

(organ music)

- Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ, amen. We listened to the text of the sermon taken from the 12th chapter in the second epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians, verse nine. "And He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee, "for my strength is made perfect in weakness. "Most gladly, therefore, I will rather glory "in my infirmities that the power of Christ "may rest upon me." Certainly this word of Saint Paul we know it and we may have heard it many times. It is a very queer and most surprising statement. If it really stands as valid and true, we feel that those people who say that the days of Christianity are passing by quickly or may have passed by already, that these people might be right. That we in our generation have entered the prosperous era since our everyday thinking, our everyday living has become incompatible with this kind of attitude and claim. Ours is an era marked by the tremendous progress and success of science and knowledge of ability and efficiency. Human possibilities seem to us as being unlimited and boundless. We are very near, very close to conquer, to govern the universe. Our conception of nature and our relationship to nature has changed basically. We do no longer feel that there may be regions which will remain out of our reach, out of our dominion. Human power really is something, something in which we may trust. Our task of today and tomorrow is only to adapt our faculties in the right and in the best way to the challenges we just have. Strength, power, might, human strength, human power, human might, they are the things that matter. And to get rid of all inferiority complexes is an aim worthy to be striving for. The idea certainly is not to be weak, but to be strong. Human existence and these days and this hour is getting so complicated that only an austere and disciplined rigor will cope with it. Strength, power, might could depend on any help and assistance from outside to trust in somebody except yourself that is suspect of being afraid of weakness, a lack of needed self-confidence. At least this opinion and conviction is in keeping with the general spirit of our age, of our present age. Therefore, just therefore the religious element in human nature is losing ground. The consciousness of dependence, the very basis of religion is dwindling away. Today's atheism therefore is in no way surprising. It is just a logical by-product of modern evolution. We'll be able to explain everything and to dominate everything if not yet at present and today, then certainly tomorrow or in the near future. And we trust that we shall deal with all newly accomplished insight successfully when we consult only and rely upon only our own reason and judgment. Evolution means progress, this we do take for granted. This is why we are facing the present decline of religion among civilized nations, and especially the regress of Christianity in our formerly so-called Christian world. Today this retrogression is quite obvious and notorious, but it has developed already for a considerable time, for decades and maybe even for more than two centuries. It began when people began to omit or to pass over those parts of the Christian Gospel and its message which no longer were in accordance with their general feeling and their understanding of human nature and human life. When people began to become aware of their great talents then they began to achieve unprecedented progress in science and in techniques, they wanted, whether consciously or not, to forget everything which might reduce or even destroy their optimistic self-confidence. There was no room anymore for the message of sin and of redemption, for this craze of service and of weakness and the like. But still they clung to everything in

the teachings of Jesus which seemed to call for a heroic and idealistic and active life. People clung to the Christian religion because they were still convinced that it had fervor and in the end had accomplished the abolition, for instance, of slavery. And Also the equal status of women in the world of men. That thereby Christianity have proved a genuine factor of human progress. It really was, it really has been, but with this curtailment and alteration of the Gospel message through which the continuation of Christianity became possible for this curtailment in those days and for a considerable time the Gospel lost its life center. Lost its Master and Lord. He was no longer needed, displaced at the bottom and in the midst of the Christian message was filled instead with His teachings. They, the doctrines were regarded as a main truth based upon themselves, no longer connected with, no longer dependent on the Master's person. So the faith in Jesus Christ was replaced by the belief in this doctrine, its precepts, its rule. The personal relation was abandoned in exchange for a system of moral or social commandments. In some parts of the world, Christianity has become something very different from what the New Testament understands by Christian faith. There, in the New Testament Christian faith means that Christians are the Lord's disciples, the Lord's own, the Lord's followers subject to the authority and attached to him personally knowing his spirit, willing to obey his directives. People responsible to the living Lord who, according to his promise, is present as our counselor and guide. We may ask him, no friends, we must, what he wants us to do. Lord, what will thou have me to do? But when we deal only with his teaching, with his rules, his precepts we may derive from his commandments a number of principles, Christian principles, which then we take into consideration and into our judgment ourselves. Principles are subject heavily. They are subject to our own judgment, and we select from them by making our own choice, putting aside what is not convenient to us or not convincing for us. And by doing this we maintain our own authority, our own decisive authority. There are many Christians nowadays who call such a selection of principles their faith. They do believe in these principles as far as they agree. There are principles among them, certainly there are which they think to be too difficult and too exaggerated and which therefore they do not acknowledge everything only of the Sermon on the Mount or on a word like love your enemy, bless them that curse you. Do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which spitefully use you and persecute you. This simply does not belong to this kind of Christian faith. That why there are quite a number of directives among the worlds of Jesus which meet with similar bouts and objectives. And to be sure none of these Christians who believe in principles of their own decisive directions has ever agreed. None of them will ever agree with this confession of Saint Paul. "Most gladly will I rather glory in my infirmity "that the power of Christ may rest upon me." This whole kind of Christian religion which is based on a collection of principles, it wants strength, wants power, wants might, wants something with which to live, with which to work, with which to succeed. Those who adhere this type of Christianity cannot and will not take the risk of infirmities. What they have in mind is rather how to avoid all sorts of weakness or possibilities of defeat. For they may believe in progress. At least we want to and we long for accomplishing our justification on our own account. Everything else would violate and hurt our pride, our claim to mastery, our claim to sovereign independence. Here it becomes clear. Here it becomes evident that this Christianity is absolutely indifferent as to God. And also indifferent as to Jesus Christ, and indifferent and utterly revolting even against the Gospel, for the Gospel announces the kingdom of God. It is announced as being at hand in the reign of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ. The human being in whom Jesus Christ meets with us, his children, in order to bring us back into his kingdom, in order to gain us over and to bring us whole again. The power of Christ, the power this Lord. What then is it? Nothing it seems. At least the power of his opponents proves to be stronger than all he can do. So he finished his commission in this world

