

Praying for the Kingdom

Our second reading is from Matthew 6:7-10a, a portion of the Lord's Prayer, whereby Jesus invites us to share in his own prayer life, as expressed in these words. On this Christ the King Sunday we'll look at the petition for his kingdom to come, in verse 10.

Matthew 6:7-10a:

⁷ *"When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*

⁹ *"Pray then in this way:*

*Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.*

¹⁰ *Your kingdom come.*

Some time ago my daughter gave me a definitive biography of George Washington, which impressed me deeply with his unquestioned dedication to the founding of our nation's independence and democratic government. Against the fears of his political opponents, Washington eschewed personal power and contended mightily for the three branches of government that would safeguard the new nation ever becoming a monarchy in the fashion of Great Britain, from whom we'd gained independence. Democratic or other representational forms of government, it appears, are the governments of choice throughout the world. And it's clear that most of us in the West don't like the idea of kingdoms, which to us have connotations of colonialism and imperialism. Monarchs (kings and queens) and even presidents are not always trustworthy!

But beginning with the days of the prophet Samuel, the Jews wanted a king to rule over them, so they could be like the nations that surrounded them (1 Samuel 8). By the time of Jesus, Israel's kings had become the puppets of the occupying Roman Empire and its government. The hopes and expectations of the Jews, including Jesus' disciples, were for a messiah king of absolute power, who would bring about the fulfillment of their expectations for the overthrow of the Roman occupiers and establish God's immediate worldwide rule on earth. Jesus resisted efforts to make him this political and military deliverer and ruling monarch over a new superpower (Matt. 4:8-10; Jn. 6:15).

Although Jesus rejected the Jews' hopes for an earthly superpower ruler, he nevertheless embraced the title of king. In fact, the kingdom of God was the central theme of Jesus' proclamation, as we see throughout his ministry. The Kingdom of God and Kingdom of Heaven is prominent throughout the Synoptic Gospels, being mentioned 103 times. But Jesus declared that his was a heavenly and not an earthly kingdom (Jn. 18: 36). Like the first followers of Jesus, we've some thinking and growing to do before we can, with all of our hearts, join Jesus' prayer for his kingdom to come, which we recite every Sunday!

Jesus proclaimed, "The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news" (Mk 1:14f; Matt. 3:2; 4:17, 23; Lk. 4:43). God's kingly reign has been since the beginning of his creation of the heavens and the earth. But with the incarnation and the preaching of his Son, God announced that his kingdom has arrived for us and he has given access to us to submit to his kingly rule over us.

That the Kingdom of God was made available through Jesus to those who were considered outsiders was scandalous to the leaders of the Jews, who thought of themselves as the privileged elite who somehow were earning their membership in the kingdom by their religious merits. Jesus announced that he was the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy of the Servant King, who was anointed of God to preach good news to the poor, proclaim freedom for prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, release for the oppressed and the year of the Lord's favor (Lk. 4:18f). What particularly infuriated the religious establishment, who subsequently tried to kill him, was Jesus' saying that the kingdom was now open to Gentile, pagan outsiders, to ordinary folks like you and me.

In praying this prayer with Jesus we declare with confidence and thanksgiving that we, by grace through faith and repentance, have entered into the kingdom of God and that we gladly submit to his reign as Lord of our lives. By grace alone we've been chosen for his kingdom. Like the invited people in Jesus' parable, we were at one time outside his kingly palace, lost in the streets and alleys, as the poor, crippled, blind and lame ones, desperately in need of his invitation (Lk.14:15-24). To enter God's heavenly kingdom of eternal life was the only solution to our hopelessly lost and empty lives.

The reign of Jesus is not a political or national membership, and not like a citizenship which we have to inherit, earn or deserve. It's a relationship with the dear Father in the heavens through faith in his Son, Jesus, who accepts us as his brothers and sisters (Mk. 3:35). Unlike sinful monarchs and demagogues whose authority needs to be distrusted and curtailed, our King Jesus reigns with perfect love, justice and wisdom. Our King is our dear heavenly Father, Lord and Savior of the cross.

As citizens of the heavenly kingdom, we've become aliens in this world, like undocumented immigrants (Heb. 11:13; Phil. 3:20)! We've come to understand that God's kingdom reign is the ultimate reality, of which this present mortal life is a vague, shadowy adumbration. As Jesus told Pilate at his trial, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. My kingdom is from another place" (Jn. 18:36).

CS Lewis graphically portrays the heavenly perspective we gain of the eternal kingdom as contrasted with what he call, in his *Screwtape Letters*, "the ordinariness of things" in this present fallen world. The demon Uncle Screwtape advises his demon nephew Wormwood on how to keep their victim away from the truth that will deliver him out of their kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God, who is their enemy. Screwtape expressed alarm that a particular man was getting concerned about his soul and about eternal matters, and so he suggested that Wormwood entice the man to get up from his study and walk outside and go get his lunch. The battle was won when the man got up from his serious contemplation of the eternal and true. And on his way outside the victim saw a newsstand with the daily headlines and the passing traffic, and soon "got over" his concern about eternal matters, such as the kingdom of God. Screwtape announced that the battle is won if you can keep the victim's mind away from the real and eternal, subjects he can't touch and see, and stay focused on "the ordinariness of things."

As God's kingdom people, we have an eternal perspective, as Paul says, the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16). We now live as citizens of God's eternal kingdom, which has come to us through Christ. We have a kingdom way of seeing things. Once when Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, "Jesus replied, '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" (Lk. 17:20f). To pray for the kingdom is to pray that the kingdom

of God will find residence in our hearts through faith and that we'll realize that being in the kingdom is living in the reality of the eternal.

