

## THE KINGDOM AND ITS SERVANTS

In Jesus' name. Amen

"Thy kingdom come; thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." What images come to your mind when you hear – and pray – these words? We are taught by Luther in the *Small Catechism* that God's kingdom comes to us when the Father gives us the Holy Spirit so that we may believe in his holy Word and live godly lives. That almost makes this kingdom hidden in some respects. And when we ponder God's will, we are again taught by Luther that God's will is always good and gracious, that it is manifest when our heavenly Father hinders and defeats the evil schemes and purposes of that unholy trinity of sin, death, and the power of the devil.

Having said all this, I am reminded of a letter my dad wrote to my mother in early January of 1942, after he had arrived in Pearl Harbor to help rebuild the bombed out shipyard there. He wrote that he had never seen such destruction. He couldn't even define it, other than to say that the harbor, Honolulu, and the island of Oahu seemed "God-forsaken." "There is so much wreckage and destruction – and the people here are frightened. Frankly, so am I."

Last week we learned that the one we dare to call Father, Abba, "Daddy," aches with us, weeps with us, and tells us his will is not destruction or violence or death – how these things run counter

to his will for us. Even so, when we hear about the ravages of war, see pictures of those who suffer in Darfur, or witness on TV the violence running rampant close to our borders with Mexico, even the most spiritual and faithful among us are tongue-tied for answers to questions like: "Where is God? Is this really what he wills for us? Has he become so far removed from us that any notion of his kingdom or his will have been removed as well?"

Christians know that there are times when we cannot begin to plumb the depths of this mystery we call the kingdom. For our forebears in the faith, the ancestors of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, God's kingdom was defined by his rule and his dwelling among his people. Yet even they experienced the loss of their land, their temple, their heritage, some of them witnessing the destruction of the holy city of Jerusalem before they were sent off in exile to Babylon. They too looked for answers about the reign of God and his will for them. They too asked, "Has God forsaken us?"

When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he told them to say: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come ...". How did Jesus understand the kingdom of his Father? In Luke's Gospel Jesus speaks of the kingdom being in our midst – which is to say that it is found in him, in the one who stands with us. We also heard tonight – as Jesus addressed Pilate – that his kingdom was not of this world. Jesus is clearly the Kingdom of God in flesh and blood.

The kingdom of God would be revealed in the cross he would bear. The kingdom would be awesomely seen as the Son of Man was lifted up before the whole world. The heavens would be opened when he was raised up from death. And the most surprising of all news is that the One who is seated at the right hand of the Father is the One who promises that he is ever-present with his people.

Once again, though, all of us who preach are stopped in our tracks by the haunting questions. If God is present, why is there such heartache? If the kingdom does come, “even without our prayer (as Luther teaches us),” then why do the good suffer while those who work evil seem always to win? Where is this place where righteousness dwells if it cannot be seen as we live out our lives day-by-day? Where is this kingdom – or, for that matter, the good and gracious will of God - when I see people around me suffering, children not properly cared for, or such poverty that people must go to city trash heaps just to look for scraps of food?

I’ve asked these questions. I find myself absolutely speechless sometimes – or more angry than reflective, more stunned than empowered to action. We often wonder where this one we call Father truly is. And just what is his kingdom, anyway?

God’s kingdom comes to us, always with a word. God’s kingdom does come, especially in the sacramental realities of water,

bread and wine. God's kingdom comes because Christ brings it to us. God does reign over this world. He does bring justice when those who govern bring good order, decency, and purpose for us as we live out our lives in the world. God reigns over us – lovingly, gently, and with unparalleled intimacy – because of the One who sits now at his right hand, interceding for us. While we are not privy to some of those stifling mysteries about life, God works for good in the midst of human sorrow and tragedy. His footsteps are sometimes quiet, yet always he is at work. His kingdom *is* that work. We are part of that kingdom. God reigns in his wondrous words of forgiveness, in his promises that all eyes shall one day behold him, and in his iron clad mercy that sometimes secretly – and sometimes very openly – repairs the brokenness and brings a healing balm to life.

So Christ bids us on: "Thy will be done." We need to understand this petition to mean more than simple resignation to things as they are. Too often the phrase gets repeated, "It was God's will that such and so happened." We've all spoken this phrase at one time or another. But our Lord does not call us into the darkness when we pray this petition. Instead, he calls us into the light of what God would have us do in his name.

