

"THY KINGDOM COME"

Text: Matthew 6:5-13

A Sermon on the Lord's Prayer

Preached at Union Church of Manila

and

at the University Presbyterian Church

Seattle, Washington

June 23, 1968

by

Rev. Earl F. Palmer

"And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

"And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then like this:

Our Father who art in heaven,  
Hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come,  
Thy will be done  
On earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread,  
And forgive us our debts,  
As we also have forgiven our debtors;  
And lead us not into temptation,  
But deliver us from evil."

It was natural that the twelve men who followed Jesus Christ as his disciples would ask him to teach them how to pray. Prayer is a central part of all religions. In the first century students in the Rabbinic Schools memorized eighteen special prayers for each day. In fact, the largest part of the Dead Sea Scrolls are devoted to the technical prayers for each occasion and situation of individual and communal living. But Jesus has been with his disciples for perhaps a year and he has yet to instruct them in a single liturgical prayer. Therefore, his men ask the question that opens this text. "Lord, teach us to pray." Both Matthew and Luke record this remarkable prayer that Jesus taught to the church. It is brief, only a few sentences; it is simple, even a small child can grasp its points; it is universal, it lacks the religious tone and hiddenness of the bulk of religious literature; it is plural,

unlike mysticism which tends to be egocentric and super-individualistic. This prayer is an "our" prayer throughout which binds the one who says it to his neighbor as well as to his heavenly father.

The Lord's Prayer begins, "Our Father." We in this century hear these two opening words without amazement, but when Jesus spoke them, because of their utter directness and familiarity, they were radically new words in the first century religious world. Christ has avoided the traditional Old Testament words for God which are all in one way or another oblique references to God. "Yaweh," the most famous, is literally translated "He is," This old Testament word for God is personal but nevertheless indirect. Also, the word "Eliohiom" which literally means "the mighty one," or "Sabaoth," "Lord of Hosts," etc. Jesus avoids these eloquent titles and begins the prayer with the very basic word: "father." He follows this with the Old Testament phrase, "The Holy, Heavenly One," which makes it clear that the God to whom he invites us to pray with the fearless word "father" is the same God as the Old Testament people had known, the Yaweh of Moses, of Abraham, Esau, and Jacob, David and the prophets.

Following this opening there are three main movements in the Lord's Prayer.

(1) Our prayer for the Kingdom of God: "Thy Kingdom come..."

(2) Our prayer for daily bread. We ask for the right to survive with enough to eat. Jesus teaches in this prayer that to ask for such an ordinary matter is proper.

(3) He teaches us to pray for moral help. "Total help for total need." (Karl Barth) We pray for the resolution of our guilt "forgiveness of our sins." Then we pray for the courage to spell out the implications of that inward forgiveness toward the neighbors around us. This is not a bargain with God where I promise to love if I am loved, but it is a prayer. The prayer closes with the earnest call for protection from temptation, dangers too great for our own instinctive resources, and at this point the prayer ends. The "Our Father" prayer closes without an ending. The phrase, "For thine is the kingdom..." does not appear in the earliest manuscripts and was later reverently added as a natural aspiration in gratitude to God for his kindness and power. But, as Jesus gave us the prayer it ends by surprise as if to invite us to now open our hearts to the Father; the doorway is open; rightness is established and whatever are the deep concerns of our hearts are now completely appropriate and legitimate.

Today I want to talk about the first request of this brief prayer. Jesus tells us that before anything else, pray "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." We are to pray for the presence of God the Father, the kingly ruler. Kingdom of God means simply the kingly reign of God and this is what Christ teaches us to pray first of all: before food, before we seek inner resolution of any moral crises and before we pray for ethical imperatives and goals.

Jesus seems to think that I should want to pray for the Kingdom of God as my very first prayer. Well, what do you honestly think about that?

Realistically, is the prayer for the kingdom of God your very first longing -- is it?

Several months ago I was determined to preach a series of sermons to my congregation at the Union Church of Manila on the Lord's Prayer, and I worked for weeks on this text. Soon I was excited by almost every part of the prayer. "Daily bread" was exciting to ponder because Christ, the shrewd realist that he was, had rejected mystical nonsense and had come out in favor of the earth and our part in it. I could not wait to help my congregation seize hold on that sentence. "Forgive us..." was a natural too, especially with the obvious interpersonal and individual needs of our time for resolution and ethical motivation. "Deliver us" came alive to me when I discovered the lexical meaning of the fascinating word "peiraow," which is the word translated "temptation."

