



# Thy kingdom come: Living the Lord's Prayer

by N. T. Wright

**W**HAT ARE we praying for when we pray for God's kingdom to come? The second main petition in the Lord's Prayer—"thy kingdom come"—rules out any idea that the kingdom of God is a purely heavenly (that is, "otherworldly") reality. Thy kingdom come, we pray, thy will be done, *on earth as it is in heaven*.

Sort out the familiar, but technical, terms. "Heaven" and "earth" are the two interlocking arenas of God's good world. Heaven is God's space, where God's writ runs and God's future purposes are waiting in the wings. Earth is our world, our space. Think of the vision at the end of the Book of Revelation. It isn't about humans being snatched up from earth to heaven. The holy city, new Jerusalem, comes down *from* heaven to earth. God's space and ours are finally married, integrated at last. That is what we pray for when we pray "thy kingdom come."

Jesus' contemporaries were longing for God to become King. Putting it bluntly, they were fed up with the other kings they'd had for long enough. As far as they were concerned, the Roman emperors were a curse, and the Herodian dynasty was a joke. It was time for the true God, the true King, to step into history, to take the power and the glory, to claim the kingdom for his own.

The prophets had promised it. Ezekiel: YHWH himself will come to be the shepherd of Israel. Zechariah: YHWH will come, and all his saints with him. Malachi (with more than a tinge of warning): The Lord, whom ye seek, will suddenly come to his temple. And, towering over them all, Isaiah: There will be a highway in the wilderness; the valleys and mountains will be flattened out; the glory of YHWH shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together. Zion hears her watchmen shouting, "Here is your God!" And Isaiah's message holds together the majesty and the gentleness of this God who comes in power and who comes to feed his flock like a shepherd, carrying the lambs and gently leading the mother sheep. This is the kingdom-message Jesus lived by; this prophetic vision is the basis of the Lord's Prayer.

But what will it mean, when Israel's God returns to be King? According to the same prophetic passages, there will be a new Exodus: the evil empire will be defeated, and God's people will be free.

How lovely on the mountains are the feet of the mes-

senger who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion "Your God reigns." Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of YHWH to Zion. YHWH has bared his holy arm in the sight of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God (Isa. 52:7-10).

Jesus, I think, knew these prophecies intimately, and deliberately made them the theme of his own work. When we sing of Zion hearing the watchmen's voices, we are singing the song Jesus himself had in mind as he told his followers to pray, *thy kingdom come*.

So was Jesus' kingdom-message, after all, simply about national and political liberation?

At this point Western Christianity has tended to say: of course not. Jesus wasn't into politics; he came with a spiritual message, the timeless and eternal truths of personal salvation. Well, that clearly won't do. We'd have to cut out the telltale phrase, *on earth, as it is in heaven*. Whatever Jesus' kingdom announcement was all about, it was about something that actually *happens*, within the space-time world.

But, equally, Jesus' parables regularly challenged the simple one-dimensional liberationist kingdom-vision that his contemporaries cherished. If Isaiah's message is about God's healing for the nations, about Israel's being the light of the world, this will not be achieved by military victory. To put it crudely, how can the Prince of Peace defeat evil if he has to abandon peace itself in order to do so?

No. Jesus took the three parts of Isaiah's kingdom-message and set about implementing them. Release for captive Israel; the defeat of evil; and the return of YHWH to Zion.

**F**IRST, RELEASE for captive Israel. Jesus tells a story of a son who goes off in disgrace into a pagan country, and who is welcomed back, astonishingly, with open arms and a huge party. For Jesus' first hearers, the story of the Prodigal Son wasn't just a timeless message of repentance and forgiveness. It was, rather, the story of the new Exodus, the liberation of captive Israel. But Jesus, in telling this story, was not issuing a call to arms in the struggle for liberty. He was explaining

**Jesus set out to implement the coming of God's kingdom, and he did so—though not in the expected way.**

why he was constantly celebrating the kingdom with the outcasts and misfits. Somehow, he seemed to be saying, through his strange work the kingdom was appearing, even though it didn't look like what people had imagined. This was how the captives were being released.

