

## THY KINGDOM COME

It is no surprise to the thoughtful that the Lord's Prayer is packed and loaded – that every phrase carries the awareness of the power and hope we have in the New Covenant, and in the relationships it reveals and opens up for us.

Jesus does not come to bring us philosophical teachings or axioms about love. He does not come to encourage us to be more loving. That is what much of the modern church thinks *should* have been His Message. That is what a great many people *want* Jesus to be about. But that is not what Jesus is about. Jesus comes to announce the Kingdom (you find it page after page in the New Testament) and to invite us into it if we are willing to come. The vast majority of Jesus' parables, sermons, and teachings are about the Kingdom: what it is like, how different it is from the “normal” world around us, and what it will be like if we decide to follow Him into this Kingdom.

It is an invitation – not a coercion. So Jesus wants to be sure that those who listen to Him will not be misled. The Kingdom is wondrous indeed, but it is also a huge departure from the purposes and principles of life as we learn them in this physical, nature-based realm – what we call “the real world”: the place of counterfeit values, false gods, and temporary rewards that we keep trying to pretend will last forever. The Hindus call this present world *Maya* – illusion.

Through no fault of my own, but rather because I was far off course as a young boy, the summer of my sixth-grade year I was given a special vision or understanding of what our world was like. There was more to the experience than I will mention here, and more to it than I have ever been able to put into words. Yet even though it was shown to me seventy years ago, it is still real and vivid in my mind. I was shown what real community was like and what real people were like ... beyond a chasm I was not allowed to cross. This community was filled with love and beauty beyond expression, and people were working hard and caring about each other. They were happy and purposeful far beyond anything in our world. I wanted to go there so badly I cannot tell you. And I was not told “never”; I was told “not yet” – not until I was more aware and better prepared.

It was extremely obvious to me then that the world I lived in was a shadow world – a very cut-back version of the real world I was being shown. And all of us, from the best of us to the least-developed of us, were only partially developed, partially formed. We thought we were alive, but we were only partway into LIFE; we were only *in the process* of coming to be what we were created to be. Later I read the story of Pinocchio, and it seemed to me the perfect description: we were like puppets longing to become real persons.

Over the years I have been reminded again and again that this really is our situation. A long and steady stream of people have come into my study to talk about life and what they are facing. I have come to love many of them more than you would know, and more than I intended. Some of them have not been very advanced on the spiritual path. Others have been courageous and noble souls who have left me feeling very humble and proud to be part of humanity, even if we *are* only partial and underdeveloped in comparison to what we will become.

But one thing is always clear: None of us are anywhere near to the patterns, the awareness, the character, or the spiritual stature and power of our true identity and purpose. Many if not all of our problems are connected to this partial awareness. Satan plays games of discouragement and shame, and he spins lies that he should not be able to get away with. But in a partial world, some of it seems really believable. “You are no good.” “Nobody really loves you.” “You make the same mistakes over and over.” “You never learn.” “Why would anybody be stupid enough to trust you or believe you?” You would think that God’s children would simply laugh Satan out of court. But most of us have experienced enough rejection and sorrow that, for a while at least, it seems truly believable.

On top of that, we keep trying to take shortcuts; we keep thinking that if we don’t hurry, all the prizes will already be gone. Wonder who started *that* rumor. When we cut corners, we think we are smart enough to see where the Path is going. But for some odd reason, high intelligence does not always lead to great humility – or to great gratitude either. “Whoever created your intelligence, you didn’t.” That was from my Mother. But even my Mother did not teach me to recognize that all human minds are finite – that *none of us* can track any awareness beyond the finite levels of reality. Beyond a certain point, we only enter the realms of the absurd. We do that frequently, and it’s nice if we notice when it happens. (Can God make a rock so big he cannot lift it? Either way, he’s not all-powerful. You see?)

Hence, all spiritual reality is dangerous to us because we perceive and understand only the most elementary levels. I presume we will be given upgraded mental abilities in the resurrection, but that's only a guess. Meanwhile, it might be intelligent on our present level not to do too much guessing.

In any case, the Lord's Prayer is packed and loaded with awareness of the Kingdom, if we really want it. It carries the power and hope of the New Covenant, and of the relationships opened to us in Christ Jesus – that is, relationships that are possible to those who share a love and trust for Jesus and the kind of LIFE that Jesus has revealed to us.

