

Thy Kingdom Come (On Earth As It Is In Heaven)

*Sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
July 11, 2010*

Psalm 72, Matthew 5:3-12, John 18:33-37

Today I continue my summer sermon series on the Lord's Prayer, and what it teaches us about how to pray, by looking at the phrase "Thy kingdom come." References to the kingdom of God (or, in the gospel of Matthew, the kingdom of heaven) abound in the New Testament, but are virtually non-existent in the Old. This does not mean that the ancient Israelites did not view God in some way as a King, in fact Psalm 22 says, "You are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel," and Psalm 29 says, "The Lord sits enthroned over the flood, the Lord is enthroned as King forever. The Lord gives strength to his people, the Lord blesses his people with peace." And when the people of Israel are clamoring for a king, so that they can be like the other nations, God says to Samuel, "*Give the people what they want, for they have not rejected you. They have rejected me from being King over them.*" To get a glimpse of the ancient Israelites view of God as a King, listen now to the words of Psalm 72, particularly for which qualities of God's character the psalmist hopes will be given to the earthly king. *Read Psalm 72.*

For our New Testament lesson, I initially picked out Matthew's version of the Beatitudes, as sort of a glimpse into what it means to live as a citizen of God's kingdom. As you hear them read - beginning with Jesus' statement, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*", hear in them a manifesto, a declaration of the priorities and intentions of the kingdom of God. *Read Matthew here.*

The second New Testament lesson comes from John's account of the day of Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus has been hauled before Pilate. Now Pilate queries him about whether or not he is the King of the Jews. Listen for how Jesus responds and what that might tell us about the Kingdom of God. *Read John here.*

What does it mean to pray "*Thy kingdom come*?" As I've said before, one of the interesting things about taking on this challenge of unpacking the Lord's Prayer, so that we can speak it intentionally and not in some rote, unthinking manner, is that every word is laden with meaning - and not all of the associations we have with those words are positive.

Let's begin with the word Kingdom. To pray to God saying, "Your Kingdom come" is, by inference, to say that God is a King. The first thing that must be said about this is that, as with the word Father, the metaphor is not about the gender of God. It is about the quality of our relationship to God and our place in God's world.

Here is where that metaphor of King (or if you like, Sovereign) comes with some baggage, particularly for contemporary Americans living, as we do, in a republic. Just last weekend we celebrated our independence as a nation, hailing in the process of our founding fathers who stood together in opposition to being ruled by a king. So, deep in the core of our national psyche is a resistance to monarchy. We understand ourselves as citizens of a republic, not as subjects of a king. The right to vote

to determine what sort of leaders will make decisions for us is central to our understanding of government - and this is true not just in civil government, but in our Presbyterian ecclesiastical government as well. Before a pastor's call to a church can be finally approved, the pastor is elected by vote of the congregation. Elders, too, before they serve on Session, get voted into office.

We very much want to have a say in who governs us, we want to know that our voice is heard. And we very much guard and want to have as much freedom as we can to make our own decisions in regard to the rest of life - how we behave, whether or not and where we worship, how we spend our time and money, what our priorities will be. And there is something about this which is laudable.

But to pray, "*Thy kingdom come,*" is to acknowledge that there is some higher authority at work in the universe than just a collection of our individual thoughts and ideas. To pray in that way is to say that there is One whose leadership and priorities hold us accountable, to whom we are in some way subject, to whom we somehow belong, and to whom we owe allegiance.

To get a glimpse into God's kingdom, the reign of this sovereign, the best place to go is the words and parables of Jesus. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus outlines a call for citizens of that kingdom to live a life marked by poverty of spirit (*the humble recognition that we need help*), meekness (*the gentle quality of being led by God*), mourning (*grief not just over our own, but over the world's, pain*), hungering and thirsting for the right thing to be done, mercy (*the practice of compassion*), purity of heart (*the intention to love and serve God and neighbor*), peacemaking, and the willingness to suffer for the sake of doing the right thing.

