as justly as he should, but almost everyone has deceived and injured another by words and deeds; and indeed almost everyone unjustly stabs the other from behind with shameful assaults and with wrongful accusations — let him do more, if he may.

For there are in this nation great disloyalties for matters of the Church and the state, and also there are in the land many who betray their lords in various ways: and the greatest of all betrayals of a lord one can think of is that a man betrays the soul of his lord. And a very great betrayal of a lord it is also in the world, that a man betray his lord to death, or drive him living from the land, and both have come to pass in this land: Edward was betrayed, and then killed, and after that burned; and Æthelred was driven out of his land. And too many sponsors and godchildren have been killed widely through- out this nation, in addition to entirely too many other innocent people who have been destroyed entirely too widely.

And entirely too many holy religious foundations have deteriorated because some men have previously been placed in them who ought not to have been, if one wished to show respect to God's sanctuary. And too many Christian men have been sold out of this land, now for a long time, and all this is entirely hateful to God, let him believe it who will. Also we know well where this crime has occurred, and it is shameful to speak of that which has happened too widely. And it is terrible to know what too many do often, those who for a while carry out a miserable deed, who contribute together and buy a woman as a joint purchase between them and practice foul sin with that one woman, one after another, and each after the other like dogs that care not about filth; and then for a price they sell a creature of God – His own purchase that He bought at a great cost – into the power of enemies.

Also we know well where the crime has occurred such that the father has sold his son for a price, and the son his mother, and one brother has sold the other into the power of foreigners, and out of this nation. (40) All of those are great and terrible deeds, let him understand it who will. (41) And yet what is injuring this nation is still greater and manifold: many are forsworn and greatly perjured and more vows are broken time and again, and it is clear to this people that God's anger violently oppresses us, let him know it who can.

And lo! How may greater shame befall men through the anger of God than often does us for our own sins? Although it happens that a slave escape from a lord and, leaving Christendom becomes a Viking, and after that it happens again that a hostile encounter takes place between thane and slave, if the slave kills the thane, he lies without wergild paid to any of his kinsmen; but if the thane kills the slave that he had previously owned, he must pay the price of a thane. Full shameful laws and disgraceful tributes are common among us, through God's anger, let him understand it who is able.

And many misfortunes befall this nation time and again: things have not prospered now for a long time neither at home nor abroad, but there has been destruction and hate in every district time and again, and the English have been entirely defeated for a long time now, and very truly disheartened through the anger of God. And pirates are so strong through the consent of God, that often in battle one drives away ten, and two often drive away twenty, sometimes fewer and sometimes more, entirely on account of our sins. And often ten or twelve, each after the other, insult the thane's woman disgracefully, and sometimes his daughter or close kinswomen, while he looks on, he that considered himself brave and strong and good enough before that happened. And often a slave binds very fast the thane who previously was his lord and makes him into a slave through God's anger.

Alas the misery and alas the public shame that the English now have, entirely through God's anger. Often two sailors, or three for a while, drive groups of Christian men from sea to sea — out through

this nation, huddled together, as a public shame for us all, if we could seriously and properly know any shame. But all the insult that we often suffer, we repay by honoring those who insult us. We pay them continually and they humiliate us daily; they ravage and they burn, plunder and rob and carry to the ship; and lo! what else is there in all these happenings except God's anger clear and evident over this nation?

It is no wonder that there is mishap among us: because we know full well that now for many years men have too often not cared what they did by word or deed; but this nation, as it may appear, has become very corrupt through manifold sins and through many misdeeds: through murder and through evil deeds, through avarice and through greed, through stealing and through robbery, through man-selling and through heathen vices, through betrayals and through frauds, through attacks on kinsmen and through manslaughter, through injury of men in holy orders and through adultery, through incest and through various fornications. And also, far and wide, as we said before, more than should be are lost and perjured through the breaking of oaths and through violations of pledges, and through various lies; and non-observances of church feasts and fasts widely occur time and again. And also there are here in the land God's adversaries, degenerate apostates, and hostile persecutors of the Church and entirely too many grim tyrants, and widespread despisers of divine laws and Christian virtues, and foolish deriders everywhere in the nation, most often of those things that the messengers of God command, and especially those things that always belong to God's law by right.

And therefore things have now come far and wide to that full evil way that men are more ashamed now of good deeds than of misdeeds; because too often good deeds are abused with derision and the Godfearing are blamed entirely too much, and especially are men reproached and all too often greeted with contempt who love right and have fear of God to any extent. And because men do that, entirely abusing all that they should praise and hating too much all that they ought to love, therefore they bring entirely too many to evil intentions and to misdeeds, so that they are never ashamed though they sin greatly and commit wrongs even against God himself. But on account of idle attacks they are ashamed to repent for their misdeeds, just as the books teach, like those foolish men who on account of their pride will not protect themselves from injury before they might no longer do so, although they all wish for it.

Here in the country, as it may appear, too many are sorely wounded by the stains of sin. Here there are, as we said before, manslaughterers and murderers of their kinsmen, and murderers of priests and persecutors of monasteries, and traitors and notorious apostates, and here there are perjurers and murderers, and here there are injurers of men in holy orders and adulterers, and people greatly corrupted through incest and through various fornications, and here there are harlots and infanticides and many foul adulterous fornicators, and here there are witches and sorceresses, and here there are robbers and plunderers and pilferers and thieves, and injurers of the people and pledge-breakers and treaty-breakers, and, in short, a countless number of all crimes and misdeeds. And we are not at all ashamed of it, but we are greatly ashamed to begin the remedy just as the books teach, and that is evident in this wretched and corrupt nation.

Alas, many a great kinsman can easily call to mind much in addition which one man could not hastily investigate, how wretchedly things have fared now all the time now widely throughout this nation. And indeed let each one examine himself well, and not delay this all too long. But lo, in the name of God, let us do as is needful for us, protect ourselves as earnestly as we may, lest we all perish together.

There was a historian in the time of the Britons, called Gildas, who wrote about their misdeeds, how with their sins they infuriated God so excessively that He finally allowed the English army to conquer their land, and to destroy the host of the Britons entirely. And that came about, just as he said, through breach of rule by the clergy and through breach of laws by laymen, through robbery by the strong and through coveting of ill-gotten gains, violations of law by the people and through unjust judgments, through the sloth of the bishops and folly, and through the wicked cowardice of messengers of God, who swallowed the truths entirely too often and they mumbled through their jaws where they should have cried out; also through foul pride of the people and through gluttony and manifold sins they destroyed their land and they themselves perished. But let us do as is necessary for us, take warning from such; and it is true what I say, we know of worse deeds among the English than we have heard of anywhere among the Britons; and therefore there is a great need for us to take thought for ourselves, and to intercede eagerly with God himself. And let us do as is necessary for us, turn towards the right and to some extent abandon wrong-doing, and eagerly atone for what we previously transgressed; and let us love God and follow God's laws, and carry out well that which we promised when we received baptism, or those who were our sponsors at baptism; and let us order words and deeds justly, and cleanse our thoughts with zeal, and keep oaths and pledges carefully, and have some loyalty between

us without evil practice. And let us often reflect upon the great Judgment to which we all shall go, and let us save ourselves from the welling fire of hell torment, and gain for ourselves the glories and joys that God has prepared for those who work his will in the world. God help us.

Amen.

Translation: Translated by Stephen M. Lewis, February 2014

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