

Studies on the Lord's Prayer

7. The kingdom, the power and the glory are yours...



Over the past weeks we've been taking a fresh look at the all-too familiar words of the Lord's Prayer—or, perhaps more appropriately, the *disciple's* prayer ... the prayer Jesus taught his disciples to pray. And so the prayer which, in praying, we return again and again to the core of what it means to be a disciple, a *follower* of Jesus.

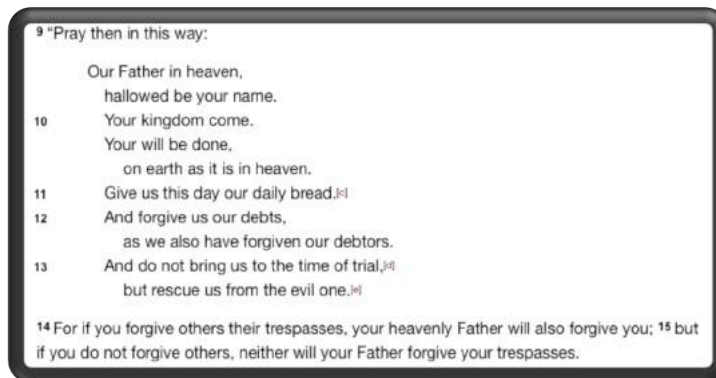
We've seen that this is not a prayer to be prayed lightly or in an unthinking manner. Because each of its petitions involves us in some radical and life-changing commitments, if we mean them, and if we act upon them. And if we don't mean to act upon them, then it would certainly be best for us not to pray them, but to remain silent instead. To ask God to make his kingdom a reality in our lives, to hallow his name in our lives, to make us reliant upon his providence and instruments of his just redistribution of resources, to ask him to turn us into the sort of people whose disposition to others is a direct reflection of God's forgiving disposition towards us, and so instruments of his peace—none of this should be signed up for lightly. And sign up for it is precisely what we do whenever we take this prayer and make it our own. It's a manifesto for a revolutionary lifestyle, not a bit of spiritually uplifting sentiment for those with a vague sense that church on a Sunday is a respectable place to be seen to be, but no particular desire for God actually to show up and begin to do things that might interfere with the rest of the week, let alone messy and challenging things designed to rock the boat of our



neatly ordered lives, or compel us to stand out like a sore thumb in the gaze of our friends and neighbours and workmates. If that's where you find yourself (and which of us doesn't find ourselves there sometimes), then for heaven's sake don't pray this prayer! You pray it at your peril! Because you may just find that God takes you at your word, and answers it.

Well, we have reached the final few power-packed words of this prayer. 'Father ... yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever'.

At first blush this sounds like little more than a neat bit of liturgical tying up of loose ends. And in a sense that's what it is. Prayers typically end with some such ascription or invocation, and this one is no different. But there's more to it than that. Because there's a sense in which into these final few words is compressed the thing upon which everything hinges: which is why the phrase begins with that little word 'for'. Father do all this, we pray, *for* yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever'. It's because the kingdom and the power and the glory belong to our heavenly Father for ever, and not to anyone or anything else, that we can pray the rest of the prayer with confidence, and that we must pray it. Because into these words—kingdom, power and glory—is poured the whole of God's character as that is revealed to us in scripture. And so what we are really praying is: because we can trust that the *final reality* of things, the *enduring reality* of things is kingdom, power and glory of the sort that we have come to understand belong to *you* (and not some other sort of kingdom, power or glory), we *can* pray this prayer with confidence, and we *must* pray it—because in praying it we align ourselves again and again with that same sort of kingdom, power and glory, and open ourselves to its influence in our lives.



If you turn to the Lord's Prayer as we find it in Matthew 6 or Luke 11, you'll notice that some translations don't contain this final phrase, while others place it in brackets [like this], and still others include it but add a footnote indicating its historical dubiety. The reason for this is that the oldest and most

reliable manuscripts of the gospels don't contain it, stopping (as the NRSV which we use in church does) with 'Lead us not into temptation'. So, did Jesus actually say and teach his disciples to say these last few words, or not? Well, we don't know! What we do know, though, is that the tradition of including it or adding it to the version of the prayer used in church began very early indeed, and that it is highly unlikely that Jesus actually ended the prayer with 'deliver us from evil' (no matter what the most reliable manuscripts say!). It is almost unthinkable that a Jewish rabbi would not conclude a prayer with a phrase *like* this one (it's a bit like a Christian prayer not ending with 'in Jesus' name' or some other such formula—it just feels wrong!), and this one fits very neatly with the rest of the prayer, bringing us back to its beginning and the petition that God's kingdom should come. So, taking all that into consideration, and bearing in mind the work of the Holy Spirit in 'inspiring' the authors and editors of the different parts of our Bible and the church in its continuing task of interpreting it, we can, I think maintain that, since Jesus almost certainly said something very like this (and may well have said *precisely* this), and since this ending fits very well with all that

precedes it, we can happily adopt it as an appropriate 'wrapping up' of the prayer he passed on to us.