We can say the Lord's Prayer as a memorized piece of ritual – an automatic, knee-jerk affair. But we cannot PRAY the Lord's Prayer without feeling our whole lives shifting into alignment with the Christian Path and WAY (like the particles in a hunk of metal that is getting magnetized). I think that's why Jesus gave it to us. To *pray* "Thy Kingdom come" means we *want* it. It means we live for it, hope in it, believe in it. If that is true for us – if that is our truth – then it also realigns our entire lives around that truth, and we live for God's Kingdom and not for anything in this world – increasingly; not out of some kind of rigid self-discipline, but because that's what *draws* us.

This is not about some great effort on our part. It is not about gritting our teeth or flexing our muscles. It has nothing to do with a list of rules or a set of commandments. Nor is there anything prideful or commendable in this change that comes over us. Sometimes that seems disappointing to those who are eager to show their merit or who feel like they have more determination, better discipline, or greater willpower than most of the people around them. Sounds like I am mocking, but not so. Some people run faster than others. Some people are prettier than others. Some people are more successful in this world than others. We do not all look alike, and we do not all have the same gifts.

Becoming aware of the Kingdom of God is not moral superiority. It is more like some kind of awakening, and people from all walks of life and with every different kind of gift can experience this kind of awakening. The response – the reaction – is never any kind of pride. It is gratitude: "Wow! I never realized before. I never saw this before. I never knew this dimension was possible before!" This new awareness, though it does not blot out our former awareness or knowledge or

experience, supersedes all former levels of value, purpose, and goals – including the overall meaning of LIFE. It simply outshines them.

Can you think of any human being you have ever known or heard about who has seen the Kingdom of God and then gone back to their old ways, their former perspectives? It's a tricky question. How would we know? And if it looked like someone had done this, would some of us not say that they never really saw the Kingdom in the first place? I probably would. Nevertheless, the question is a good one to ask. And the fact is, if anyone has seen the Kingdom and then chosen to go back to the old life, that is an exception to prove the rule. It is amazing, almost dumbfounding, that we do not hear any of the reasonable complaints we might expect to hear from those who are living for the Kingdom.

Does Paul ever express anger or regret for his experience on the Damascus Road? It made his life absolutely impossible and miserable, but we never hear him complain about it. He has many concerns, many trials, endless reasons to claim that this is no favor for him. But though his life is extremely different from anything he was expecting or trying to achieve, I am unaware of any comment from him that shows regret for this encounter with Jesus – or indeed with any of his subsequent encounters, most of which got him into even more trouble than he was already in.

Peter? Peter has some complaints with himself, to be sure. Maybe even some complaints with some others. But is Peter ever sorry about being called into a New Life by Jesus? If so, it is not recorded. And you know what happened to Peter.

Go up and down your own list of followers. Do you know people who, from your perspective, were genuinely converted but who wished that it had never happened? We used to say that the proof of the pudding was in the eating. Well, I consider it fascinating that from the world's perspective, the Christian Path is a grim and dubious business. Yet that opinion, that jaundice, is not coming from those who have ever tried it – from those who have walked the WAY. That is: From afar and from the outside looking in, Christianity is a hard and dubious WAY of Life. But from inside – from those who have tried it – it is wonderful beyond words to tell it. And please, I am not talking about life in the Christian *church*. I am talking about Life in Christ Jesus. Our attempts to reflect the Kingdom of God in earthly structures are sometimes impressive for a while and from time to time. But in

the main, the “broken world” does not allow us to demonstrate the principles and realities of the Kingdom with any accuracy, and certainly not with consistency over long periods of time.

So back to our subject and theme: We live in a dual reality, caught somewhere between a physical reality we think of as real and a spiritual reality which seems to intersect the physical reality in many, many places. Is it possible for us to become more and more aware of the Signs of the Kingdom all around us? Is it even possible that this part of the design and purpose of the Creator is put here on purpose to teach and lead and train us in a realm that masks the Kingdom, so that we will learn to know and recognize the physical and distinguish it from the spiritual? We are all completely certain, of course, that there will be no physicality in the realms beyond this one – a conviction that none of our biblical forebears shared, by the way. But never mind; one retreat is not long enough to explore everything.

