

Studies on the Lord's Prayer

3. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven



Jesus spent a lot of time teaching people about the kingdom of God. More significantly, he linked the beginning of his own ministry with the appearance of the kingdom on earth. In the Gospel of Mark, we find Jesus, immediately after his baptism by John and having had the Holy Spirit poured out upon him by his heavenly Father, driven into the wilderness to experience forty days of testing. Once that was over he was ready to embark on his ministry in Galilee. And what was the main thrust of his teaching when he did so? 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the good news!' (Mk 1.14-15)

Nor was this just a bit of good timing. The imminence of the longed-for kingdom of God was linked to Jesus much more concretely than that. 'If, by the power of God's Spirit, I cast out demons', he told the crowds, 'then the kingdom of God *has* come upon you' (Mt. 12.28). In other words, in Jesus' own presence and actions, God's kingdom is now present, to be recognised by

those with eyes to see and ears to hear. A kingdom needs a king, and a king is precisely what Israel has been longing and waiting for. And now, in the person of Jesus, baptised and anointed uniquely with God's Holy Spirit (bear in mind that *this* is the fact to which the NT directs us again and again in its description of him courtesy of a title which only



gradually hardened into a proper name: he is, simply, 'the anointed one'—*mashiach/messiah/christos*), named as God's beloved Son, proclaiming the good news of liberation and salvation through repentance and forgiveness, healing the sick, releasing those held captive by powers and principalities (the 'kingdom of this world'; see Jn 12.31;16.11), *the king has at last arrived*—even if he does not quite fit the person specification Israel has long since drawn up for him in her religious imagination.

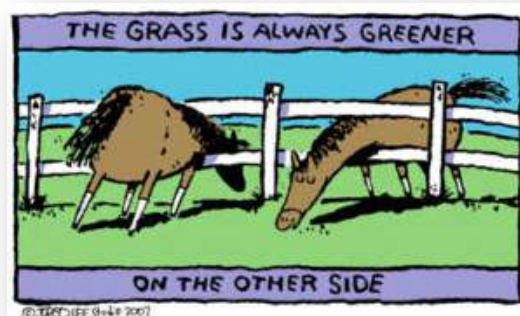
But we should probably back up a bit, and remind ourselves of some things about Israel's experience of monarchy, which was, to say the least, rather a mixed one.

Israel was not originally a kingdom, and had no natural homeland. The Old Testament tells the story of her origins in the escape of a bunch of slaves from captivity and enforced labour in Egypt, led by a seditious figure called Moses, and under the promise of God that she would indwell a land of 'milk and honey'—in other words, a rich and fertile territory that she could call her own (even though she would have to acquire it by force). When, after forty years wandering in the wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula, Israel eventually occupied the land of Canaan, it was under the leadership of Joshua, another charismatic individual raised up by God to keep in order what was otherwise still a

bedraggled bunch of peoples belonging to different tribes, and united only by their common ancestry and their worship of the same God—the God who had revealed himself to Moses as the God of their ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and who had established a ‘covenant’ with them according to which ‘You shall be my people and I will be your God’.

Having occupied the ‘land of the promise’, Israel remained an association of twelve different tribes, occupying different territories, and ruled over by a series of ‘Judges’ who followed on from the sort of political and religious authority exercised by Moses and Joshua after him. The greatest of these was Samuel, after whom two books of our Old Testament are named. And it was towards the end of Samuel’s time in office that

Israel, having settled into the land and put down some roots, began to look across her borders and compare herself unfavourably with the nations around her. Among other things that they all had and she did not have was a monarch, and all the trimmings and prestige and pomp and ceremony that goes with a royal family. 1 Samuel chapter 8 tells the story of how the elders of the tribes of Israel paid Samuel a visit and demanded that he should appoint a king over



them. Samuel, no doubt slightly piqued that his own leadership was being judged insufficient, consults with God (whose human representative he is in exercising his rule over the nation), and God responds as follows: ‘Listen to the voice of the people in regard to all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. ... (h)owever you shall solemnly warn them and tell them of the procedure of the king who will rule over them’ (1 Sam. 8.7-9).

