

In preparing for today, I was reminded this week of one of my pet-peeves. Some of us have pet-peeves, those things in life that irk us, bother us, that get us riled up. In some cases they're trivial, like having a preference for which way the toilet paper should be hung (paper out, or against the wall); in my case, this pet peeve had to do with prayer, and that little addition we sometimes add to the end of our prayers – "... yet not my will, Lord, but Yours be done."

It's a phrase that sounds pious and filled with faith; it contains the implication that we are humble enough to accept God's will rather than our own. It has excellent pedigree, as it is, after all, what Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane as He struggled in prayer before His impending suffering:

*"Father, if it is possible, let this cup of suffering pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will."*<sup>1</sup>

The difference however, between Jesus' use of these words, and ours, is that Jesus *knew* the Father's will – He knew He had to face the Cross – and therefore this prayer was a prayer of faith and submission to God's will.

The way we sometimes use it is quite the opposite. Rather than an expression of faith, "not my will, Lord, but Yours be done" becomes a cop-out, a get out of jail free card. If what we pray for doesn't happen, we simply say it wasn't God's will, and we can excuse our lack of faith, or our half-heartedness in prayer.

I'm not saying this is always the case; but sometimes it is. And I know this might sound harsh – that's what pet-peeves sometimes sound like. So please believe me when I say that no offence is intended.

But I raise point to introduce the next phrase in the Lord's Prayer:

*"Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."*<sup>2</sup>

I wonder if Jesus *knew* what He was saying – what He was praying for – when He said these words. And therefore, can we know what Jesus meant? Can we know what it means to pray for God's kingdom to come, and God's will to be done "on earth as it is in heaven"?

If you're like me, you're probably accustomed to thinking about heaven and earth as two separate spheres of existence: heaven is where God lives, and where God's will is done perfectly; earth is where we live, and where God's will is done imperfectly. While this is partly true, the Biblical picture of heaven and earth is far less separated. Heaven and earth are two interlocking spaces, all of which comprise God's good world.

Throughout the Bible we see God interacting and engaging with the world, from walking in the Garden of Eden in Genesis, to drawing near to Israel in the Tabernacle. And when we look to the end of Revelation, what we see is not humans being snatched up from earth to heaven, but

---

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 26:39

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 6:10

the holy city, the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth, and God's space and ours finally being married and integrated. And that is what we pray for when we pray 'Your Kingdom come'.<sup>3</sup> We're praying that God would *come down*; that God would take His place as the rightful, just, wise, and compassionate king of the world.

But we're not at the end of Revelation; we live in a world where God's Kingdom has not fully come. In many places, it looks like God's kingdom has not come *at all*. And so, we pray all the more earnestly.

In Jesus' time, the people of Israel longed for God to come and rule over them. This was the hope and promise of the prophets.

In Ezekiel, we read:

*For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out ... I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land ... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD.*

For Israel, this promise was nothing less than God himself becoming king over Israel. The clearest picture of this in the prophets is found in Isaiah 40, where a highway is made in the wilderness, mountains and valleys are flattened out, and God comes, and God's glory is seen by everyone.<sup>4</sup> When this happens, God will defeat all evil, and God's people will be free.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus, I'm positive, knew these promises, and deliberately made them the theme of His own ministry. When Jesus described Himself as the good shepherd in John's gospel – as the One who knows His sheep and gathers them – Jesus was drawing on the words of Ezekiel.<sup>6</sup> And all the gospels' writers looked to Isaiah when describing John the Baptist's ministry of preparing the way for the Lord.<sup>7</sup>

But does this mean that Jesus' message and ministry was actually political, that Jesus actually intended to free Israel from Roman oppression?

That, certainly, was what Israel hoped for. As I've said many times, Israel longed for freedom from Roman occupation. They longed for God to set them free.

The answer about Jesus' politics, however, isn't straightforward. We must firstly say no, Jesus' message wasn't political, and in doing so we will agree with a great tradition that sees Jesus as a spiritual Saviour; One who came to achieve our personal salvation. In the words of the Apostle Paul, Jesus

---

<sup>3</sup> Tom Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1996), 24–25

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 40:3–5

<sup>5</sup> Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*, 26

<sup>6</sup> John 10:7–18

<sup>7</sup> See Matthew 3:1–3; Mark 1:1–3; Luke 3:3–6; John 1:19–28

*“... gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father.”<sup>8</sup>*

But we must also acknowledge that Jesus was political; that His life and ministry did have real world consequences – that Jesus’ talk about the Kingdom of God was about something that actually *happens* in this world.<sup>9</sup>

But if Jesus was political, then how so?