Are there other hints, from familiar Scripture passages, which indicate that we should be learning to recognize the Signs of the Kingdom all around us? Paul again: *“And now, my friends, all that is true, all that is noble, all that is just and pure, all that is lovable and attractive, whatever is excellent and admirable – fill your thoughts with these things (think on these things).”* (Philippians 4:8) Such things are not natural; they are not to be expected from this realm. Their source is the Kingdom of God. That is why we are learning to pay much closer attention to them. Which is why more and more we ask: “Where do such things come from? What is their source? Do they just happen by accident? Are we surprised and grateful when we encounter such things?” If we do not pay very much attention to what is going on around us, how will we learn?

We could spend an entire retreat on just this one verse. But to barely dip in: What about what is “just and pure”? Maybe that’s too much for one time. What about what is “just”? Is true justice a Sign of the Kingdom? We live in a time when the entire liberal Christian establishment is full of talk about “justice” (justice and peace). It crosses my mind that we have no notion of what we are talking about. Even a cursory look at what the UCC is calling “justice” quickly turns out to be a Robin Hood kind of fairy story: we should take from the rich to give to the poor. But that is not justice; that is robbery. That is a human contrivance which assumes a Kingdom principle on the assumption that we are smart enough to make a better world

by our own goodness and brainpower. Will it not inevitably lead to more errors and more aberrations than whatever problems we thought we were going to solve?

What if in the Kingdom *everybody* contributes and everybody has something *to* contribute? Maybe in the Kingdom it is no better for poor people to live off of the rich than it is for rich people to live off of the poor. Maybe in the Kingdom we each focus on what we can contribute and not on what we want or think we want. Maybe in the Kingdom justice really is blindfolded – not impressed by temporary outer circumstances – and will not play favorites. When was the last time we saw *that*? Well, I’m not interested in taking potshots at anybody’s government; just because it thinks it’s getting enough votes does not give it the right to play God, but it will. So when I do see justice, I think I am seeing a Sign of the presence of the Kingdom. I saw it often with my father.

Of course, Paul is just the second string. What about Jesus? Do we ever catch Jesus watching for Signs of the Kingdom? All day every day! Again and again Jesus stops in the middle of whatever is going on and points to something for His followers to notice, to pay attention to, to learn from. Sometimes He points; sometimes He tells parables; sometimes He comes right out and teaches or preaches it.

There are far too many illustrations, but just for openers or for a warm-up:

Jesus sees a widow putting an offering into the temple coffers. I do not think Jesus is saying that the temple is the Kingdom or that all the priests are perfect. But He sees this widow’s devotion and love for God, and He stops to highlight what she is doing.  
(Mark 12:42-44; Luke 21:1-4)

Jesus points to some little children and tells us that the Kingdom of Heaven is for them, and that if we want to see the Kingdom, something about them is an essential ingredient.

And it is not just children: “*Blessed are the poor in spirit; the kingdom of Heaven is theirs.*”  
Not “will be”; IS theirs.

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All through the Gospels, we see Jesus pointing us to the Signs of the Kingdom that are around us in the real world. Some people get discouraged because they never notice any of them. Have any of you ever been discouraged? It's easy to be, isn't it? Jesus, with far more reason to be discouraged, never gets discouraged – because He notices the Signs of the Kingdom everywhere He looks.

The more we notice the Signs of the Kingdom, the more we get glimmers of what the Kingdom is like – of what it is about. The more we realize how far our world is from being the Kingdom, the more we come to a greater and greater desire to belong to the Kingdom – to be part of it, to live for it, to adopt its ways and principles until they are our own.

“Thy Kingdom come” is a wondrous prayer. And it leads toward a wondrous WAY of Life. But of course, none of it lasts or seems believable enough for us to stay with it – until we realize that where the King is, there the Kingdom is.

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### SOME NOTES ON THE SIGNS

- 1.) Authentic, caring, meaningful relationships
- 2.) Beauty (much subjectivity) – music, art, nature, poetry
- 3.) Family groups
- 4.) Purpose (unconditional allegiance) – goals moved toward, devotion, dedication; not apart from self, but expressing the self and bigger than self
- 5.) Vocatio – a calling, or callings

And all around us: substitutes and counterfeits (idols) for each of these Signs of the Kingdom.