Two things are important in this exchange. The first is by far the most important: the reason that Israel did not have a king was because, in the terms of the covenant which God had made with her, *God himself* was to be her king, ruling over her directly through his own chosen and appointed human agents (the judges). Why on earth should Israel desire a human king, when she had what no other nation had ever had—the ‘rule’, or reign, or ‘kingdom’ of God himself. What an amazing privilege! What an amazing king! But Israel was, like most of us, easily swayed by what others had and she herself lacked. She had a hankering after the glitz and the glory, the commemorative mugs and tea-towels and other ‘royal’ paraphernalia that go with a human monarchy. And no doubt she thought she would be bettering herself and her international prospects by acquiring one. God, of course, knew otherwise. And so, secondly, he instructs Samuel to warn Israel of the inevitable consequences of her choice. Monarchy invested in a God whose



very nature is holiness, goodness, justice and mercy is one thing. Monarchy invested in even the best and most well-intentioned of human beings is always going to be something else. And so, of course, it proved to be. And while, after a hiccup with King Saul, things went reasonably well during the reign of David, and of his son Solomon, with Solomon’s death the wheels began to come off the whole project. Politics of an all-

too familiar sort entered in at once, and the nation fragmented into two parts, each ruled over thereafter by a series of kings, some better and some worse, some faithful to their calling to be, in effect, God's regent among the people, and others wholly disdainful of it and clinging to power and its trappings for their own ends. You can read the story for yourselves in the OT books of 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings. At the end of it all, both the northern and the southern kingdoms (Israel and Judah as they were known) had slipped into political, social and religious degeneracy, until eventually one or another of those bigger nations whose royal heritage had once so beguiled her invaded the land, defeated her armies, sacked her cities and crushed her power. And that was the end of Israel's flirtation with the institution of monarchy. The project was over, and it would never be revived. Israel would remain an occupied territory or vassal state of one empire or another (Assyrian, Babylonian, Greek and Roman) for the rest of her days.



Except that the idea of having a king didn't altogether go away. In fact, among various groups within the 'nation' (such as it now was) of Israel, the idea began to gain more urgency and more force. But now, a salutary lesson having been learned about the dangers of human kings, what was being remembered and revived was that old religious idea that God (who, though Israel was in exile and forced to 'sing the Lord's song in a strange land', was *still* her God) was her true king, whose reign alone could bring justice and peace and well-being. Indeed, true kingship, the sort that any nation might gladly submit itself to, was to be found in God alone, whose character, *unlike* that of human monarchs, was good and righteous and merciful and entirely trustworthy. And this was good news, because, Israel came increasingly to recognize, this God (YHWH, or the LORD) was not just her own national deity, but the one who had created all things in the beginning, and so was the only true God, the all-powerful Lord or King of all.

This, then, was the context in which religious hopes and expectations began to coagulate once again around the notion of kingship and kingdom; but this time it was the coming of *God* as King and the establishment of God's kingdom (his rule or reign) on earth that was the focus. This is a theme that resounds through the great prophets of exile, especially Isaiah and Ezekiel, as they share their visions of a great 'Day of YHWH (the LORD)', when God would finally act to establish his reign on earth, executing his justice



and exercising his mercy to put to rights the wrongs and injustices of history, healing hurts, restoring goodness, liberating captives and purging sin. For Israel in political exile, for us in the 'exile' of fallen and sinful existence, this is good news! So Isaiah insists: 'How lovely on the mountains are the feet of him who ... announces peace, and brings news of happiness, who announces salvation, and says to Zion, "Your God reigns!"' (Isa. 52.7).

Your God *reigns!* That is, your God *is king*; the time of his kingdom has come! And he is not king of Israel alone, but of the whole world, of all that he has created. So, Isaiah continues: 'The LORD has bared his holy arm in the sight of all nations, that all the ends of the earth may see the salvation of our God' (52.10). The kingdom of God, the reign or rule of YHWH, then, is the establishment of God's sovereignty over all nations and all people in a manner that is visible and palpable, so that it makes an identifiable difference in the world. And it is to be a kingdom whose hallmarks are unlike those of any other kingdom we have ever known—the kingdom marked by power and justice, but exercised by one who is gentle and merciful, a shepherd to his people.