Well, firstly, if politics meant freeing people from captivity and oppression, then Jesus’ message of repentance and forgiveness, of wholeness and freedom, was how captives were released. When Jesus declared that the woman with the flow of blood was healed, He freed her from the oppression of social isolation.<sup>10</sup> When Jesus healed the demoniac in Mark 5, He set him free from demonic captivity. When Jesus announced that people were forgiven, he freed them from guilt, and when Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners, He was announcing that the Kingdom of God was appearing, even if it didn’t look how like the people imagined.

Secondly, if politics meant the defeat of evil, then Jesus most certainly believed and acted as though evil was, and would be, defeated through His work.

The prophet Isaiah promised that when God finally came, evil would be defeated. In Isaiah 40-55 we find four poems about a strange character called the Servant of the Lord. This Servant will be God’s agent in defeating evil. The four poems describe how the Servant will achieve this.

In the first poem the Servant will establish justice on earth, opening the eyes of the blind, and freeing the captives.<sup>11</sup> In the second, the Servant is called from birth and given a mission to restore Israel and be a light to the nations.<sup>12</sup> The third poem emphasises the Servant’s complete obedience and trust in God, even in the face of suffering.<sup>13</sup> The final poem, the most well-known, describes the Servant’s suffering, death, and ultimate exaltation. The Servant is portrayed as bearing the sins of others, becoming a substitute for their punishment.<sup>14</sup>

Jesus knew these prophecies, and in the words of Tom Wright, “Jesus volunteered for the job. This, he believed, was how evil would be defeated.”<sup>15</sup>

Thirdly, if by politics we mean that God Himself would return to his people, coming as a gentle shepherd, then 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

---

<sup>8</sup> Galatians 1:4

<sup>9</sup> Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*, 27

<sup>10</sup> Luke 8:48

<sup>11</sup> Isaiah 40:1–9

<sup>12</sup> Isaiah 49:1–7

<sup>13</sup> Isaiah 50:4–9

<sup>14</sup> Isaiah 52:13–53:12

<sup>15</sup> Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*, 28

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 freedom from oppression, not just the defeat of evil, but also, astonishingly, the return of YHWH to Zion.<sup>16</sup>

When Jesus taught His disciples to pray “*Your kingdom come*” it wasn’t just so they could pray this prayer after He was gone, He wanted them to pray He would succeed in His mission.

And amazingly the prayer was answered. Initially, the disciples thought it hadn’t been. When Jesus was crucified they were tempted to believe their hopes had been in vain. But Easter proved them wrong. To quote Tom Wright:

*“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 together. The prophecies had been fulfilled, though not at all in the way they had expected.”<sup>17</sup>*

But if God’s kingdom has come in the life of Jesus, why is there still injustice, hunger guilt, and evil? What does it mean to pray for God’s kingdom to come today?

It means two things: firstly, that we look to our Father in heaven, and commit ourselves to hallowing God’s name by living holy lives, to honouring God in all we do and say. In looking to God, we see all that Jesus has done. Secondly, we look to God’s world – God’s battered and scarred world – and view it through the eyes of God, with the love of God. When we pray God’s Kingdom come, we pray “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.”<sup>18</sup>

But to pray this way, requires we be prepared to live this way.

We cannot simply pray that God will sort everything out, while we sit cozily at church or home. We can only pray this prayer if we’re prepared to live this prayer – to be Kingdom-bearers – to take the message and hope of Christ into the world. To pray this prayer, then, is to pray a prayer of submission and commission.

As I said at the beginning, the prayer “not my will but yours be done,” is not a shrug of the shoulder’s prayer of resignation: it’s a bold prayer of submission to God’s will.

To pray “your kingdom come” is how we sign up for the work of God’s kingdom. To quote Tom Wright one last time: “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 music for the world to sing.”<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 28–29

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 29

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 31

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 32–33