Second, Jesus spoke and acted as if evil's long reign would finally be defeated through his own work. Isaiah's kingdom-message promised defeat for the evil regime that had enslaved God's people. Woven into that message in Isaiah we find four poems about a strange character, the servant of the Lord, who will be God's agent in accomplishing this task. The prophecy as a whole (Isa. 40-55) sets out the promise of the kingship of God; the servant-songs within it describe how the promise is to be realized. Jesus volunteered for the job. This, he believed, was how evil would be defeated.

Third, Isaiah had declared that YHWH himself would return to his people: coming with power and justice, coming gentle as a shepherd. Jesus spoke of his own work in the same terms. He frequently explained what he was doing in terms of a shepherd rescuing lost sheep. He told stories about a king, or a master, returning to his servants to see what they were up to. Jesus spoke and acted as if he was called to embody not just the return from exile, not just the defeat of evil, but also, astonishingly, the return of YHWH to Zion.

Jesus, then, embraced a crazy and utterly risky vocation. And when he taught his disciples to pray, *thy kingdom come*, he wanted them to pray that he would succeed in it.

That prayer, astonishingly, was answered. The disciples thought it hadn't been; but Easter proved them wrong. Jesus' first followers, to their own great surprise, quickly came to believe that God's kingdom *had* come and his will *had* been done—in Palestine, in Jerusalem, on Calvary and in the Easter garden. Heaven and earth had finally dovetailed. The prophecies had been fulfilled, though not at all in the way they had expected.

Jesus' first followers didn't think, for a moment, that the kingdom meant simply some new religious advice—an improved spirituality, a better code of morals, or a freshly crafted theology. They held to a stronger, more dangerous claim. They believed that in the unique life, death and resurrection of Jesus the whole cosmos had turned the corner from darkness to light. The kingdom was indeed here, though it differed radically from what they had imagined.

Of course they faced the question: If the kingdom is here, why is there still injustice? Why is there still hunger? Why is there still guilt? Why is there still evil? They didn't dodge this question. They didn't escape into saying: Oh, we didn't mean that; we're talking about a new individual spiritual experience, leading to our sharing God's kingdom in heaven, not on earth. No. They went on praying *and living* the Lord's Prayer. And they would tell us to do the same.

But how? What Jesus did, he did uniquely, once and for

all. That is essential to the gospel. We don't have to go on repeating it again and again; and we couldn't, even if we wanted to.

Rather, think of it like this: Jesus is the medical genius who discovered penicillin; we are doctors, ourselves being cured by the medicine, now applying it to those who need it. Jesus is the musical genius who wrote the greatest oratorio of all time; we are the musicians, captivated by his composition ourselves, who now perform it in a world full of muzak and cacophony. The kingdom did indeed come with Jesus; but it will fully come when the world is healed, when the world finally joins in the song. But it must be Jesus' medicine; it must be Jesus' music. And the only way to be sure of that is to pray his prayer.

**W**HAT THEN might it mean to pray this kingdom-prayer today? It means, for a start, that as we look up into the face of our Father in heaven, and commit ourselves to the hallowing of his name, we look immediately out upon the whole world that he made, and we see it as he sees it. *Thy kingdom come*: to pray this means seeing the world in binocular vision. It means seeing it with the love of the Creator for his spectacularly beautiful creation, and seeing it with the deep grief of the Creator for the battered and battle-scarred state in which the world now finds itself. Put those two together, and bring the binocular picture into focus: the love and the grief join into the Jesus-shape, the kingdom-shape, the shape of the cross—never was love, dear King, never was grief like thine! And, with this Jesus before your eyes, pray again, *Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven!*

We are praying, as Jesus was praying and acting, for the redemption of the world; for the radical defeat and uprooting of evil; and for heaven and earth to be married at last, for God to be all in all. And if we pray this way, we must of course be prepared to live this way.

