

In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen.

Our gospel reading today is, again, from the 18th chapter of Matthew, and includes a conversation between Jesus and Peter, followed by another relevant teaching parable. But travel back through the chapters of Matthew with me for a moment, to the ‘Sermon on the Mount’, where in chapter 6 Jesus teaches the disciples a good way to pray. There, in what is known as ‘the Lord’s prayer’, Jesus begins this way: Our Father, who art in heaven (hallowed be thy name), thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Now, in that short sentence we find two clues which help us understand Matthew’s perspective on how the good news of Jesus is best announced. First, notice that God’s name isn’t exactly used. We say ‘our father’ and that the father’s name is hallowed, or holy, but the actual name of the Father isn’t mentioned. In Jewish tradition, and even among many Jews today, the use of God’s true name is prohibited, both in speaking and in writing, in an admission that no matter how they try, they are going to get it wrong, or at least incomplete. Scholars believe that the author of Matthew had an intended audience that was primarily Jewish, that his (or her) message was targeted specifically to those whose lives and practices were in the Jewish tradition. The gospel of Luke, on the other hand, written probably at about the same time, was written for a different audience, one whose lives and practices were more in line with the broader Roman Empire. So, Matthew avoids mentioning God’s elusive real name, even when addressing God directly in prayer.

The second clue in that very first sentence of the Lord’s Prayer comes in the distinction between heaven and earth. We should pray, as Jesus instructs, that the Father’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven. So, there are two places? Are heaven and earth two different places, where there might be two different codes of conduct, where people live their lives differently? One where God’s will is promoted and yet another where it is ignored? Are there two places in creation which are in constant contrast? It sounds a little like a science-fiction scenario! But in Mathew’s gospel, Jesus is recalled as using the phrase ‘kingdom of heaven’ more than 30 times, contrasting that place with earthly civilization, often in parables which are meant to teach morality and justice. He says that the kingdom of heaven is like an improbably powerful mustard seed. The kingdom of heaven is like a woman who wisely uses yeast. The kingdom of heaven is like when a sower goes out to sow seeds. The kingdom of heaven is sort of like when a large fishnet is thrown into the sea. And today we have heard that the kingdom of Heaven is like a time and place where a king not only forgives a debt out of compassion and pity, but an improbable, impossible debt. The servant owes his monarch ten thousand talents, and each talent is worth about 6 thousand denarii in the currency of those days. A denarii, BTW was equivalent to a day’s wage, so the servant owes a sum approaching 60 million days worth of work. That’s an impossible amount of course, but the compassionate king, when asked, is willing to forgive the entire debt in order that the servant and his family may be saved. That, says Jesus, is what can happen in the kingdom of heaven, and what would probably never happen in an earthly kingdom or society.

Now, Luke and Mark use the phrase ‘kingdom of God’ instead of ‘the kingdom of heaven’. Is there a difference? Perhaps not. Matthew might be just showing some special sensitivity to the Jewish audience by not presuming to use the name “God” and substituting the word “heaven”. But there is a difference in our hearing, at least to an extent. There are some, who when hearing references to the heavenly kingdom, think of only the ‘afterlife’. They, in particular, might consider Jesus’ teaching to be so outrageously improbable that his ideas would never work here, but are what we should, with some relief, find to be true of the place where we will go after death. While they might be able to recognize ‘the kingdom of God’ as being universally applicable and achievable even among human civilization, they might hear the ‘kingdom of heaven’ as referring to a different experience altogether. But that doesn’t seem to be what Jesus intends when he teaches us to pray that God’s will be done here on earth as it is in heaven. When we ask that, we aren’t saying that we are content to wait until after our lives are over for the justice and compassion Jesus speaks of in these parables.

And there may have been a difference for the disciples of Jesus' day, too, between the idea of God's kingdom as opposed to a heavenly kingdom coming. Recall that the Jewish messianic tradition had taught for centuries that when the Messiah came, he would perform such a revolution against worldly powers that he would replace rulers like the Roman emperor and establish a new empire, one more just but equally powerful and authoritarian. Earlier in chapter 18, Peter seems to have gotten it right when he proclaims Jesus to be the Messiah, but then reveals his misunderstanding when he rejects the idea that any such messiah ought to face the kind of suffering Jesus predicts. Jesus even calls him a stumbling-block to the real messianic work and to the coming of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus, one might say, was especially sent from the kingdom of heaven to correct this misunderstanding among God's faithful people. If and when the worldly civilization was to be altered to be more like God's will, it certainly would look anything like the Roman Empire, or any authoritarian political or theological state ever invented by the human mind. It was beyond the thinking of those disciples, as it might just be beyond ours as well. Nevertheless, according to the gospel of Matthew, Jesus gives these glimpses of what the kingdom of heaven is like, with the hope that we can, indeed, be taught.

Now, there's a reason why I have spent so much of this precious preaching time giving you background information and boring you to tears. (And what was it?...oh, yeah!...) When we pray the Lord's prayer, and right away encounter those two clues, we'd better recognize just what we are praying for. God's name, holy as it is, is so complex, so infinite and eternal, that we dare not presume to understand it fully. That we call God 'Father' is an appropriate way to begin, but the true nature of God is so awesome that neither the Nicene creed nor the rantings of a preacher are likely to reveal much more than a tiny fraction of the truth. And when we pray for heaven on earth, we do so with but a few glimpses of what that might be like. Yet we encouraged, given courage, to pray for just that. You know, the Lord's prayer becomes something like a chant for us, a useful spiritual practice as we seek to envelop ourselves with the Holy Spirit, to engage with holiness, to be one with God and all the ancestral souls which have preceded us in this faith. But as comforting and embracing as the words of that prayer are, we ought to at least occasionally reflect on their meaning and implications. Praying for God's will to be as efficacious on earth as it is in heaven is no small thing. It might be risky in some ways. It might have unintended consequences. It certainly invites our own interests, our own dreams, our own lives, to be overwhelmed by God's dream and intentions. We might just have to surrender a lot for the sake of heaven on earth.

The forgiven servant in the story Jesus tells is given the opportunity to behave like the king who has treated him with such unexpected mercy and generosity. But he squanders that chance, doesn't get the example which has been given to him, is merciless and cruel, and must face torturous consequences. He was not ready for heaven on earth. He couldn't adapt, even when he was given such a dramatic and generous example to follow. Heaven on earth had no place, no patience, for his behavior. By not being forgiving as he had been forgiven, he tried to bring all matter of sin into heavenly society, and it wasn't a good fit. By his behavior, he attempted to bring bitterness, greed, cruelty, lust for power, arrogance, oppression, and all the other seven deadly sins into the kingdom of heaven where they were not going to be tolerated. Sin is whatever separates us from God, and, by definition, makes the kingdom of heaven impossible. So, when we pray for the kingdom to come, we should realize that it won't, it can't, while our public and even our secret sins infest our lives and our society. Summing up his parable, Jesus says that every one of us will be denied the freedom of the heavenly kingdom if we don't forgive all brothers and sisters from the heart. Can he mean that the kingdom cannot come until each of us hears the truthful message? Will the kingdom be prevented from assuming sovereignty over the world until each can somehow become sinless? God help us! That certainly seems improbable. But then, so do all Jesus' teachings about the heavenly kingdom. The secret, he suggests, is to look to our hearts, where the secrets about loving God and loving our neighbors have been imprinted for us to discover. Look to your hearts, look to your souls, where the unimaginable blessings of the kingdom of heaven are to be received. Amen.