

Talk 3 "Thy Kingdom Come"

O Heavenly King, Comforter, Spirit of Truth,
You are everywhere present and fill all things.
Treasury of blessings and Giver of life: come
and abide in us, and cleanse us from every
impurity, and save our souls, O Gracious Lord!

The third petition of the Lord's Prayer is: "Thy kingdom come". As with the first petition we must ask what meaning does the believing Christian ascribe to these words, to what does he or she direct their conscience, their hopes, their desires, I am afraid that, as with the first petition, this question is equally hard to answer.

At the dawn of Christianity the meaning of this petition was simple, or more accurately, one can say that it embodied and expressed the essential theme in Christian faith and hope. For it is enough to read the Gospels once to be convinced that the teaching of the Kingdom of God lies at the very heart of the preaching and teaching of Christ. Christ came preaching the gospel of the Kingdom, saying: "Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand" (Mt 4:17). Almost all of Christ's parables concern the Kingdom. Jesus compares it to the treasure for which the man sells all that he has to obtain it; to the seed from which grows an

enormous tree; to the yeast which leavens the whole lump of dough.

Throughout we hear this mystical yet alluring promise, this announcement, this invitation into the Kingdom of God. "Seek first the Kingdom of God (Mt 6:33), that you may be "sons and daughters of the Kingdom" Mt 13:38). So, possibly the most amazing fact in the long history of Christianity is that this core and central understanding, this very nucleus of the gospel message, confronts us now as a new riddle, whose answer was lost along the way. But how are we to pray about the Kingdom of God, how are we to say to God and ourselves, "Thy Kingdom come", if in fact these words elude us?

The difficulty here lies in the fact that the Gospel itself seems to give the Kingdom a double meaning. On the one hand it seems to refer to the future, to the end, to the beyond; it seems to refer to that for which it's opponents, the atheists, have always chided Christianity - that Christianity seems to have its centre of gravity in some other invisible world beyond the grave, and therefore remains unmoved by the evil and injustice of this world, that Christianity is simply a religion of another world. If that's the case, then the petition, "Thy Kingdom come", is a prayer for the end of the world, of its disappearance, a prayer specifically for the hastening of precisely this remote world beyond the grave.

But then why does Christ say that the Kingdom has arrived, and to his disciples' questions he replies that the kingdom is among them, and not only that but it is within them? Doesn't this mean that we can't define the Kingdom simply in terms of a different future world coming after a catastrophic end and annihilation of this earthly world?

It is here that we begin approaching the central issue. For if we have ceased to understand the gospel of the Kingdom, and no longer know what we pray when saying in the words of the Lord's Prayer "Thy Kingdom come", it is because we no longer hear them in their fulness.

We always start with ourselves, with questions about ourselves, for even the so-called "believer" is very often interested in religion insofar as it answers questions concerning themselves: is my soul immortal, does death put an end to everything, or is there possibly something there beyond that fearful and mysterious leap into the unknown?

But the Gospel does not speak about such things. It calls "Kingdom" the encounter of humankind with God, God who is the fulness of life and the very life of all life, who is light, love, knowledge, wisdom, and eternity. It tells us that the Kingdom comes and begins when a person meets God, recognises him, and with love and joy offers himself or herself to him. It says that the kingdom of God comes when my life is filled to the brim

with this light, with this knowledge, with this love. And finally it says for the person who has experienced this encounter and has filled their lives with this divine life, that everything, including their death, is revealed in a new light, for that which they encounter, that which fills their lives with here and now, today, is eternity itself, which is God himself.

Indeed, what are we praying for when we pronounce these absolutely unique words, "Thy kingdom come"? Above all, of course, we pray that this encounter may take place now, here, and today, in the present circumstances, that in my mundane and difficult life I could hear the words, "the kingdom is near you", and that my life would be filled with the power and light of the kingdom, with the power and light of faith, love, and hope. Furthermore, we desire that the whole world, which so evidently lies in evil and longing, in fear and in striving, would see and receive this light, which entered the world some two thousand years ago, when at the outskirts of the Roman empire was heard that lonely, yet resounding voice of St John Baptist: "Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand" (Mt 3:2). We pray also that God would help us not to betray this kingdom, not to constantly fall away from it, not to sink into the engulfing darkness, and that finally, this kingdom of God would come in power, as Christ has said.

Yes, Christianity always contains the anticipation of the future, the anticipation of the beloved,

hope for the final manifestation on earth and in heaven: "that God may be everything to everyone" (1 Cor 15:28), "Thy kingdom come". In a sense it isn't even a prayer, rather it is the heartbeat of anyone who has at least once in their lives have seen, felt, loved the light and joy of God's Kingdom and who knows that it is the beginning, the content, and the fulfilment of everything which lives.

Lenten Prayer of St. Ephrem

O Lord and Master of my life, take from me the spirit of sloth, despair, lust of power, and idle talk.

But give rather the spirit of chastity, humility, patience, and love to Thy servant.

Yea, O Lord and King, grant me to see my own transgressions, and not to judge my brother or sister, for blessed art Thou, unto ages of ages. Amen.