



On Earth As In Heaven?

In the first session when we began to look at what I am calling the Abba Prayer (and what we have come to know as the Lord's Prayer) we saw that the prayer we use in our liturgy today is the result of a number of developments through the gospels and early Christian writings. This is helpful to us in so much as we are able to see that from the outset of the church Christian communities were working out their theology in their own context according to their own experience. One of the points we looked at was that the phrase *'in heaven'* which

follows 'Our Father' was not found in the very earliest record of this prayer. It can be found in Matthew but not in Luke (the only gospels to record the prayer) and not in 'Q' (believed to be the source material used by Matthew and Luke when they wrote their gospels). Later, as the church began to create liturgy for use in worship Matthew was preferred and the phrase *'in heaven'* is now familiar to us all. Why draw attention to this? Because words are important and also because words change their meaning throughout the generations. For Matthew and his readers it was the natural assumption that the 'home' of God was 'heaven' – the place beyond the clouds. They knew nothing of what we now know regarding the universe and it was for them an obvious conclusion to draw regarding the creator of all things and where 'he' would be located. Do we now believe this? Well, perhaps we do and perhaps we don't – and sometimes both at the same time!

Years of reciting this prayer without necessarily studying it have shaped our mental picture of what it is that we are in fact saying and also 'believing'. It is no surprise that we refer to 'the big man upstairs' as we raise our eyes to the sky indicating that we are referring to God. In our worship we project our words, and even our thoughts, upward and outward. In our architecture we point our spires to the clouds as if a signpost to the divine. We will often speak of God as one who is looking down on us. Some of you may well be familiar with the song 'From A Distance'¹ which has the refrain 'God is watching us'. This is instinctive because we have always imagined God to be *'in heaven'* and even though we now know that the universe is infinite and ever expanding we still defy the logic and speak in spatial terms. Why do I labour this point? Because God is *here and now* and not *out there somewhere over the rainbow*. There is no distance between us, God is the ground of our being, the all in all, the one in whom we live and move and have our being. God is as close as our very next breath. Even if the first Christians did believe that God was out there somewhere, the significance of what they came to define as the incarnation – God with us in the person of Jesus – is the beginning of redefining that understanding and locating God in the here and now.

Another reason I am repeating this point is that we find again in the next phrase of the prayer, a reference to 'heaven'. The phrase in 'Q' is simply; *Let your basileia (kingdom/reign) come*. Once again Luke follows this form in his gospel but Matthew adds, *Enact your will on earth as you have in heaven*². So, originally the prayer was that the kingdom of God would come. This is significant because Jesus began his ministry declaring that the kingdom of God is close at hand, right here right now, indeed, the kingdom of God is within you.³ In Matthew we read that Jesus proclaims *the kingdom of heaven is close at hand!* And in this statement we can see that Jesus is pulling 'heaven' down to earth – in effect he is saying, "Do not imagine any longer that God is in his heaven up there somewhere – no, God is very close at hand and as such so is his kingdom." In Luke he proclaims that *the kingdom of God is within you!* Note that Matthew uses the word 'heaven' and once again Luke does not, choosing instead to use the phrase *kingdom of God* (heaven is a favourite concept of Matthew). But what is significant about both Matthew and Luke is that they show that Jesus is redefining ideas of where God and the reign of God is located. The kingdom is here! Therefore when we pray *Your Kingdom come* there are two important words we need to be aware of; the first is *basileia* (translated *kingdom*) and the second is *erchomai* (translated *come*).