By the time we get back to Jesus, some 500 years or so later than all this, we find a situation in which Jesus' contemporaries were longing for the fulfilment of this prophetic vision and the divine promise contained in it. They were longing, in other words, for God's kingdom to arrive, and for God to take up his reign visibly on earth (as



it always is in heaven). And, labouring under Roman occupation, with a puppet dynasty (Herod and his ilk) maintained in place by the Emperor, the Jews could hardly wait for God to step in and claim the kingdom as his by right, and so bring about the massive upending and reversal of political, economic, social, religious and moral fortunes that would be bound to go with that. And, as the human agent through whose presence and involvement all this would happen, and whose appearance would herald the appearance of God's kingdom on earth, the Jews were looking for an 'anointed one' or Messiah, one born of David's line, and one whose holiness and faithfulness to God would erase the dreadful memory of Israel's failed monarchy, being instead the human symbol of her one true King in heaven.

When Jesus, shortly after his baptism in the Jordan, began a ministry in which he announced the arrival of God's kingdom, this was the fever-pitch expectation he was taking for granted among his hearers. He didn't need to explain to his hearers what the words 'kingdom of God' meant. All he had to do was use them, to apply them to his own person and ministry, and then watch as the ripples of excitement and energy and hope, and those of questioning and uncertainty, and those of resistance and incredulity and rejection all washed through the crowds who heard him and gathered to see what he would do next and what would happen to him. And, if Jesus doesn't exactly fit the bill as far as their ideal Messiah is concerned (they were thinking more Russell Crowe than Charles Hawtrey), there could be no doubt that remarkable things happened around Jesus, and there was never a dull moment to be had.



In fact, in claiming the kingdom of God as rightfully his own, Jesus both fulfilled the prophetic promise and, precisely in fulfilling it, blew it wide open! Instead of a kingdom belonging properly to God but introduced by yet another pair of human hands (albeit ones baptised and inspired by a rich outpouring of God's Holy Spirit), in Jesus the King himself finally makes an appearance, as God himself takes flesh and begins to reign on earth, acting out the role of King on the stage of history and clothed in our own humanity. In him we see what God's kingship amounts to when translated into human terms. And what we see is no common or garden kingship, but something very distinctive indeed. 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them', he tells his disciples, '(but) the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life



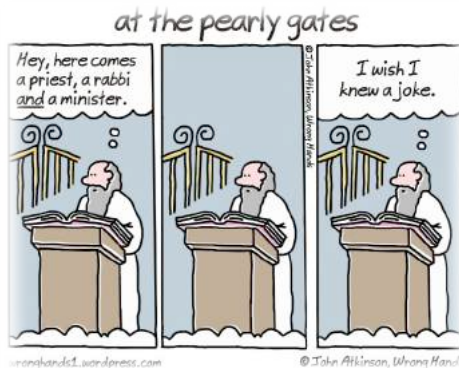
a ransom for many' (Mt. 20.25-6). True kingship, in other words, is not about naked power, wealth and privilege. True kingship is about power used to redeem even its enemies, about wealth enjoyed only as it is given away for the sake of others, about privilege which does not count status as such something to be vaunted, but empties itself out for the sake of others. True kingship is the sort exercised by the God who is holy love.

One way in which Jesus did *not* transform the notion of God's 'kingdom', though, was by *spiritualizing* it. True, he did once insist that, as King, 'my kingdom is not of this world' (Jn 18.36). But he certainly did not mean by this that it was a kingdom that would leave the externals of public life unscathed, a purely 'spiritual' or interior matter with no practical impact. His kingdom (or 'rule') was, to be sure, not one born of purely human aspirations, achievements or possibilities, and in this sense not 'of' this world. Instead it was 'from above', originating in God's own life and purposes, and in the Father's ordination and sending of him into the world, and reflecting the Father's own character. So, while there are all sorts of ways in which the kingdom of God (and Jesus' way of modelling what it means to be 'King') are quite different from the rule of the Medes and Persians, the differences are not ones that effectively *privatise* it, taking it out of the sphere of public reality and turning instead into a 'lifestyle choice', a matter of personal or domestic morals, spirituality and religiosity. The one who taught his disciples to love even their enemies, to give away their possessions when they were confronted by material need, to lend without expectation of return, to pardon without limit those who affronted or hurt them, and never to resort to violence as a response to violence could hardly have envisaged the kingdom as a purely spiritual or private affair (Mt 5; Lk 6. 20-38). On the contrary, his teachings were bound to be social and political dynamite to the extent that anyone were to take them seriously and implement them. And, as Jesus himself made quite clear, the cost of doing so would be mockery, persecution and suffering by those whose investment in the social, political and economic capital of 'the ways of the world' could only be threatened and eventually undermined by them. No wonder he encountered those who wanted to be associated with him, but who balked at actually following his rule of life (Lk 6.46). God's kingdom, the doing of God's