Last week I spoke of the late Helmut Thielicke, who pastored in post-war Germany, helping and even pondering with his parishioners about the traumas they were facing as they looked upon the ruins of

their country. He asked his people point blank: "Are we to think that what we have experienced ... and probably will experience is really God's will – not only what we see in the ruins but, above all, what we do not see: the sad nights of the homeless and the bereaved, the mortal struggles and panics in the pits and cellars deep beneath the earth, the scenes of terror that nobody ever hears about – is all this the will of God? Or is not all this rather the will of the men who have done it or caused it to be done? Is it not therefore precisely *that* will which is in opposition to the counsels of God ...?"

There is a prevailing attitude that whatever happens is somehow connected to God. Whether good or bad, we assign this to God. This is one of the sad heresies the church continues to battle. Last night, as our Bible Study class on the Lord's Prayer pondered the whole notion of the kingdom and God's will, we were all struck by the fact that what we know God wills is not necessarily what we will, that what God wants us to do is the very thing we sometimes don't do or refuse to do. That's the human element, always fighting the good and gracious will of God. Luther's insight here is very beneficial: "...his will is done when he strengthens our faith and keeps us firm in his Word as long as we live. This is his good and gracious will."

Are you struck by those words, "good and gracious?" In the gospels there are 57 references to Jesus' teachings about the kingdom of God – and the healings and miracles Jesus did were

*visible* teachings about God's will. He was about the task of creating here on earth the beginnings in which the will of God was to be done clearly and unmistakably. Jesus was driven to live by the will of the Father in heaven. As he went about teaching, healing, and doing the miraculous, he was giving the disciples a glimpse of what they would be doing as well.

The man who impacted me the most in college was my campus pastor. To look at him, you would think that John Hallsten was nothing more than an ordinary guy who wore a collar. He was married, had 5 kids to support, and loved doing campus ministry. But he was also driven to do something only a handful of white clergymen did in the mid '60's. After praying about it, and talking with his wife about the possible dangers, he decided to become part of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s march on Selma, AL. For Pr. John, the gospel he preached was more than something merely spoken – it was also to be visible. So he went to Alabama, was arrested with Dr. King, met the Rev. Jimmy Reeb – the first clergy-martyr of the Civil Rights movement, spent three days in a crowded jail, and returned to the campus of CSU a changed man. He told those of us who were part of the student congregation that if we were to take our catechetical teaching seriously, and if we were to take the Bible seriously, then all of us would be involved in the good and gracious will of God, active in the world.

But Christians struggle to be involved in what God wills for life. The struggle begins the moment we are baptized. We have our feet on the ground and our heads in the sky. Or, as the late Bp. Wm. Lazareth put it, "We are in the world but not of it." With this mixed identity we are reminded always that we are to strive to do God's will. Even so, there is a strong divide between our striving and our willingness to exercise this good and gracious will.

In Baptism we are made servants of the kingdom of God. Christ yokes us to his mission. Yet how often we are tempted, literally carried away, resisting what God our Father would have us do - as if our happiness in life depended on our own will. We all know those moments when what we really want goes against the grain of what God wants for us. My "wants" replace my "needs" - and as this happens I find something else at work in me. It is self-centeredness, creating in me a different will.

Our Father brings us his kingdom. It is not yet here in its fullness, but one day we shall see it fully. He brings us the kingdom through the cross and empty tomb. He reminds us that there is nothing that can stop him from loving us and giving us eternal life in that kingdom where he will have the last word in his Son. He anoints us with the promise that we are - and always will be - his Son's people, his own dear children, the ones for whom his heart beats with tenderness because of Jesus. In this way he reveals his will for

us as well: good and gracious. Good and gracious! His will for us was born from his Son's agony in the garden: not my will but thine be done. Christ hid himself wholly in the Father's will – even experiencing the God forsakenness of untold human suffering – in order to bring us the peace and fulfillment of knowing that the Father's will went this far, allowing his Son to die for us.

We know that the world will continue to be pain-racked. We know that there will be those dark valleys that loved ones face – that even we may face. We know that there will be some very narrow passes we will negotiate. But we have been brought into the Kingdom of God, whose only Son brings life and light to a troubled world. As citizens of this kingdom, we are also its servants. We are the subjects, so that others may know they are the objects of the Father's eternal, never-failing love. We anoint tonight – so that those who desire a healing word may know that the kingdom is a place of healing. We anoint tonight, because we are also called to serve one another – and others, no matter where they may be in the Father's vast kingdom.

So when we say, "Thy kingdom come," we again pray with Jesus that this kingdom will be revealed in its fullness. And when we pray, "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," we are given the faith to hold fast to our Father through his Son, as the Holy Spirit

empowers us to live by God's will and hide ourselves wholly in the Father's love for us all.