

Thy Kingdom Come

In the name him who has poured out his Spirit upon us, dear friends in Christ: have you ever wondered what it would be like to be a key participant in one of the truly great and noble achievements of mankind? Wouldn't it be neat, say, to have been one of the engineers at NASA who helped put a man on the moon? Or one of the many thousands who bravely stormed the beach at Normandy and helped free Europe from Nazi domination? Or one of the medical researchers who helped eradicate some devastating disease like polio or small pox? I imagine that most of you would agree that something like that would make you feel pretty good inside. And mind you, I'm not just talking about sinful pride or having the right to brag about what you've done. No, I mean the personal satisfaction of knowing that through your hard work and sacrifice other people were benefited in some substantial way: that you were a direct part of saving or extending the lives of many, or of significantly improving the quality of their lives, or of helping to free them from misery and oppression. Wouldn't you want to be part of something like that?

If so, you'll be glad you came this evening because in teaching us to pray the Lord's Prayer – and in particular the second petition of the Lord's Prayer – our Lord Jesus invites us to become partners with him in a cause infinitely more important and of far, far greater benefit to mankind than anything I've mentioned so far: and that is the coming of God's Kingdom. You know, usually our prayers are rather narrow in scope. We normally pray for things that are of immediate concern and that are very small on the grand scale of things like, "Lord, help me resolve this problem I'm having," or "help me get that promotion at work or better grades in this class I'm taking", or "please help so and so who is sick get better". Then there's the perpetual farmer's prayer for an inch or two of rain. And there's nothing wrong with that kind of prayer; but that shouldn't be the only kind thing we pray for. Luther said that when we approach God with only that kind of request we are very much like a wretched beggar brought before a rich and powerful emperor. The emperor opens his arms and says, "Ask me for anything you want and I shall give it to you", and the beggar responds "Please, sir, may I have just a bowl of cold gruel?" It is in some ways insulting to God that he has so much to give – such royal treasures to grant – and we ask him for so very little. It's like we think of him as a stingy miser who would begrudge us what we ask, or as a boastful liar who pretends to be generous but who has nothing to give.

In teaching us to pray the second petition, Jesus is instructing us to think big and to go boldly before the throne of God's grace and ask for the greatest blessings that he has to grant; for when the Kingdom of God comes people pass from darkness to light, from bondage to freedom, from sin to righteousness, from death to life, and from an eternity of suffering in hell to everlasting glory in heaven. I'd say that's more important than curing polio or liberating France (especially liberating France because there are times when I wonder if maybe that wasn't a mistake. But seriously) there is nothing more grand or noble that you could possibly ask for than the coming of God's Kingdom. And again, by encouraging us to ask for it in faithful prayer, Jesus is inviting us to play a part in making it happen.

How does it happen? Well, you may recall that last week we considered the first petition of the Lord's Prayer which is, "hallowed be thy name". Through the Small Catechism we learned that God's name is hallowed (that is, we regard it as holy) when his Word is taught in truth and purity and when we as his children live holy lives according to it. So, it all starts with us receiving the Word of God. The trouble is that in our natural state sinners like ourselves are incapable of properly understanding God's Word. The Scriptures tell us that the man without the Spirit cannot comprehend the things of God for they are spiritually discerned, that the sublime truths of God are foolishness to fallen man in all his imagined wisdom, and that by nature we are the enemies of God and hostile to his will. So even if we could understand him, we wouldn't want to live according to his Word. The mind and heart of man are so darkened by sin that in a spiritual sense we are completely blind. We need someone to turn the lights on so we can see. That Someone is the Holy Spirit.

This is what Jesus is saying in the passage from St. John's Gospel that we heard: "No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." He's says this to Nicodemus who, as a Pharisee, has God's Word. He was in fact a highly trained Bible scholar; but for all his training, for all his years of study, he

does not understand the Scriptures because he has no spiritual sight. His thinking is all on a very earthly level. This is why he asks the ridiculous question about reentering his mother's womb – he can only understand Jesus mentioning being born again in an absurdly literal way. But Jesus goes on to explain that the rebirth he's speaking of takes place by water and the Spirit. Only a person reborn in this way, by water and the Spirit, enters the Kingdom of God.

Jesus is referring to Baptism, of course, because it is the gateway, so to speak, to God's Kingdom. To be more precise, Jesus is talking about what takes place in Baptism, because through it a person is united with Christ in his death for sin, his burial in the grave, and his resurrection to new life. Through Baptism the Holy Spirit comes to a person first to convict of sin so that he sees that he stands condemned before God. Through this revelation the Spirit then brings the person to repentance, and then finally to faith and trust in the Gospel of Jesus Christ through which the person is saved. All of this is included in what I mean when I say that the Spirit turns the lights on.

Once it happens, the Kingdom of God comes to the person in question. He becomes a child of God and an heir of eternal life. From the outside he won't look any different. That's because, as Jesus said, the Kingdom of God is not something that comes by your careful observation. No, he says, the Kingdom is within you. That's because on this earth his is a kingdom of faith: faith and trust in Jesus as the Savior. So when we pray for the Kingdom to come, we're asking God to send forth his Holy Spirit so that we will receive his Word with understanding and faith.

We pray this first for ourselves: that we as individuals may be increasingly enlightened to see and understand the things of God revealed in his Word. We're asking the Lord to ensure our ongoing development in the faith so that more and more we are controlled by his Spirit, and that we walk in his ways by daily crucifying our sinful desires, confessing our sins, and receiving again the washing of his forgiveness. We're praying that the fruits of the Spirit grow to maturity in us: the fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, and faithfulness – for by bearing such fruit we serve others as Christ our Lord served us, and we show ourselves to be citizens of his Kingdom.

We pray "thy Kingdom come" also for the Church of Christ at large: that it be kept in the true faith, that error and false teaching be exposed and rejected, that its pastors and teachers be faithful to their callings and proclaim the Word of God in its whole truth and purity, that they administer the Sacraments according to Christ's institution, and that they lead God's people in the right worship of him. We pray that the administration of the church be conducted in wholesome and correct ways, and that God raise up able lay leaders to manage the affairs of his house and see to the temporal welfare of all of its members. We pray that the collective work of the church in the world be advanced: the schools, hospitals, orphanages, relief agencies, and shelters it operates all be kept in good and efficient order, and that the church be prepared to respond to natural disasters and other crises so that together we can bring comfort and safety to those in need. In such ways the Kingdom of God, though it is an unseen kingdom of faith, becomes visible through its actions.

We also pray "thy Kingdom come" for those who are as yet outside the church of Christ: that they too may be enlightened by the Spirit through God's Word and come to saving faith in Jesus. We pray for missionaries, mission societies, Bible translators, and all who work to support them, that the advance of God's Kingdom may continue unimpeded and that the mission of the church to convert and save the lost may result in multitudes being delivered from Satan's bondage and granted life eternal through God's Son.

And ultimately, when we pray "thy Kingdom come" we are asking for the Lord to hasten his coming on the Last Day. Then darkness will give way to light. The reign of sin and death will be ended, and the Kingdom of God will no longer be a matter of faith. It will be revealed in the fullness of its glory. And we who were made and kept its citizens by the work of the Holy Spirit will be raised from death, crowned with life, and enter in to the everlasting joy of our Lord. And that is certainly something to pray for with all hope and earnestness.

All of this is encapsulated in this the shortest petition of the prayer our Lord taught us. Though they are but three simple words, they request of our Father in heaven the highest and best gifts we could possibly ask

for. And so we pray them with confidence, knowing that for Christ's sake he will grant to us all these blessings and more when we ask of him "Thy Kingdom come" in Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!