But the first sentence: "Thy kingdom come," seemed to me then so spiritual, so religious, even sentimental and totally lacking in relevance I resented the order and arrangement of the prayer. It seemed to me that the logical order would be bread first, forgiveness, ethical involvement in the world, and then after these critical needs are met, I would be in the mood for the kingdom of God. What I mean is that it seemed to me that the urgency quotient of "Thy kingdom come" was of a lesser weight than the other parts of the prayer. In everything Jesus of Nazareth had said, there was an unmistakable realism and grasp on his part of the true moods and feelings of people, and I was honestly disappointed with the first sentence of the "Lord's Prayer" on that very ground; so much so that I was sure that the listener of this twentieth century generation would ridicule the prayer precisely because of its pious beginning.

And then like the lightning that strikes by surprise in a tropical storm, the stark, vivid, unforgettable meaning of the phrase, "Thy kingdom come" struck me. When I discovered what that opening sentence really meant I was convinced of its intense relevance and urgency for our generation.

Imagine that you are at the old and beautiful Peninsula Hotel, Hong Kong, and the date is mid-December, 1941. You are attending an Officers' pre-Christmas Ball. (There was one on the very night of the first military attack upon the Crown Colony.) The evening seen by itself poses no problems. At that moment you are well cared for and clothed, you have not only daily bread but even more, "cake." Let us assume that your interpersonal relationships are healthy and that your inner moral self is resolved. But there is a sick feeling inside of you; the separate parts are presently intact, but the ground beneath them is deteriorating, breaking apart at the seams, and this giving way of the foundations causes the individual parts which appear normal and the same as before to have about them an odd feeling of unreality.

Have you ever seen a little child lost from his parents in a park? The park police have him in tow, he has an ice cream cone in one hand and a toy in the other, daily bread and the question of guilt are not pertinent questions. But nevertheless, though the parts are all unbroken, the distress of the child is overwhelming.

A few months ago I was a speaker to Air Force personnel at Camp John Hay in Baguio, Philippines. This is a beautiful U. S. recreational base built around 1920 in the Baguio mountains, some 5000 feet above sea level. One evening

at about 5:00 o'clock p.m. I was watching the flag ceremony as the Republic of the Philippines and the U. S. flags were lowered. At about 40,000 feet in the sky I could see some four B-52's travelling toward the East like incredible arrows across the sky. In that pensive moment, I looked around at the charming setting of the Camp John Hay, each of the buildings are in perfect repair, freshly painted, clean, yet unmistakably old, dated. There are no new buildings under construction though the present structures are well maintained. It seemed to me that these buildings were symbolic of American military presence in the Philippines and Asia and perhaps this is good and necessary. But in a larger sense, in that moment I was struck with the terrifying awareness of the impermanence of our time. I think that we feel this impermanence more intensely now than ever before in history; the parts may or may not be intact, but the foundations are uncertain.

"This is our true state; this is what makes us incapable of certain knowledge and of absolute ignorance. We sail within a vast sphere ever drifting in uncertainty, driven from end to end. When we think to attach ourselves to any point and to fasten to it, it wavers and leaves us; and if we follow it, it eludes our grasp, slips past us, and vanishes for ever. Nothing stays for us. This is our natural condition, and yet most contrary to our inclination; we burn with desire to find solid ground and an ultimate sure foundation whereon to build a tower reaching to the Infinite. But our whole groundwork cracks, and the earth opens to abysses."

....Pascal

Jesus Christ taught us to pray before all other requests. "O, God, place a ground beneath everything or we will perish." Thy kingdom come. This is what the prayer means. The kingdom of God is the very ground beneath every other part and relationship. Without this ground everything that we build sooner or later collapses, is swallowed up by the course of parallel events and finally, by time itself.

In the Christian doctrine of prayer remember two things:

(1) What Jesus Christ has instructed us to pray for, he will grant to us. There is a king and he stands beneath human history; therefore, if we honestly desire his kingly reign at the ground level of our lives, such a desire will not go unanswered. There are times when we feel that great cracks are opening up beneath our social order and our individual destinies, but the Lord's Prayer begins with the most basic affirmation of all - ask this and it will be yours. "Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven." The kingly reign of Christ is not limited to heaven; it is our legacy too. Ask for it when the separate parts are in order or if they are in shambles. Either way, the Lord offers to us the right to choose this kingdom.

(2) Secondly, it is a basic principle in the Christian understanding of prayer that what we pray for we must give ourselves to. In the "Our Father" we pray for daily bread. Then we must face up to our responsibility over the earth for Christ's sake.

We pray for forgiveness; then stand with your head erect without self-pity or self-hatred. We pray for reconciliation toward the neighbor next to us; then become creatively involved in living out such a prayer. If we pray "Thy kingdom come," then seek the King.