In his parables, Jesus most often points to the kingdom being like a party to which all are invited, but especially the lost and the lame, the marginalized and the outcast. In so doing, he also illustrates that there are people (like the elder brother in the story of the Prodigal Son and the scribes and the Pharisees, ancient and modern day) who won't want to be a part of it.

I think there is a sense in which Brian McLaren is right, that the kingdom of God, or as he calls it, "Jesus' secret message", is about celebrating inclusion. In that regard, I think Irene Minich's celebration last week about being in attendance at our former dreamer Abeni's marriage to her partner down in North Carolina was a perfect example of the kingdom of God. The fact that their eighty year old African American grandmothers were there, and people from Immanuel who had worked with Abeni as a youth were there, and friends of a variety of races and creeds were there -all of them in attendance to honor their love and commitment to one another was beautiful. This really was a glimpse of the kingdom of God breaking in to the world.

Jesus also says in another of his parables that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which, when planted, grows into a tree large enough for all the birds of the air to take refuge in it. This suggests that the kingdom of God is about hospitality. It starts with small acts of kindness and welcome and grows larger until more and more people find that there is room for them. Every time you and I practice hospitality, every time we open our hearts and homes to another, the kingdom of God comes.

When his disciples are trying to exclude children from coming to him, and then again are arguing about which of them is to be first in the kingdom, Jesus says that you have to become like a child to enter the kingdom. So it may be that every time you and I welcome children, or see the world with child-like wonder and openness, the kingdom comes.

Then there is the place in Luke where Jesus responds to a question from the Pharisees about when the kingdom of God would come by replying, "*The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you.*" Which is to say that the kingdom of God is not something that is out there, but something that is in here (*pointing to heart*).

So when we pray thy kingdom come, what are we saying really? Are we saying that it has happened already, or that it will happen in the future? One way theologians and Biblical scholars have dealt with this conundrum is by developing the idea that the kingdom is "already *and* not yet." It is both already here and not yet fully realized.

It could be said, for instance, that there is a sense in which the kingdom has already come in the life of Jesus. In the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark, Jesus inaugurates his ministry by proclaiming, "*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe in the good news.*"

Then again you could make the case that the kingdom was ushered in with the birth of Christ, who was hailed as a king by shepherds and sages. Or you could point to the moment in several of the gospels, just after he predicts his suffering and death and just prior to his transfiguration, in which Jesus speaks these words, "*I tell you the truth. There are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God has come with power.*"

It could be said that the kingdom came when Jesus, hanging on the cross, said of those who had arranged and were cheering his death, "*Father, forgive them. They do not know what they are doing.*"

Perhaps the kingdom came when the Spirit was poured out on his disciples at Pentecost, and they were filled with an energy that allowed them to embody God's love as Jesus had. Perhaps the kingdom comes when, as Jesus tells the Pharisees, we grasp the truth that the kingdom is within us.

There is a very real sense in which the kingdom of God has come. I see it in people getting and giving rides to doctor's appointments, and people being wrapped in prayer shawls, and in various other expressions of compassion and hospitality. I see it in youth heading off to Honduras, Belize or Pennsylvania to build and paint houses or to work with children. I see it in moments of reconciliation and understanding.

The kingdom of God is not "pie in the sky, way up high, by and by, that you get to when you die." It is a reality that we can and sometimes do experience here on earth - when human compassion is fleshed out, when people really hear each other, and when broken relationships are healed.

We see glimpses of it in holy moments and thin places. Whenever people are rapt in wonder and awe at the mystery of life; whenever they are wrapped in the warmth of human love, God's kingdom comes. And yet, and yet.... To pray "Thy kingdom come," is to affirm that it somehow isn't fully here yet.