So, as we pray this for the world, we also pray for the church. But this cannot simply mean that we want God to sort out our messes and muddles, so that the church can be a cozy place, without problems or pain. We can only pray this prayer for the church if we are prepared to mean: make us kingdom-bearers. Make us a community of healed healers; make us a retuned orchestra to play the kingdom-music until the world takes up the song. Make us, in turn, servants of the Lord, the few with the message for the many.

The world, the church—but what of ourselves?

I used to think of this clause simply as a prayer of resignation. "Thy will be done," with a shrug of the shoulders:

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what I want doesn't matter too much; if God really wants to do something, I suppose I can put up with it.

That might do if God were a remote, detached God. It won't do for Isaiah's God; it won't do for Jesus; and it won't do for those who break bread and drink wine to remember Jesus and pray for the kingdom. No: this is the risky, crazy prayer of submission and commission, or, if you like, the prayer of subversion and conversion. It is the way we sign on for the work of the kingdom. It is the way we take the medicine ourselves, so that we may be strong enough to administer it to others. It is the way we retune our instruments, to play God's oratorio for the world to sing.

There is one important spin-off of this. Along with the unbiblical view of the kingdom that sees it as the escape from the created order rather than the redemption of it, there is a view of prayer that sees it as essentially the activity of the mind, the heart or the soul, leaving the body untouched and irrelevant. This view has a certain strength: it will never fall into ritualism or magic, or into thinking that we can put on a pretty little outward show that God will then politely applaud.

But that's actually about all that can be said for it. Thy kingdom come *on earth* as it is in heaven; and we who pray that prayer are ourselves bits of earth, lumps of clay. If we really want God's kingdom to come on earth, we should of course expect that the earth in question will include *this* earth, this clay, this present physical body. That

means, of course, holiness. It means, of course, sacraments. And, held between holiness and sacraments, it means the *physical* act of prayer.

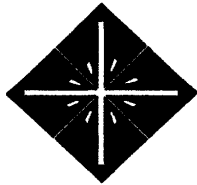
**S**ADLY FOR THOSE who like everything tidy, there are no rules at this point. Some, after all, find kneeling difficult; some can't stand for very long; some are too shy to cross themselves or raise their hands into the Orthodox praying position or its recent charismatic cousin; some realize that their flamboyance in doing these things may be a hindrance to anxious neighbors; and so on. But this doesn't mean that the physical expression of prayer is irrelevant. We have learned a lot in our generation about what we call "body language." Have we thought of applying it to our prayer?

If we do, we may well discover that the great men and women of prayer in other times and cultures knew a trick or two. The ideal posture, they would tell us, is relaxed but not slumped; poised but not tense; alert but not fidgety; above all, humble but happy in the presence of the Creator whom you are learning to call Father. Find the posture that does all that for you; find the gestures that express and symbolize the life and love of Jesus for you; and you will be teaching your body to pray—which, to the surprise of many modern persons, is not a bad way to teach your mind, heart and soul to pray as well.

What is more, you will be acting out, in one little but vital local instance, the prayer you want to pray anyway: *thy kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven*. If we each learned a bit more about how to do that, the medicine and the music of the gospel might make fresh inroads into the sick and cacophonous world all around us. And an excellent way to start is the acted drama of the liturgy; particularly, of course, our coming with empty and outstretched hands to take and taste the life and death and rising of Jesus.

You see, if it was part of Jesus' task to teach his followers to pray in this way, it is in a sense *our* task to teach the *world* to pray in this way. How might we get the opportunity? In Luke's Gospel, Jesus waited until his followers asked him for a prayer; and the reason they asked was because *they saw what he was doing*. Something tells me there's a lesson there. ■

*Blaze a new trail...*



*...follow the light.*

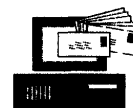
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