The King And The Kingdom

Basileia is a key concept of Jesus as he teaches that the rule or the reign of God is here and now. The people to whom Jesus spoke were under the oppression of another king and another kingdom – the emperor of Rome and the Roman kingdom. Everywhere they looked they saw evidence of being captive to this foreign oppressor. They were ruled over by a despotic enemy and they were captive to them. The Zealots sought to fight against this by night and under the cover of darkness. Their aim was to overthrow the oppressor and bring in the reign (basileia) of their God according to what they understood the prophets to have said. However, Jesus refused to join the Zealots because he understood that there will always be times of external oppression. For us today that may not be political or national but it may be emotional or psychological. Many of us are captive to other things, other

¹ Made popular by Bette Midler in 1990 on her album *Some People's Lives*

² See the separate sheet with the five different Jesus prayers of Early Christianity

³ In Matthew 4.17 and Luke 17.21

kingdoms (basileias), other rulers that compete in our lives. We can be ruled by appetite, attitudes or hereditary forces. When Jesus states boldly that the kingdom, the basileia, or the rule and reign of God, is close at hand or even within us, we see that nothing can overthrow that rule if we submit to it. The king and his kingdom can be found within us and as long as that is the case then no external pressure can usurp it. For as long as we imagine that we are somehow separated from God by some distance defined as heaven and earth we shall always be susceptible to feeling vulnerable and somehow divorced from God.

Erchomai is the word translated as *come* and can also be translated as *be revealed, show yourself, or appear*. Jesus is making it very clear that the kingdom is not hidden beyond the clouds in some far off heaven. There is no need of imagining that somewhere out there an army is amassing to come in power to overthrow the enemy. Just as so often the enemy is within, so too will be the kingdom. Our salvation does not come from afar but is to be found close at hand as it is revealed to us in Jesus the Christ. Later in the more theologically developed gospel of John we will hear Jesus saying that if we have seen him we have seen the Father. He goes on to state that as the Father is in him so he is in the Father and so we are in him and he is in us⁴. The knowledge of God is one of an intimate relationship, a knowing deep inside us that we are one with God through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We are then also called to be as Jesus was, those who reveal the kingdom and declare it to be right here right now!

So then, as we pray *your kingdom come*, we are actually making a declaration that the rule of God is right here and right now and we will live according to that rule. We must avoid the idea that there is a place somewhere where the rule of God is perfectly carried out and we have to long for that to be established here on earth – that would be platonism⁵. Instead we affirm that the will of God can be enacted in our hearts and minds *because* the kingdom of God is within us and not in some distant place over the rainbow. This is the transformative reality of what it means to be a person of faith in Christ. We do not long for something from outside ourselves to be imposed upon us, instead we understand that we are transformed from the inside out.⁶

Aramaic Roots

In Aramaic we find this meaning clearly indicated, the phrase *Thy Kingdom come* is *Teytey malkuthakh*. Like the Greek *Erchomai* the Aramaic *Teytey* means *come* but it also evokes images of the deeper meaning of a nuptial chamber where mutual desire is fulfilled and birthing begins. In this sense we are not only 'born anew' but we also become those who give birth to the kingdom of God. The kingdom is within us as a woman carries a child and as it is nurtured it is birthed into the world. *Malkuthakh* denotes either *kingdom* or *queendom* it has ancient roots which carry the image of that which is fruitful poised to create. It is the 'I can' within us that enables us to step forward in faith believing that we are able to live transformative lives under the gentle and yet powerful rule of our God.

Neil Douglas-Klotz translates it poetically;

Create your reign of unity now –
Through our fiery hearts and willing hands.

Let your counsel rule our lives,
Clearing our intention for co-creation.

Unite our "I can" to yours, so that
We walk as kings and queens with every creature.

Your rule springs into existence
As our arms reach out to embrace all creation.

From this divine union, let us birth
New images for a new world of peace.

Create your reign of unity now!⁷

⁴ See John chapter 14

⁵ Platonism is a philosophy based on the teaching of Plato (428-348BC) The central concept of Platonism is the *Theory of Forms*: the transcendent, perfect archetypes, of which objects in the everyday world are imperfect copies. In other words, our lives here on earth are imperfect copies of a perfect version existing somewhere else. Platonism had a profound effect on Western thought, and the early Christian church adopted many Platonic notions once it grew apart from its Hebraic roots.

⁶ See Romans 12.1-2

⁷ *Prayers Of The Cosmos* (Meditations on the Aramaic words of Jesus) by Neil Douglas-Klotz page 19