Frederick Buechner writes of praying for the kingdom to come:

*"We are asking God to make manifest the holiness that is now mostly hidden, to set free in all of its terrible splendor the devastating power that is now mostly under restraint. Thy kingdom come on earth is what we are saying. And if that were suddenly to happen, what then? What would stand and what would fall? Who would be welcomed in and who would be thrown the hell out? Which if any of our most precious visions of what God is and of what human beings are would prove to be more or less on the mark and which would turn out to be as phony as three dollar bills? Boldness indeed. To speak these words is to invite the tiger out of the cage, to unleash a power that makes atomic power look like a warm breeze."*¹

There is so much evidence around us that the kingdom has not been realized that it somehow feels very far away. If the kingdom of God is about peace, then why do we still have war, why do tanks still roll, why do bombs still drop? If the kingdom is about hospitality, then why do we see so much hostility toward the other, sometimes even in national church gatherings? If the kingdom is about justice and righteousness, and everyone having enough, then why do children in some places in the world and the U.S. go to bed with aching empty bellies, their stomachs distended from malnutrition? Why do some people work their fingers to the bone for very little, while others cheat people out of their savings? If the kingdom is about mercy, then why so often do we see people obsessed with getting their pound of flesh, trying to exact their revenge for what has been done to them? If the kingdom is about healing and wholeness, then why do we see shorebirds drenched in oil and seventeen year old daughters and forty-nine year old mothers dying?

To pray thy kingdom come on earth is to recognize that in so many places it hasn't yet come. And it is to take some responsibility, as citizens and subjects of that kingdom, disciples of that King, to take our part in helping it to come.

Yesterday afternoon, as I was working on this sermon, I heard my wife Judith and daughter Martha practicing for an anthem they will be singing at Trinity Presbyterian this morning. It is a favorite old hymn of mine. They were trying to remember the words from memory, and to help them I went and found a version of it on line.

The rendition I found was by the lovely Celtic woman Enya. Over the course of its history, it has also been sung by folk singers like Pete Seeger and in church choirs. It is a kingdom song, a song which has energized lives of faithful discipleship and has given strength to people protesting injustice and working for peace and healing.

As you hear the words of the song, I want you to let images roll in your head. I want you to visualize the devastation on the Gulf Coast, and the killing fields and mass graves of human history. I want you to see broken relationships and ramshackle shacks and lives in thrall to addiction. I want you think of the person you know who is caught in the throes of the downward spiral of depression and other images which, to you, reflect that the kingdom of God has not yet fully come.

But I also want you to see Martin Luther King, Jr. leading the March on Washington and the vision of Abeni's wedding which Irene Minich shared with us last week, with eighty year old African American grandmothers joining friends and family of a variety of races and creeds in celebrating the commitment of two young people to one another. I want you to see people wrapped in prayer shawls, and food being given to the hungry. I want you to see treatment centers, and people getting help from and giving help to one another. I want you to see Jesus on the cross whispering, "*Father forgive them,*" and Paul and Silas singing in prison at midnight, and a host of other people of faith and hope and love doing their part to make a difference in the world.

Have those images in your head as you hear these words.

*My life flows on in endless song
Above earth's lamentations,
I hear the real, though far-off hymn
That hails a new creation.*

*Through all the tumult and the strife
I hear it's music ringing,
It sounds an echo in my soul.
How can I keep from singing?*

*While though the tempest loudly roars,
I hear the truth, it liveth.
And though the darkness 'round me close,
Songs in the night it giveth.*

*No storm can shake my inmost calm,
While to that rock I'm clinging.
Since love is lord of heaven and earth
How can I keep from singing?*

*When tyrants tremble in their fear
And hear their death knell ringing,
When friends rejoice both far and near
How can I keep from singing?*

*In prison cell and dungeon vile
Our thoughts to them are winging,
When friends by shame are undefiled
How can I keep from singing?²*

Oh, it is true. The kingdom has not yet fully come. But in the meantime, we have a song to sing. And we have work to do.

In Jesus' name.

Amen.

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter's Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco. 1988), p. 84.

² The original words to the hymn "How Can I Keep From Singing?" were penned by Baptist minister Robert Wadsworth Lowry in 1868. Doris Plenn wrote the last two stanzas in 1950. To read more about the hymn and its history go to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/How_Can_I_Keep_from_Singing