of ours as we know and remember in the days of Lent coming to us in the near future. We remember yes, the end of his commission and suffering in death in total defeat. And yet all power of human pride and self-concern of hatred and vindictiveness cannot, could not overcome Him. Cannot, could not make Him use the same means of power and violence, not even in self-defense. Cannot seduce Him to the spirit and attitude of retaliation. So just so he becomes and remains more than a conqueror, for in dying we know he prays forgiveness for his murderers, his hangmen, his guardsmen, his persecutors, his traitor, his enemies, his faithless friends. In praying he dies for them all. For all of us, more than a conqueror, the Savior. In the last year of my imprisonment in one of Hitler's ill-famed concentration camps at Dachau, at gallows, was transplanted, transferred from the general camp into the courtyard of the so-called bunker, the prison inside the prison, prison inside the camp. The upper part of this gallows looked into my solitary confinement cell through the window bars. How often as this gallows induced me to pray for my comrades who were hanged on it. How often every day I had to control myself when the idea arose, naturally it arose, if these people will pull me out of my place here to that gallows what should I do? Shall I howl at them? Oh yes, I should like to, to love to. You criminals, you murderers wait and see. There's a God in heaven and he will show you. Then afterwards the torturing question, what would have happened if Jesus, when they nailed him to his gallows, the cross, if he had spoken like this. Then he would have crossed his enemies. Nothing, nothing would have happened. Only there would be no Gospel. There would be no Christian church or there would be no Gospel, no message of great joy. There would be no forgiveness of sin, no redemption, no reconciliation, no salvation. Then he would have prayed against his enemies, not for them. Then he would have died against them and against us and not for them, not for us. Thank God he prayed and he died a different way. "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." "There it was that he said unto me, my strength is made perfect in weakness." "Therefore my grace is sufficient for thee." This then is a crucial, a decisive question. Do we, do I really know that he prayed for me, that he died for me there on Calvary, there on his cross? You see, no Christian principles will never do. Paul the apostle is right. When he renounces every idea of being anything for himself. All that matters is he, Jesus, and all that really counts is his power of sacrificial, self-sacrificial love by which he makes me his brother and thereby his Father's child. My fellow brother, my fellow's brother at the same time. But I need Him, not just his word, not just his directives, but Him. Him, himself. I need his person, I need his personal love. I need Him. "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory "in my infirmities that the power, this power of Christ may rest upon me and that I may confess. "I live, yet not I, but Christ, lives in me," amen. Let us pray, O Lord, make us see Jesus, our human brother. Make us recognize him, the Son in whom thou art well pleased. Help us by thy spirit that in looking to him we may become aware of his power which is thine. And which therefore being the power of thy grace, of thy love, will outweigh our self-reliance with all its seducing hopes and fears and which will replace it by confidence and trust in his Lordship and guidance that the power of Christ may rest upon us and remain with us, amen. Now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be and remain with us all. (choral singing)