We all know what kingdom, power and glory look like in human terms of course. And often it's not a pretty sight. With power, sooner or later, there is typically corruption of some sort, no matter how promising or genuine its early manifestations. And the more absolute the power, the more serious the impact of its corruption tends to be. Where human beings are concerned, power (and the wealth which undergirds and directs it) generally exists in an uneasy relationship with truth and justice. Having secured power, the options available for



holding on to it so often seem to involve being willing to compromise one or the other of those, riding roughshod or being willing to exploit or deceive others. And, when this has gone on for long enough or too long, the means for getting rid of those in power are often equally unsatisfactory and sometimes unsavoury. Even in a democracy like our own, shifts in government are typically messy, promises being made which are then so often not kept, disillusionment setting in sooner or later. And, while there is perhaps a certain amount of glory attached to the acquisition of political power, there is all too often a subsequent fall from grace or worse, when we discover that those who walk or stalk the corridors of power are, after all, 'only human', and incapable of bearing the sorts of responsibility and expectation we heap upon their shoulders.

I suppose 'glory' is a commodity which in our society is rather more commonly associated with the so-called 'stars' of stage and screen and sports stadium than with politicians. Some of them famous for their actual achievements, and others, it seems, famous simply for being famous. And with such 'celebrity' often goes wealth and a jet-setting lifestyle to which ordinary people aspire, so that their adulation is typically shot through with a certain amount of envy. But again, so much of all this is all about image, and the ability to fashion and to maintain and to pedal an image so that the public at large sees what those who promote the cult of celebrity want them to see. And, even as we buy the product, we are



aware that the reality, beneath the surface or behind the carefully painted veneer, is different. And if those whom we put in such precarious positions don't abuse their power in one way or another, we know that sooner or later we shall be able to enjoy seeing them washed up, having lost their grip on the limelight, and resorting to appearance on some reality TV show or other in order to recharge the

bank account and maintain the life to which they have become accustomed.

There was no reality TV in Jesus' day, and no very obvious counterpart to the cult of celebrity. But power and glory were as much sought after by those in a position to do so as they always have been. And the forms they typically took were no less messy or problematic. The world of politics was, if anything, even more colourful and dramatic than in our own. As Jesus makes his way towards Jerusalem in our gospel reading this morning, the territory around the city is full of Roman soldiers, 'squaddies' charged with crowd control at one of the busiest



festivals of the year. But power, humanly speaking, is basking in its own glory hundreds of miles away in Rome, where Gaius Octavius (better known to us from Luke's Gospel as 'Caesar Augustus' or 'the great Emperor' – not known for his humility of spirit) rules with a rod of iron, exercising power of a sort few can have had at their control before

or since. Augustus was certainly an effective ruler, and perhaps for that reason a long-serving one. Under his rule the Roman Empire attained a newfound stability and peace—the famous 'pax Romana'—which meant that you could travel its length and breadth on the nice new Roman roads with reasonable confidence of arriving at your destination with your body parts all still intact. But such benefits came at a cost. A literal cost, to those (like those in Palestine) whose money poured into Roman coffers thanks to exploitative levels of tax (don't forget that 'tax-collectors' are not generally well thought of in the gospels!), and at the cost too of ruthless violence meted out to any who fell foul of Roman law or threatened to cause a disturbance in the force. Augustus enjoyed absolute power, and was feted as a demi-god. But this was kingdom, power and glory achieved and sustained by violence and with little regard for truth and justice wherever these proved less than convenient.

As Jesus approached Jerusalem, travelling over the hills to the east of the city with his disciples, he sent some of them ahead to borrow a colt and bring it to him. And when they returned, he climbed onto the colt and rode into the city on its back. On the face of it, it's an odd thing to do, and an odd thing for the gospel writers to pay much attention to. So, Jesus gets tired like the rest of us. So what?



