

Sermon for 17th May 2020

Thy Kingdom Come.

These words come directly from the Lord's Prayer, so we all pray them quite frequently.

We are moving towards the end of the Easter season. This coming Thursday is Ascension Day, when we remember our risen Saviour parting from his followers in visible physical form for the last time. Ten days later comes the Feast of Pentecost, when we remember the great universal outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Christ's followers.

Thy Kingdom Come.

In 2017 and subsequent years, our Archbishops invited us to join in a wave of prayer in the period from Ascension Day to Pentecost, and Churches together in Buxton took up the initiative. This year, we have had other pre-occupations and public gatherings are denied us.

Thy Kingdom Come.

Three years ago it seemed to me that we lived in very uncertain times. Respect for institutions, whether the government (national or local), political parties, the media, the Church, the police, the banks, large companies, and so on, seemed to be at a very low ebb.

We were aware of the dangers of pollution and global warming, and we see areas of the world where drought and famine threaten human life on a huge scale.

We had voted to leave the EU. The word "Brexit" was not then a familiar one. Now we are in a post-Brexit transition period.

And then, shortly after Brexit had been effected, the world was plunged into the chaos of the Covid19 pandemic which still engulfs us.

Thy Kingdom Come.

This can seem like a prayer of desperation!

To some extent it is. Our Archbishops are well aware of declining faith and of shrinking church attendance almost throughout this country, and part of the reason for the call to prayer 3 years ago was a desire to get each one of us to articulate our faith and share it with others. Now we are shut out of our church buildings, and various attempts have been made to facilitate worship at home or on-line.

Some have found that the number of "clicks" on their on-line services at home greatly exceed numbers in their historic congregations. The more cautious observers ask how long each on-line observer remained engaged. Sometimes engagement has apparently been for only a minute. On-line browsers can be flighty!

Thy Kingdom Come.

Our Bible readings today are interesting.

In the reading from the Acts of the Apostles, St. Paul is in Athens. Athens was the great centre of Greek philosophy, and Paul was addressing a very different type of audience from the mass of Jewish pilgrims that Peter had addressed in Jerusalem on that first day of Pentecost.

Paul's speech has often been held up as a model for us. Paul started from something neutral in their own culture – an altar that he had noticed, bearing the inscription "To an unknown god."

He used this, and indeed a quotation from one of their own poets, to introduce elements of his own faith background and then to get on to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

But was it a success?

Well, by Jerusalem Day of Pentecost standards, where 3000 were added to the number of disciples, the answer has to be "No."

The chapter from which our reading comes has another 3 verses, which say:

"When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, 'We will hear you again about this.' At that point Paul left them. But some of them joined him and became believers, including

Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.”

Thy Kingdom Come.

We are called to be faithful. If God grants success, however we might consider or measure that, that will always be a cause for rejoicing. If we do not see the Church growing, we are still called to be faithful. We are still called to pray.

Thy Kingdom Come.

Our Gospel reading is a short one, and it comes from a time of change and turmoil in Jesus’ earthly life – at the Last Supper, shortly before his betrayal.

Jesus’ words are words of comfort and affirmation:

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.”

Thy Kingdom Come.

Jesus leaves us with this wonderful promise,
“They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”

As we continue to pray for deliverance from Covid19, and guidance for the new life that will follow, may we all be faithful, in prayer and in daily living. Thy Kingdom Come. Amen.