that He gave His only
n. **THINGS I WISH T**
ever **JESUS HAD** beli
not **NEVER SAID.** pe
7 God did not send his

will on earth as in heaven means, in other words, the transformation of our social, political and economic commitments and behaviour, and not just a turbocharged 'spiritual life'. To profess Jesus as Lord, while yet failing to do any of the radical and life-transforming things he tells us he wants us as citizens of his kingdom to do, is hypocrisy and cant. Unfortunately, it is also all too common.

And, of course, to pray for God's kingdom to come *on earth* means that we can hardly relegate it to some 'other-worldly' status, as though the here and now were meant to remain unscathed by its appearance. There is still more than a whiff of other-worldly



aspiration within Christian churches today, as though salvation were essentially a matter of waiting to be rescued from the contingencies and contradictions of this world, finally escaping them and leaving them behind as we are duly translated into 'heaven', a wholly other 'spiritual' realm in which disembodied souls enjoy having been liberated from material existence. Rather than salvaging souls and transporting them 'up to heaven', the Bible's vision is rather one in which heaven itself comes down to earth and is married with it

(see, e.g., Rev 21), redeeming our flesh and blood existence and 'making all things new' rather than consigning them to a cosmic dustbin and starting over. That's the point of belief in bodily resurrection rather than the mere survival beyond death of an immaterial 'soul'.

And, although Jesus can speak of God's kingdom as something as yet still to come (why else would he urge us to pray for its coming!), he also insists that in another sense it has already arrived and is present at work in the world. How can it be both, present and future, both now already, and not yet? Well, with the birth of Jesus and his eventual anointing for a messianic ministry, something decisive had happened in God's dealings with the world,



something wholly unprecedented in the course of human history: the King himself had at last appeared in person to inaugurate his reign. This is the burden of apostolic testimony about Jesus; that with his birth and life and passion and resurrection, the entire creation has reached a tipping point and shifted on its axis, so that from now on the triumph of God's kingdom over sin and evil and death is assured, though it is not yet completely accomplished. On the contrary, in the meanwhile the world is still blighted by injustice, by war, by disease, by starvation, by selfishness, by guilt, by shame and many other symptoms of a world still alienated from its Creator, and one in which he is not yet 'all in all'. The NT never supposes or pretends otherwise. But rather than encouraging us to speculate about God's reasons for not acting more quickly and more decisively to move out from the bridgehead he has established, invade enemy territory and defeat the remaining pockets of resistance to his reign (whether in individual lives or on the scale of history as a whole), what it encourages us to do instead is precisely to *pray* for the coming of God's kingdom—to pray, that is, that it may come ever more fully

and completely into existence as an identifiable reality in the concrete forms which human lives and communities take. And to pray 'your kingdom come on earth' is, of course, to commit ourselves and to open ourselves to being part of the change that still needs to take place. Here, as in other respects, it's no good thinking globally unless we are willing to act locally. In this regard our praying is, oddly enough, part of the answer to our own prayer!



Questions for reflection and/or discussion:

What are the differences between the sort of kingdom (or 'rule') we see in God and in Jesus, and the kingdoms of one sort or another we otherwise see around us in the world?

What might it mean for us to take seriously and begin to implement more faithfully some of Jesus' teaching (the things he wills us to do)?

Are there particular areas of our lives where we find such injunctions especially challenging?

What differences would it make to our daily living, our relationships with others, the concrete realities of life if we were to take the risk of extending his Lordship into these areas of our lives?

If we are to pray for *the coming of God's kingdom on earth*, and not that we might duly be 'beamed up' into a wholly different world ('heaven'), how might we think differently about our world and our experiences of embodied existence?