

# Sermon

All Saints' Episcopal Church

The Rev. Dr. Simon J. Mainwaring

Gospel Reading: Luke 11:1-13

July 28, 2019

Your kingdom come.



Perhaps the most pivotal line in the prayer that Jesus teaches his disciples in Luke's gospel this morning, and also the name given to a campaign begun by the Church of England a few years back as an attempt to get those heathen British back to the praying ways via a promotion of the Lord's Prayer. Anyone who knows the country could have told them that it was a hopeless cause.

The campaign launched shortly before Christmas, 2015, just as the latest film in a new Star Wars trilogy was about to be released. The plan was to catch unsuspecting Luke Skywalker fans unawares by planting a short advertisement during the previews showing footage of people around the country saying parts of the Lord's Prayer in the midst of their daily lives - firefighters, teachers, farmers and the like. From this, a nationwide strategy called 'Thy Kingdom Come' was put into motion, as churches up and down Britain braced themselves for a surge of Christmas Eve attendees.

At least, that would have been a wonderful outcome, if the three major cinema chains who account for about 80% of movie-going audiences across the UK, hadn't refused to screen the preview, stating in their defense that 'some people might find it offensive', whereas I suppose being subjected to yet another Avengers movie trailer, previewing alien decapitation and unnecessarily moronic dialogue is perfectly OK. Daily bread and forgiveness apparently is just too much for the British.

It's probably the case that the Church in England saw it coming. 'Your kingdom come', are considered as three more or less harmless words when uttered in private, or amidst the pomp and ceremony of a royal wedding, but when people are praying for God's kingdom to come, out in public, that's a whole different matter.

Near the beginning of the 20th century, during the First World War, Anglican clergy would pray over the trenches, petitioning God for safety and victory. Toward the end of that same century, rather than pray for military success, Robert Runcie, then Archbishop of Canterbury, famously denounced the 1980's Falklands War between Britain and Argentina, which won him no new

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friends in Downing Street, but also signaled a change for the church, ushering in an era where hopes for the Kingdom of God, were increasingly expressed in the public sphere.

Of course, not everyone has been enamored with this re-discovered public voice for the Church, on either side of the Atlantic, partly because some people are adamant that religion and politics should not mix, and partly because we have become conditioned to keep God safely at home. In many ways, our lives of faith have increasingly come to be exercised in private and with a great deal of order and control. Not only is Sunday morning still the most segregated portion of the week in America, it is also one of the most controlled. Put an American church-goer into their Sunday best, promise them something good to eat for brunch, and they will become a new person. Respectable. Charming even. And if they're Episcopalians, never so rude as to say the word 'Jesus' out loud.

Yet, this tendency toward privacy when it comes to our lives of faith has not always been the case. The first followers of Jesus in emerging communities in Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, and from today's epistle, Colossae, proclaimed in word and deed 'your kingdom come' in a public life set in stark relief to the prevailing Roman order. Each were communities bearing visible signs that Jesus did indeed usher into the world a new kingdom, where material resources were shared, and the rich and the poor sat around one common table, and where the politics of identity no longer mattered because all were counted as equal: circumcised or uncircumcised, male or female, slave or free. Others could see that the faith of these Jesus people had radically re-ordered their way of life. Indeed, to gather with those communities of the earliest church was to hear proclaimed that there was a new creation, and that they should count the present order of the world as loss, and become visible members of a re-born body in Christ.

However, it wasn't simply that these were public expressions in word and deed of private convictions, it was that they took place in flat contradiction of the prevailing political order of the day. Faith and politics were not so much disagreeably mixing, they were explicitly at odds.

We can see this when we think about the context for Luke's gospel and the early Church communities, that saw the hopes for God's kingdom to come set in relief to another kingdom, and another king, most prominently, Nero, Emperor of Rome, self-absorbed and brutal. Shortly before Luke would write his gospel and just as the first missionary communities of Paul were being birthed, Nero's rule had become obsessed with the notion that his person embodied the salvation of his people.

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As hard as it is to believe, Nero's narcissism would have given even today's politicians a run for their money. In the musical, poetic and athletic competitions which he entered, the judges made sure he always won, and if you were unlikely enough to be an audience member at one his recitals, you would have no opportunity to leave until the bitter end, resulting, according to Roman historian Suetonius, in "women in the audience giving birth...[and] men so bored with listening and applauding that they...shammed death and were carried away for burial".

The narcissism, however was only the backdrop for the terror which would follow it. As Rome erupted in flames in the summer of the year 64 CE, in the search for scapegoats Christians were rounded up. Just as our own African American brothers and sisters were lynched in this land merely because of the identity of their skin color, Christians in Nero's Roman order were arrested simply for being Christian, and suffered the most barbaric and demeaning of deaths: dressed in animal's skins, torn to pieces by dogs, crucified, or burned alive.

In the prayer where Jesus invites his followers to forgive those who have sinned against them, Luke, writing a few decades later, appeals for another kind of savior to emerge in the darkest of times. In such a zero-sum political economy, the public life of faith was not merely a counter-statement, it was the expression of the hope that even in the most desperate of hardship and loss, God's kingdom comes, new life emerges, hope doesn't die, love prevails. When those first followers of Jesus prayed and lived out their faith in public view, they did so with their eyes wide open at the nature of the political world around them.

When we pray for God's kingdom to come on the earth, in our own place and time with its own concerns pressing in upon us, we are also called to pray with the plight of the world in our sights. From our borders to our impoverished and forgotten neighborhoods, from our longing for racial healing to our common need for a more compassionate and other-centered social order, our lives of faith are to be nurtured in the intimacy of our hearts, but played out in the public settings of our lives. What's more, as Christians who belong to a thoughtful expression of faith in the Episcopal Church, our opportunity is to offer hearts and minds that find questions, and differences, and a diversity of deeply held passions and values as welcome and essential components of the life of public faith.

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For is it not the case, dear saints, that our society is sorely bereft of such public spaces for honest and decent dialogue, where the views and insights that differ between people are received with love and respect. In too many places, the quality of our public discourse has become eviscerated, where soundbites have been substituted for analysis, and bombast has been counted as leadership.

When we pray 'your kingdom come' we do so as living successors of an ancient hope, sharing the same vocation as our forebears did, to have our public lives of faith embody a love for politics - not a love for red or blue, but a love for the life of the polis, of the city, and the nation, and our world.

May we be known in this place and time as a community that values and welcomes difference in all of its sorts. May we be known as people who seek to disagree well yet find common ground with joy and thanksgiving. May our public space in this city be a sacred ground for the hopes of God's kingdom come and yet to be fulfilled, not only for us, but for all who may ask, and seek, and long for a better world.

Amen.

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