

Thy kingdom come

Gen.12.1-4a / John 3.5

In our Old Testament reading, we heard a promise to Abram that he would head up a nation, a kingdom, as it were. And in the Gospel we heard Jesus say to Nicodemus that he could only enter the Kingdom of God by being born of water and the spirit. So today we are trying to get some kind of 20:20 vision of what 'kingdom' might mean. I have chosen hymns which add lots of ideas to anything I say in the next few minutes – so hopefully by the time we leave, even if our vision is not 20:20, it is at least wider than when we came in.

There are lots of politicians who tell us, in secular terms, and possibly some of them in religious terms, that a vote for their policies will bring in the kingdom. We do well to remind ourselves that whilst it is right and proper that Christians should test political theories and policies in the light of their loyalty to the Kingdom of God, it was precisely the confusion between God's kingdom and the kingdoms of this World which led to Jesus' death. He was executed on a charge of being a threat to the security of the state. We remind ourselves on Palm Sundays of how the crowd made an identification between his manifesto, and that of the nationalists who wanted to get rid of Roman domination. Even the disciples found it hard to move from that confusion. Many commentators have seen in Judas Iscariot's betrayal, the act of a disappointed and frustrated man who had pinned inappropriate political hopes on Jesus. So whilst "kingdom" ideas are not to be identified with political ones, they can't be indifferent to them. It is historically observable that the Kingdom of God has been advanced by people who are not consciously its agents. It is not only preachers and priests who have brought the kingdom nearer to the everyday lives of people, but also politicians, scientists, writers and artists. We must return to what the real meaning of "kingdom" is a moment or two.

I want us to think about that line in the Lord's Prayer 'Thy kingdom come'. There is nothing specific and detailed about it. It is a grandiose, sweeping statement about things in general. What a healthy thing that is! Because anything that we do pray about in detail has to be set against the main thrust of God's message to us. Jesus dealt with the little things which people around him needed: the food at the picnic meeting by the lakeside, the minor gynaecological

problems of a woman in a crowd - but that wasn't his message. Those were ways his message became real to people. What he went about saying was "The Kingdom is here, the Kingdom is at hand, the Kingdom is among you". We will sing about that in the Offertory hymn. Before we bring our own, or others' very real personal and important needs to God, we must to put them in the context of God's overall purpose. The God who will listen to our petty petitions is the God who is leading his purpose on to the day when, in the prophet's words "the earth will be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea. So the movement is from thinking of God, to seeing how God relates to his whole creation, and then finally we can narrow down to specific things for others and ourselves. Do you recall how Jesus told his followers not to worry about food and clothing, but to trust God? He talks about how the flowers are better robed than Solomon in all his finery. Don't worry, he says - "set your hearts on his kingdom, and these other things will be given you as well."

So we have to come to questions about what Jesus meant by "kingdom". I suspect that what each of us tends to think as we pray this prayer is quite different. There are certainly people who equate the kingdom with the church. So ultimately what they are praying in these words is that the church will grow, and extend throughout the world. In the crudest form, the kingdom will have come totally when everyone comes to church. That is extreme, but there are many who cannot see any evidence of the kingdom beyond the confines of the church and its members. We have that reflected to some extent in the words of the Communion hymn – 'the Church of God a kingdom is'. Then again, there are people who in praying these words are thinking in terms of the end of time. The prayer becomes a request for the Second Coming. They pray for God to break into our world in a dramatic way, sort out the wrongs, and institute a world order in which everything is good. And again, there are those who, far from thinking about the greater canvas on which God paints, think only of themselves as they pray this, making it a prayer that God's rule may be ever greater in their own lives. That was reflected perhaps in our opening hymn – about making way for Christ the King to enter our lives. These things aren't bad things to pray - that the church will grow, that Christ will return, that we will be more obedient to God's will - but it is extremely unlikely they are what Jesus intended people to have in mind as they said "May your Kingdom come."

