

Living for God's Cause

“Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will be Done...”

Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 5:1-12

Pray that the will of God may be done in everything. He, in fact, wants what is good and useful for your soul, while you are not always seeking that and only that. Evagrius

Author Annie Dillard questions whether Christians are really aware of the kind of power they so blithely invoke, or believe a word of it, when they worship. She writes, “The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.”¹

We may want to pull out the life preservers as we consider today’s phrases from the Lord’s Prayer: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven.” These two petitions of God are radical, life-changing requests of our Creator. When we pray these petitions with sincerity, we are promising to align ourselves with the cause of God. We are making the purposes of God the priority in our lives. You may want to put on your crash helmets, for we may be in for some surprises as we look at these phrases more closely.

“Thy kingdom come.” The kingdom of God was the main theme of Jesus’ preaching and teaching. There is no one single description of the kingdom of God, but throughout the scriptures we receive glimpses of God’s reign of justice and truth. We heard Isaiah’s vision of wild animals living together in peace. The wolf shall live with the lamb without devouring it. A child can play over the hole of a snake without fear that the snake will bite it. In the kingdom of God predators no longer stalk their prey for their own personal benefit. Hostile forces are transformed into energies of mutual protection.

Jesus describes the kingdom of God by way of parables. “The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed...like yeast hidden in flour...like a treasure hidden in a field...like a merchant seeking pearls...like a net cast into the sea...like a man who hired laborers to work in his vineyard...like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son...” Jesus never says directly what it is—only what it is like. It almost seems to be something

hidden or overlooked, but he also tells us that the kingdom is within us. Within us lie the seeds and the hope of God's reign of justice and peace.

The Sermon on the Mount offers a summary of God's kingdom. It begins with the Beatitudes which proclaim a reversal of fortunes for those who are usually left behind in this world. Under God's reign the values are turned upside down. The poor, the mourners, the meek are the ones who receive blessings, instead of being trampled underfoot.

Preaching professor David Buttrick uses "the phrase 'God's new order' to help us realize that 'kingdom' implies a sociopolitical realm in which God is ruler and humanity its citizens. To pray for the arrival of God's kingdom is to express longing for wrong things to be made right, injustice to be made just, inequalities to be made equal, and the hard facts of hurt, hopelessness, and dying to be replaced by *shalom*."²

It is often thought that faith and politics should not be mixed, but in this prayer that we pray faithfully and regularly, Jesus uses a political term to describe God's intended culmination for all of history: the kingdom of God. In our country, the concept of a kingdom is outmoded. In an age of liberal democracies, the idea of God's kingdom carried with it ideas of hierarchy and oppression. But in the first century, people could not conceive of a society other than a monarchy.

In the Roman Empire the emperor exercised power through armies. This was (ironically) called *Pax Romana*—peace sustained by force. The Lord's Prayer bases God's power not on force, but on authority. "Authority, in the Roman sense, meant an innate quality possessed by someone that made his or her views and opinions worthy of belief and obedience."³ In praying for the advent of God's kingdom, we acknowledge that God is worthy of obedience. We place ourselves under God's rule and reign. We claim our citizenship in the kingdom of God.

With dual citizenship in the world and the kingdom of God, we often find ourselves in a power struggle between the two. There are different opinions about who is in charge and whose will ultimately counts. The will of God is often in tension with the will of human beings. Our faith and allegiance to God often calls us to oppose the ways of the world. That's not easy, nor is it comfortable. Jesus lost his life for choosing obedience to God's rule over obedience to an oppressive human regime. But every time we chose the way of God over against the way of the world, we are participating in the creative energy of God that is forming a new visible community based upon rule of God. God's kingdom does not come through expedient annihilation; it comes through the slow process of transformation. In God's commonwealth, the ultimate power is love, not force.

I have not yet seen the movie *Hotel Rwanda*, but from the reviews I have read I believe that it offers a model of how the kingdom of God is breaking in upon a world of destruction. In 1994 Paul Rusesabagina, a hotel manager in Kigali, Rwanda, risked his life to help save more than 1,200 men, women and children from the ethnic cleansing that wiped out nearly 1 million Rwandans in 100 days. Paul, a Hutu, runs a tight ship at the Belgian-owned Hotel Mille Collines, whose customers are mostly foreigners and wealthy Rwandans. He stores up favors in case he needs them someday for his family, which includes his Tutsi wife, Tatiana, and three children.

When the Hutu president is killed immediately after signing a peace accord, the Hutus start their bloody rampage against the Tutsis, brandishing their machetes. Returning home from work through burning streets, Paul finds a dozen or so Tutsi neighbors hiding at his house. They have come to him because he is a good man and the only Hutu they can trust.