Jesus gave parables to those of us who're open to kingdom reality. He spoke about how he has given us eyes to see the reality of his kingdom (Matt. 13:16ff), beyond the "ordinariness of things." And he taught us that his kingdom is growing secretly and significantly, even though the growth of his kingdom is often imperceptible to our physical eyes (Matt. 13:31ff). God's kingdom often begins as a tiny mustard seed, but in God's time and in God's eyes, the seed grows and the kingdom expands. When we pray with Jesus, "Your kingdom come," we're asking and trusting God to work in human hearts, including difficult people we think are beyond hope. The seed of the word and the Light of the World are able to penetrate into the most unlikely places.

In the cross we see how God brought his kingdom to us through the seemingly tragic and unjust suffering and death of his Son. His kingdom didn't come into our hearts by force or by our decision, but through the grace of the cross of Christ. Helmut Thielicke spoke to his congregation in the wake of the bombing of the city of Stuttgart, in which his church had been totally destroyed, as well as his own home. Preaching in an old pair of army boots because his better clothing had been destroyed in the bombing, he shared an experience that demonstrated to him, at a low point in personal discouragement, that the kingdom of God is coming even while the kingdoms of this world are collapsing. His main point was that the collapse of this world's kingdoms sometimes is necessary in order to show us the reality of the kingdom that will never pass away.

God's kingdom is growing and is coming under the witness and power, not of armies and national and international unions and commissions and governmental powers, but is coming under the weak power of the cross. Jesus told his disciples that some who were standing with him would not taste death before they would "see the kingdom of God come with power" (Mk. 9:1). Likely he was referring to his kingdom coming in power through his resurrection, through the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost and through the growth of the kingdom through the earliest church. And you and I've been privileged also to see the kingdom come with power by way of the cross and the resurrection. The kingdom is growing through the witness of the persecuted church and the many called upon to suffer for the sake of the message of Jesus, just as the kingdom grew into the hearts of Saul of Tarsus and many others through the suffering and death of Stephen, who faithfully proclaimed the message of the cross.

When we pray with Jesus for the kingdom, we also pray for the kingdom's influence to grow in this fallen world, where God is at work putting this creation to rights. It's to pray for God's realm to extend on earth as it is in the eternal realm of the heavens and as it shall be in the New Heaven and Earth. Peterson paraphrases this petition, "Set the world right" (The Message). We're to pray for the establishment of Christ's rule in the entire world, including within all human and social institutions. We can be grateful for the lives and influence of people like William Wilberforce, whose leadership led to the eradication of the ungodly institution of slavery; for people like Florence Nightingale, who greatly impacted and improved medical and humanitarian care for the sick and suffering; for Martin Luther King Jr. and the cause of racial justice, the evangelism of Billy Graham, and Mother Teresa of Calcutta, whose compassion and care for the sick and the dying made a huge impact on the world. But your life and mine also can unite with God's kingdom work.

But we're also all too aware that this fallen world, which is under the sway of the Evil One and belongs to his kingdom of darkness, will never become a utopia of perfect peace and absolute

social justice. Even the best of human governments and social institutions are irremediably infested with flawed humans with sinful hearts. Evangelist Tony Campolo says that America is a good Babylon, but nevertheless is Babylon still, and Babylon cannot stand guiltless before God's judgment (Rev. 18).

We pray and work toward a just society and for the values of the kingdom to influence the structures of this fallen world, including the environment, which some day will be set to rights. God's people are his points of light in this dark world, and it seems the kingdom is growing least in places that have the greatest advantages, the most numerical and institutional church growth, and religious freedom and privilege. The light of the gospel may well be shining most brightly in the places of greatest spiritual darkness, where hearts are turning to Christ in profound repentance and where genuine conversions are happening instead of mere "decisions for Christ."

We join with Jesus in praying that the kingdom of the world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, who'll reign forever and ever (Rev. 11:15). We join with Jesus in praying that there'll be, on the Day Jesus returns, worshipers from every nation, tribe, people group and language (Rev. 7:9).

The kingdom realm grows through the powerful witness of the suffering church. Jesus said in his beatitude, "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt.5:10). God's realm is growing through the indomitable witness of the suffering faithful and the martyrs of Christ. As Bonhoeffer noted, we've witnessed the kingdom of God "breaking in on earth," having seen "Satan crushed and the powers of the world, sin and death broken." But still the kingdom of God is exposed to suffering and strife. "The little flock has a share in that tribulation." But this great martyr, Bonhoeffer, noted that we "stand under the sovereignty of God...in the midst of persecution. And he prays, "God grant that the kingdom of Jesus Christ may grow in his Church on earth, God hasten the end of the kingdoms of this world, and establish his own kingdom in power and glory!" (166). To pray with Jesus for the kingdom to come is to pray also for his personal and glorious return.

Like the victim of demons Screwtape and Wormwood, we're constantly bombarded by the message of this fallen world that cries out to us that this world is all there is. We must continue to pray, "Your kingdom come," that we might keep it all in the right perspective and not fall victim to "the ordinariness of things."

George Buttrick tells us that "In the consecration service for bishops in the primitive church, the bishop-elect was exhorted to remember eternity: and recently," continues Buttrick, "at such a service in Canterbury Cathedral the old custom was kept, for, as the new bishop passed through the midst of the people, they cried to him: 'Remember eternity! Remember eternity!'"

The Lord's Prayer is not just a model for us, but is Jesus' prayer that he invites us to pray with him. Jesus prayed throughout his earthly ministry and, finally in Gethsemane for the kingdom to come. As he faced the cross he remembered eternity.

So, let's remember eternity and pray with our risen King Jesus to our dear Father in the heavens—"Your kingdom come!"