The New Testament provides us with an intriguing contrast. There is no doubt that the word "kingdom" was frequently on Jesus' lips. You need only skim the pages in Matthew, Mark and

Luke to see that is how they recalled his teaching. But you won't find it so often if you look through John, or through the rest of the New Testament. It is as if the first generation of Christians had rejected that as being central to the message. If you think about it, that is understandable. Jesus' message was about what God was doing. What the Christian community came to understand was that it was Jesus himself who was the real focus of God's activity. Jesus implied that the kingdom had come in what was happening in his ministry, but was not preaching "I am the bringer of the kingdom" in that brash way. The disciples did not have that difficulty, of course, and were able to preach about what God had done, and was doing in Christ. So the kingdom and the message of Jesus become so closely intertwined they are inseparable. "Kingdom" as Jesus talked of it, was rooted in Jewish thinking, of course, and was less easily applied to the Gentile converts who came later. Despite the misunderstandings of those around Jesus, essentially it was about "God's rule", rather than some political entity. Matthew adds a parallel line, after the style of Jewish poetry, to the Lord's Prayer, which underlines that. He says "Your will be done", as a parallel way of saying "May your Kingdom come." It may have been the risk of further political interpretations that kept them from using that language so frequently. So, although we can be clear that "kingdom" was about God's rule, not about some new political state of affairs, we still have a problem. We accept that the kingdom was inaugurated by Jesus' coming. Through him, God had acted decisively in his world. There was a breaking-in of God's power and love. But if that is true, why do we still pray for it, and if it is true, why do we look around and see a world which is manifestly not ruled by the love and goodness of God? The clue to coping with this difficult question is in seeing the kingdom as *coming* rather than come. In Jesus, the kingdom had arrived. It was a new state of affairs, but the world has been spending two thousand years getting to grips with what that means. In many ways, we can see how that has happened. But the process is not yet over. In individual lives, the kingdom may have considerable reality, in those followers of Jesus who are able to accept that rule through their saintliness. For most of us, there is still considerable conflict within ourselves, and we know we are far from perfect. For example Paul was prepared to acknowledge that he found himself doing things he knew to be wrong, and not doing things he knew to be right. We put up images of being 'sort of alright', but if we are honest, we know the truth is quite different. But the coming of the kingdom is not just a matter of individual lives, but of lives lived together. So "kingdom values", as some have called them, need to be pursued and encouraged within the society in which we live. Those 'kingdom

values' are reflected in our final hymn – 'justice, joy, mercy, grace, challenge and choice'. We can rejoice when those things are happening, and be distressed when such things are made more difficult. That forms part of our praying of this prayer. When it comes to it, both as individuals, and as part of the world at large, we bear a measure of responsibility for this prayer being answered. So prayer and action work hand-in-hand. Our offertory hymn talks of we Christian pilgrims being 'summoned to take the questing way.' As we pray, so we must act; as we act, so must we pray. That process is fraught, because we don't always know what is right for the kingdom. As C.S.Lewis said in his 'Letters to Malcolm' - "Prayer is not the time for pressing our own favourite social or political panaceas'. That was the mistake we read about in the New Testament, where some of the good, devout and holy people of Jerusalem wanted to identify God's kingdom with getting rid of the Romans. We can understand their feelings. With the wisdom of hindsight, we can see that, for example, God used that very Roman Empire's structure to enable the kingdom to be spread, God used an Emperor called Constantine to make the message of Jesus the official religion of much of the civilised world. Our prayer is that we may become part of God's purpose; that we may be prepared to find God's timetable, and so to live and think that the prayer we pray is answered in God's way, not our own. For it is *God's* kingdom for which we pray, not our version of it. We hallow God's name, and follow his purpose, not our name and our petty advances. The prayer 'Thy Kingdom come' begins rooted in God, and has to stay rooted in God as we move on to think of what he wants with us, and his world. An Indian New Testament scholar, George Soares-Prabhu put it well: 'The kingdom comes as a gift, but it comes also as a responsibility inviting urgent and active response from those to whom it is given. Salvation comes from God, but it is actualised in and through the struggles of the poor.'

The kingdom comes to us, and for us, and it also comes by us and through us. Send us out into the world to live and work to your praise and glory, to see and recognise and celebrate where the kingdom is, and where it isn't, but might be if only we play our part.