Paul takes them in, bargains for their lives, and back at the hotel continues to accept terrified Tutsis from all corners of the exploding city. Adopting the attitude that “there is room at the inn,” he fills every nook and cranny of the hotel with those fleeing the terror in the streets. Although Paul has been adept at trading favors to stay on the good side of power, he comes to recognize the face of evil and risks his life to resist it.⁴

Faith in God may be personal, but it is never meant to be private. God created individuals as part of a larger community. We are interdependent beings who need one another in order to insure the health and well-being of each and every one. In praying “Thy kingdom come,” we are asking God to deliver God’s kingdom. But through our request, we are offering our energies to God in modest obedience. We are pledging ourselves to become part of God’s intended purpose for the world.

Closely related to the first two petitions regarding God’s needs, the hallowing of God’s name and the coming of God’s kingdom, is the third petition: “Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven.” Again the prayer is that God take the initiative to bring about change. We stubborn, rebellious human beings find it difficult to bend our wills to do God’s will.

God’s will is often misunderstood as whatever happens in our lives. But it is impossible to reconcile natural disasters, accidents, and violence that destroy life with the ministry of Jesus who came to restore life, to make the broken whole, and to heal the wounded. Jesus is evidence that God’s will for the created order is goodness, beauty, wholeness, healing, and life. God does not hurt us for our own good, to test us, to punish us, to teach us a

lesson. God is not cruel. God is good and God's desire is for our goodness and well-being, and the well-being of all creation. God desires our life, not our death.

In addition to asking God to work God's will in the world, we again are aligning ourselves with God's will. Our culture offers a vast supermarket of desires that we are constantly encouraged to consume. We must always be discerning between the temptations of the world, our personal desires, and the will of God. Our prayer is that we have our lives caught up in the adventure of what God is doing in the world. One pastor's daily prayer is this: "Lord, put me in the center of your will. Let me bless what you are doing."⁵

When we pray for God's will to be done "in earth as it is in heaven," we do well to remember that we are made of earth. Praying for God's will to be done "in earth" invites God into the earth that is us, into the matter of our lives. It opens the door for God to change us at the deepest levels of our being so that we come to will what God wills.

There are some people who are so attune to God's will for themselves and for others that their lives are reflections of the kingdom of God. One of these persons was Methodist Bishop Donald Tippett. Two young men were planning a robbery in New York and wanted to establish an alibi by visiting a pastor in New York City. So they asked to see Bishop Tippett, who invited them into his study. While they were talking together, an important phone call came for the bishop. He decided to take it in another room, so he left his study. The young men thought he knew their plan, so they jumped him and, using brass knuckles, knocked him down, doing permanent damage to his left eye, which drooped for the rest of his life. When they were apprehended and charged, he pleaded for a reduced sentence. When they were imprisoned, he visited them. And, hard as it is to believe, he helped one of them through college and medical school, and saw him become, of all things, an ophthalmologist. The joy and the power of the kingdom of God were already present in Donald Tippett.⁶

Jesus' vision in the Lord's Prayer is that ultimately in God's promised kingdom human beings will accomplish God's will. Then God's purpose for all creation will be realized. God's creative energy continues to move the world toward that end. We can participate in the innovative activity of God, dedicating our energy, our wills, our lives toward fulfilling the purpose of God.

When we pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven," we best put on our crash helmets, for the kingdom of God is

breaking in upon us and around when the people of God offer their lives for the cause of God.

May we be so bold to pray and live for the cause of God.

Eternal Spirit, Earth-Maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver,
source of all that is and that shall be,
Father and Mother of us all.

Love God, in whom is heaven.

The hallowing of your name echoes through the universe!

The way of your justice be followed by the peoples of the earth!

Your heavenly will be done by all created beings!

Your commonwealth of peace and freedom sustain our hope and come on earth.

With the bread we need for today, feed us.

In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.

In times of temptation and test, spare us.

From the grip of all that is evil, free us.

For you reign in the glory of the power that is love, now and forever.

Amen.

The Book of Common Prayer of New Zealand

¹ Annie Dillard, *Teaching A Stone to Talk* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), pp. 40-41.

² David Buttrick, *Speaking Jesus: Homiletic Theology and The Sermon on the Mount* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), p. 144.

³ Michael Joseph Brown, "A Prayer for All People," *Sojourners*, July-August, 2000, pp. 42ff.

⁴ John Petrakis, "Room at the inn," *The Christian Century*, January 25, 2005, p. 42.

⁵ William M. Easum, *Leadership on the Other Side* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), p. 19.

⁶ Ronald S. James, "Communion and the Coming Kingdom," *Weavngs*, January/February 1987, p. 31.

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