

“In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.” We typically hear these words read at Christmas, and yet because they’re familiar we might be forgiven for not pausing to wonder what exactly Luke is telling us.

Emperor Augustus is known for transforming the Roman republic into an empire, and for becoming its first emperor. He ruled from 27 BC to 14 AD and instigated a long period of peace known as the Pax Romana.

While Augustus rejected the title ‘king’ he effectively ruled as one, slowly consolidating power in his own hands. By the time Jesus was born, Augustus ruled from Gibraltar to Jerusalem, from Britain to the Black Sea.

While Augustus enjoyed unparalleled power, he wasn’t only interested in power, he wanted glory, and before his death, many of his subjects had begun to regard him as divine,¹ something Augustus was probably quite happy about. Divinity bestowed greater power and glory.

It’s in this world that Luke writes about the birth of a baby boy – the son of a peasant girl. While Augustus can move the world as he decrees that the empire to be counted, for Luke there is no question as for Whom the angels sing.

Today we’re looking at the final clause in the Lord’s Prayer:

For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever.

When Jesus was born Augustus had ruled for twenty-five years; but despite Augustus’ power, he was merely a pawn in the Divine chess game. Yes, he ordered a census, but this set in motion events fifteen hundred miles away he could not have conceived. His decree sent a young couple on a journey to a small town, a town that just happened to be mentioned in an ancient prophecy about the coming of the Messiah.² While there, a baby was born, of whom the angels sang

*Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.*³

The question then is whose peace was genuine? The peace of Augustus, or the peace the baby would bring.

¹ Tom Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1996), 80

² Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*, 78-79

³ Luke 2:14

The Pax Romana was peace at a price, peace at the edge of a sword. Augustus had had to spill a lot of blood to secure his peace and had to continue spilling blood to maintain it. But how would the peace of the Messiah be established?

Our Old Testament reading today is also a familiar one at Christmas. Micah 5 is one of the key prophecies regarding the Messiah's birth in Bethlehem. But it also describes how the Messiah will secure peace.

*And he shall stand and feed his flock
in the strength of the LORD,
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth;
and he shall be the one of peace.⁴*

If Herod had been worried by the visit of the Wise Men, so too would have Augustus had he known, for in Bethlehem was born a King whose power, glory, and peace would be a rival to Rome.

So, in the opening words of Luke, we find more than a quaint story of shepherds in a field, we find rather the introduction of two kingdoms that offer vastly “different definitions of what peace and power and glory are all about.”⁵

Tom Wright vividly describes the difference between the Roman Peace, and the Peace of the Messiah:

Augustus' empire is like a well-lit room at night. The lamps are arranged beautifully; they shed pretty patterns; but they haven't defeated the darkness outside. Jesus' kingdom is like the morning star rising, signalling that it's time to blow out the candles, to throw open the curtains, and to welcome the new day that is dawning.⁶

And it is this dual vision of reality – the true peace Jesus brings verses the counterfeit of Rome – that we invoke every time we pray ‘For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever.’

While it is true that this final phrase is only found in the King James Bible and is absent from all modern Bible, it is also true that these words *were* incorporated into the

⁴ Micah 5:4–5a

⁵ Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*, 80

⁶ Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*, 80-81

earliest liturgies of the church, and according to Wright, it is “... inconceivable ... that Jesus would have intended the prayer to stop simply with ‘deliver us from evil’.”⁷

The whole of the Lord’s Prayer is about the clash between the kingdoms of this world and the Kingdom of God – God’s name be praised, God’s will be done, God’s kingdom come, God’s glory and power.

We’ve seen over the past few weeks how deeply the Lord’s Prayer is tied to Jesus’ life and ministry: how for Jesus to call God Father meant a willingness to be ‘apprenticed’ by God and to do as God did; for us, it implies the same, and being willing to go wherever God sends us, even if it means going to a world in pain to bring the healing power of God’s love.

We saw how to pray *Your will be done, Your kingdom come*, was a bold prayer of submission to the will of God, and in praying *give us this day our daily bread*, we were challenged by our desire to pray this as our only prayer – while Jesus instructs us to call God Father, to hallow God’s name, and to seek God’s kingdom first. We also saw how Jesus enacted the provision of *daily bread* in the meals he had with tax collectors and sinners, and the miracles he performed. This prayer is an invitation to see the abundance of God’s Kingdom, and to pray not only for our own needs but those of the world, that they too might have bread.

In the words *forgive us our sins*, we were reminded of the story of the running father, and how willing God is to forgive – sometimes more willing than we imagine. We saw Jesus forgiving people, and again, eating with ‘sinners.’ We also heard the challenge that being a *forgiven* people means to be a *forgiving* people.

And last week, while Jesus taught us to pray *deliver us from evil*, when He prayed the same prayer the answer was NO. Jesus was not delivered from evil; it was allowed to unleash all its horror upon Him; yet in His death Jesus exhausted evils power. We can now pray this prayer in the full confidence that Jesus *has* defeated evil, even though we still see it in the world today.

How then does Jesus embody this final clause? In short, through His entire life; in everything He did and said.

As Jesus approached Jerusalem, riding a donkey, we read that He wept over it, saying,

“If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies

⁷ Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*, 81

will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you.”⁸

“The time of God's coming to you...” I've said previously that Israel's hope was that one day God would come and deliver them from oppression and forgive their sin. It was a hope steeped in the prophets, especially in Isaiah 40:3,

A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”

Israel fervently believed and hoped that God – actual God – would come. Jesus believed that He wasn't simply God's spokesman; he was the very word of God, Israel's God in person, acting out the return of YHWH to Zion.

Tragically Jesus, who had come as the Prince of Peace, was rejected by the leadership in Jerusalem, and Pilate, acting on the interests of Caesar the glory of Rome, handed Jesus over to be crucified.

But again, Pilate was an even smaller pawn, and through Jesus' death God redefined what power and glory truly look like.

So, what does it mean for us to pray this final clause?

Firstly, it is a prayer to mission. If Jesus is the true King of all the world, if true power and the glory are seen through His birth, life, death, and resurrection, then to pray *thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever* is a prayer to resist the power of the Empire today. It is prayer that undermines all other claims to our time and energy.

Tom Wright boldly says,

“If the church isn't prepared to subvert the kingdoms of the world with the kingdom of God, the only honest thing would be to give up praying this prayer altogether, especially its final doxology.”⁹

But secondly this clause is also a final prayer of confidence. Because Jesus has come, because Jesus has died and risen again, because God has exalted Him, we can pray the whole prayer knowing that Jesus hears us, and that ultimately, God's will *will* be done, God's kingdom will come, God will provide, God will forgive, ultimately we will be delivered from trial and evil, and God will be glorified forever and ever. Amen.

⁸ Luke 19:42–44

⁹ Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*, 87