

Sermon for Evensong on Sunday after Ascension Day, 28th May 2017
2 Samuel 23:1-5; Ephesians 1:15-23 - Thy kingdom come

Thy kingdom come. The Archbishop of Canterbury has proposed, for a second year running, that in the nine days between Ascension and Pentecost, Whit Sunday, everyone in all the churches should pray that bit of the Lord's Prayer:

Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven,

together with other short prayers, in a 'novena', in a nine-day cycle of prayer. You can look them up on the Church of England website - and indeed, if anyone doesn't have a computer to download it, see me afterwards and I'll let you have a printed copy.

In the modern-language Communion service, in one of the Eucharistic prayers, Prayer E in Common Worship, we pray this prayer:

'Lord of all life, help us to work together for that day when your kingdom comes, and justice and mercy will be seen in all the earth'.

For 'that day when your kingdom comes'. That's when, but it's a bit confusing where all this is supposed to be happening. With the Ascension, Jesus going up to heaven, and the Holy Spirit coming down upon the apostles at Pentecost.

This is something where our words are inadequate to describe the divine realm, the workings of God.

As St Paul writes, '... what is the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, Which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places..'

It is, in St Paul's words, a powerful description of a God who is beyond all measurements of power, and I think by the same token that God is beyond any location in time or space. So it is all right to talk of him being up in heaven, in the sense that that isn't a literal description, so much as a mark of how important, and how beyond all human imagining, the power of God is.

But we are not now looking at a world in which justice and mercy are seen in all the earth: at least, not yet. There are still terrible wrongs being done, as we realised on Monday night when the suicide bomber struck in Manchester, at a

pop concert mainly attended by teenage girls, some of them with their mothers.

There have been so many words already written and spoken about this terrible crime. It was a terrible thing, a horrible crime. Whatever twisted ideology stood behind it, nothing could justify killing and injuring innocent children and their parents.

And now, until tomorrow night, we have armed soldiers on the streets to give people a sense of protection, to reassure them that such an atrocity will not happen again. Nevertheless it does seem doubtful whether simply having armed soldiers on the streets would actually deter or stop a terrorist who is prepared to blow themselves up alongside their victims.

We can feel the despair. 'Thy kingdom come - please, yes', we might say, in a spirit of frustration and bewilderment. How can we say that God's kingdom is coming, or will come, when such terrible things do happen?

I should say immediately that I'm not ignoring the way in which, whenever a terrible atrocity happens, it also brings out the most wonderful outpouring of love and service, from the emergency services, the doctors and nurses, the police, the firemen: and ordinary people, like taxi drivers offering people free rides home. There is a real sense of community and solidarity, which is something that we should celebrate and be profoundly grateful for.

But the doubt remains. How can we celebrate the love of God when such awful things happen? Is there any point in saying prayers?

A lot depends on how you ask those questions. I nearly said, how could a loving God allow, or even cause, such things to happen? But I don't believe that God works that way. We are not robots. God is, we believe, all-powerful, omnipresent, and all-knowing. But it doesn't mean that God makes us do something good or bad. We believe that we have free will: we can choose whether we do a good or a bad thing. Indeed, we can choose whatever we want to do. We have been created as autonomous beings.

So the first thing to say is that God did not somehow cause the bombing in Manchester on Monday night. It was a criminal act by one criminal, perhaps supported by others, also with criminal intent.

The second thing is that it doesn't mean that there's no point in our saying prayers.

The Archbishop's 'wave of prayer' over the next nine days is actually a really good response to the evil which found its expression in Manchester on

Monday night. I recommend to you the 'Thy kingdom come' website, where you can see short clips by various of the Christian leaders, and where there are prayers which we can say each day.

[\[http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/ens/2017/05/24/presiding-bishops-video-leads-worldwide-prayer-campaign-thy-kingdom-come/\]](http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/ens/2017/05/24/presiding-bishops-video-leads-worldwide-prayer-campaign-thy-kingdom-come/)

At the beginning there is an inspiring short address by Bishop Michael Curry, the presiding Bishop and primate of the Episcopal Church in North America, where he emphasises that prayers are answered.

It's not the case that, when we pray, it's as though we are in some kind of divine restaurant and God is some kind of divine maître d', whom we can summon and order about.

When we pray, it is more like being a client of a food bank: getting a food voucher. We present our voucher, and the food bank gives us what is good for us. We have little or no choice.

And it is good: the second reflection in the novena is from His Eminence Christoph, Cardinal Schönborn, the Roman Catholic archbishop of Vienna. He finishes in a very engaging way by pointing out that it is good to pray with a smile.

All around the world Christians are either involved in this wave of prayer, praying 'Thy kingdom come,' or in other big Christian gatherings, like the German 'Kirchentag', or church festival, in Berlin, which began on Thursday with a 90-minute dialogue between former President Obama and the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, about democracy and global responsibility.

Barack Obama spoke of the need for renewal of the international order, against a background of xenophobia, nationalism, intolerance and anti-democratic trends. He said we have to push back against those trends that would violate human rights, or that would suppress democracy, or would restrict individual freedom of conscience and religion. 'We can't isolate ourselves. We can't hide behind a wall', he said. He was speaking at the place where Berlin was divided between east and west, by the Berlin Wall.

In our prayers in a minute I will say the special prayer which the Bishop of Manchester has written for the people of Manchester, and that will be our first prayer. It will be our contribution to the wave of prayer today.

Prayers do work. Even our little congregation here will be heard. God will answer our prayers, in ways which we cannot anticipate or forecast. God's kingdom will come, but in God's time. Justice and mercy will be seen in all the

earth: swords will be beaten into ploughshares: they will not hurt or destroy on God's holy mountain.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant

A prayer from the Diocese of Manchester

A SPECIAL PRAYER

God of compassion,
you hear the cries of all who are in trouble or distress;
accept our prayers for those whose lives are affected by the bombing in Manchester;
We pray especially for those suddenly facing a future without a child, parent or loved one,
young ones who are in deep distress
those who are injured, traumatized or awaiting news
strengthen them in their hour of need,
grant them perseverance and courage to face the future
and be to them a firm foundation on which to build their lives;
this we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord.



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The Collect for Peace

O God, who art the author of peace and lover of concord,
in knowledge of whom standeth our eternal life,
whose service is perfect freedom;
defend us thy humble servants in all assaults of our enemies;
that we, surely trusting in thy defence,
may not fear the power of any adversaries;

through the might of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.