But there's much more to this than meets the eye of course, as the behavior of the disciples and the crowds indicates: 'As he rode along', we read, 'people kept

spreading their cloaks on the road (and) as he (came) down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice ... saying "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!". For those who have read the whole Gospel, this echoes another incident, back in Chapter 2, where Caesar Augustus (the same one) lifts his little finger in Rome and sends people scurrying all over the Empire to get themselves registered in a census: and, on a hill outside the town of Bethlehem, some shepherds are unexpectedly treated to a *son e lumiere* display of the highest order: again it's a multitude, not of disciples this time, but of angels, praising God and saying "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours". Power and glory and kingdom – and *peace. Shalom.* The word doesn't just mean 'peace and quiet' or



the absence of disturbance, but the sort of overall well-being that we enjoy in being at one with God, at one with one another, and at one with the world God has made for us to dwell in. Peace and joy are closely related. Joy, it's been said, is peace dancing; and peace is joy resting.

Kingdom, glory and power. But not those of Caesar Augustus. Not those of any form of human politics or power-mongering. But a kingdom, glory and power whose hallmark and accomplishment is peace and joy. A kingdom, glory and power in which

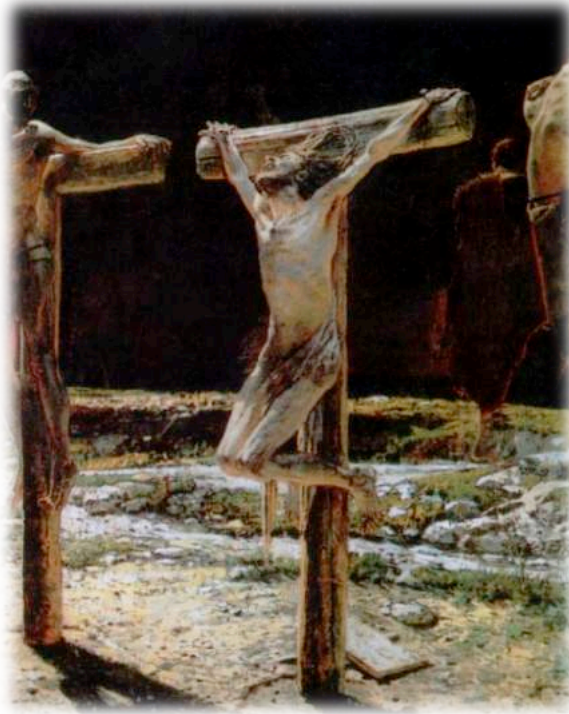
Gods' name is hallowed, in which justice is done, in which mercy and forgiveness heal all ills; in which evil is overcome and finally banished. It's a tall order, and one which few human rulers would pretend to lay claim. Because it's beyond human capacity, left to our own devices.

Israel, though, entertained a hope that one day God himself would come and claim the throne as his own, and that his rule would precisely be one in which power and glory were exercised and enjoyed in ways that made for justice, joy and peace. One version of that hope is found in the prophet Zechariah in Chapter 9 where we read: "Rejoice greatly ... O Jerusalem! Shout aloud! Lo, your king comes to you, triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth'.

Kingdom, power and glory alright. And on a scale and a scope casting even the accomplishments of the Pax Romana in the shade. But more importantly, of a sort wholly unprecedented and, in purely human terms, impossible. A king who rides into his rightful capitol not on a charger, but on a donkey—gentle and humble. A peace that is no mere absence of conflict secured by fear and the

threat of violence, but a creaturely well-being characterized by joy, and the hallowing of God's name on earth.

This is the ancient hope the remembrance of which Jesus deliberately evokes and stirs up by ordering a ride. It's the hope that the disciples revel in as they burst into songs of praise. It's the same hope that the angels were singing about all those chapters ago on a chilly hillside. And now, Jesus is suggesting, in his own arrival in the holy city on the back of a colt, this same promise, this same hope is at last being fulfilled. God himself, in flesh and blood, is here; and in what



happens over the coming days (over this coming holy week) we shall see just what God's power and glory are like when they confront the power of any and every kingdom made by human hands. The king is about to be lifted up for all to see, and to do what only he can do and must do to defeat evil and to deliver us from its clutches. And to show us what 'the kingdom, the power and the glory' on which the universe itself is founded and by which it is sustained are really like; and revealing so much of what passes for kingdom, power and glory in the world as at best a sorry counterfeit, and at worst something much more dangerous and frightening altogether.

