

Advent 2014 St Marylebone 8.30 am and 11 am

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.*

Right at the very heart of our worship of almighty God, whether private or public, lies the prayer that Jesus his disciples to pray.

No other prayer has been prayed by so many lips as the *Our Father*, the Lord's Prayer.

But not only did Jesus teach his disciples to call God 'abba', 'papa', when they prayed, Jesus taught them to pray for the coming of the Father's Kingdom; for God's will be done here in earth, as it is in heaven.

Whilst we might well have grown confident enough to call God by familiar names, such as 'papa' – or even 'mother', I am not so sure that we are really that confident in our daily praying, to really ask for God's Kingdom to come, really come!

Most of us would, I sense, be pretty miffed if our prayer for God's Kingdom to come here on earth just as in heaven was actually answered and the last trump sounded with earth and

heaven becoming one in the unity of God's eternal love and will.

What would happen to the mortgage, the down payment on the new car, the plans for the next company merger or next season's fashion or product launch? And, for heaven's sake I have filled in the application forms for my daughter's admission to The St Marylebone School!

If we are brutally honest with ourselves, I guess that most of us are really rather relieved that God's Kingdom does not suddenly burst in and upset all our well-made plans and what might pass for a rather well-ordered life.

So, praying for God's Kingdom to come, really, actually come here and now, for things to be in earth just as they are in heaven can often be, at best a perfunctory and really rather half-hearted petition.

If God's love and justice and peace did break in, explode even, into our world, out if it's safe and really rather comfortingly distant heavenly confines, it's not only the FTSE 100 and the Dow Jones which might need a little realignment!

Yet, Advent, the period of the Church's year we begin today, is about praying for God's Kingdom to come; and praying for it to come not just because we must, because Jesus told us to

pray for it – every time we pray - but because the realisation and the actualisation of the Kingdom is the thing for which - and above all else - we should be yearning and longing for.

Advent has become, like so much of the rest of the year, the time of preparing for Christmas; for buying and wrapping presents and arguing whether it's going to be Turkey or Goose we always promise ourselves but never get round to chancing!

But Advent is first and foremost about the earnest-longing and eager-praying for the establishment of God's perfect and just rule, God's Kingdom, here on earth, here in Marylebone, right here where I am, just as it is in heaven.

Praying for the Kingdom is a dangerous and risky thing.

Charles Elliott, one-time Director of *Christian Aid*, has written, that the coming of the Kingdom implies nothing less than the “total transformation of human society”: its politics, its economics, it's personal, group, institutional and international relationshipsⁱ.

No wonder we find it hard to pray 'thy Kingdom come!'

As John the Baptist tried to tell the people of Jerusalem in the first century, the Kingdom of God is not something 'out there'

that will, whether we want it or not, be 'superimposed' by God on this world to bring it into line with heaven; nor is it simply a 'spiritual' or 'internal' state of reality which can transform the life of an individual believer whilst leaving the external world untouched and unchanged.

The message of John, the message of Jesus, is that the Kingdom of God is nothing short of complete transformation, complete liberation, not only of individuals, but of the whole created order, the complete transformation of the world and its structures and its institutions.

We are constantly being brain-washed, through our television screens, our newspapers and our magazines, even by those whom we democratically elect to high office, into accepting the world as-we-are-told-it-must-be, as if there is no alternative, as if there is no other way.

But the cry of John the Baptist which echoed in the in the 'wilderness' of first century Palestine and which echoes through the days of Advent is a cry that God's way is a 'different' way; that the values and hallmarks of God's Kingdom are not the generally accepted values and hallmarks of the world as it is.

It is not unfair to say that the voice of the Church has not always been unequivocal in proclaiming the Kingdom, and , I

suppose, it is one reason why the Church has been so poor at praying for it: compromised by splits and disunity, by trying hard to cover up the appalling crimes of child abuse, or too busy arguing with itself about women priests and bishops, the Church seems to have had too little time or space to pray for and model the Kingdom.

To pray for the coming of the Kingdom, to model the Kingdom in our daily lives and in our churches, is no easy thing. It takes a great deal of courage to pray with conviction that God's Kingdom come here in earth as it is in heaven.

But this is what Jesus asks us, as he asked his disciples to do, when we pray. This is what Advent is really all about.

Jesus does not ask us, his disciples, to pray to the Father to protect us from the coming of his Kingdom; he asks us to pray so that God's perfect will can be done here in earth and his Kingdom come in all its fullness.

If we do nothing else this Advent let make certain that we pray, at least once every day, the Lord's Prayer as we have perhaps never prayed it before, and may God's Kingdom come.

ⁱ Praying the Kingdom, Towards a Political Spirituality, Elliott, C., Paulist Press, 1986