

LENT - 3

Jesus said to his disciples, "Say this when you pray:

"Father, may your name be held holy, your kingdom come" - this is St. Luke's version of the Lord's prayer.

St. Matthew adds, "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven".

Jesus taught his followers to pray for the coming of God's kingdom on earth. Whenever we pray, we are trying to respond to that teaching. All our prayer is really directed towards that end - the fulfilling of that one petition - "thy kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven".

But what does it mean – Thy Kingdom come? It is so often repeated, sometimes almost mechanically without much thought. We seldom stop to think of its meaning.

The coming of God's kingdom, God's rule here on earth must surely imply a complete transformation of human society - its politics, its economics, its personal, group, institutional and international relationships. If God were to be really and truly in control – ruling as a King – the affairs of mankind here on earth things would surely be radically different. So in fact we could do well to use that petition as a mantra - a prayer which we repeat inwardly to ourselves and to God as we go about our daily routines - "thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven". Because, whenever we hear of the exploitation of children - whenever we meet with injustice or corruption - whenever we meet with tragedy - whenever we are tempted –

if we repeat the prayer - "thy kingdom come on earth, as it is in heaven" we become agents of redemption - instruments of God in that situation. In a small way, when we pray 'Thy Kingdom come on earth' we are affirming our allegiance to Christ who died for that purpose – to redeem the world.

So it is an amazing, courageous, foolhardy even, faith inspired prayer. The world appears to be in the grip of so many powers of darkness. The super powers, the multinational companies, the drug barons, the oil sheikhs; they all claim that theirs is the kingdom - they are the rulers - but the simple petition "thy kingdom come on earth" stubbornly persists and denies their claims.

We are not asking that God should intervene miraculously and impose his rule on earth. When Jesus hung on the cross the onlookers taunted him, "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross and we will believe in him". But no - this is not God's way. The power of God is seen in the way of the cross - the way of self-giving love. In a sense therefore, the follower of Jesus is an agent of change - an agent of transformation - bringing the power of love to bear on every situation of human sin and weakness whether it is an act of terrorism in Ireland or in East Africa or the conflict in Iraq. All these events provide material for our prayers – Thy Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

But what effect does our praying have? What is going on - what is happening when we pray. What are we hoping for

when we pray in our intercessions "Give wisdom to all in authority, bless Elizabeth our Queen, and direct this nation and all nations in the ways of justice and of peace; that men may honour one another and seek the common good".

First, one thing must be clear and obvious. We are hopeful that such changes are possible - such changes are conceivable. However naive it might sound to people who don't pray, we are expressing faith and hope by simply saying Amen to those words - "direct this nation and all nations in the way of justice and peace" - we commit ourselves to that possibility. To the hardened sceptic, we are saying that we believe that people can change, that human nature can be redeemed.

Secondly, we are acknowledging that there exists a power beyond ourselves - a power with whom we can align ourselves. That power, we call God - the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is His world, and it is his kingdom, his rule, which we long for. The manner in which his kingdom comes is shown to us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the way of suffering and death - yet it is a way into a new quality of life, which is described in the New Testament as eternal life.

Thirdly, when we pray, we are committing ourselves to action. Our integrity demands that what we say with our lips may be seen in our lives by giving ourselves to his service.

So when you pray, said Jesus, pray thus; " Father, thy name be hallowed; thy kingdom come, on earth as in heaven."

To sum up then; The kingdom is not to be imposed by supernatural intervention - nor is it a process of 'spiritual' or 'internal' change which will leave the outer injustices and corruptions looking much the same. The kingdom of God is nothing less than the transformation of the real world in which we live, move and have our being.

St. Paul expresses this hope in words from our New Testament reading, taken from the letter to the Ephesians; "Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think, to him be glory in the church and in Jesus Christ to all generations, for ever and ever."

AMEN.