Enrolling in the School of Prayer: Class 6,

Praying about God's kingdom, power, and glory

2020-11-08 Sermon

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[**read slides 1-6, sound on**]

[**slide 7, blank**] Deb recite Lk. 2.1-8.

Those words have become so familiar to many of us when read at Christmastime that we can forget to stop and reflect on what Luke is trying to tell us.

In one short paragraph he moves from the great Emperor in Rome to the new King in Bethlehem who is to rule the world.

There is no question for Luke as to which one makes the angels sing.

[**slide 8**] As we look at this story today, we can catch a glimpse of what we mean when we pray, "Yours [Abba Father] is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever and ever."

[**slide 9**] By the time Jesus is born, Caesar Augustus has already been ruler of the Roman Empire for a quarter of a century.

He is the king of kings, ruling a territory that stretches from Gibraltar in the West to Jerusalem in the East, from Britain in the North to Egypt in the South.

[**slide 10, blank**] Power is now concentrated in the hands of this one man.

He has done what no one had done for 200 years before him: brought peace to the whole wide Roman world.

But it was peace at a price; a price paid through war and conquest and by taxing subjugated peoples in far-off lands.

As Arnaldo Mo-mig-li-ano, one of the greatest historians of the ancient world put it,

"[Augustus] gave peace, as long as it was consistent with the interests of the Empire and the myth of his own glory."

There you have it in a nutshell: the whole uncertain structure of a human empire,

a kingdom of absolute power, bringing glory to the man at the top, and peace to those on whom *his* favour rests.

But, as Luke points out in his gospel, watch what happens next.

[**slide 11**] This man, this king, this absolute ruler, Caesar Augustus, lifts his finger in Rome,

issuing his decree that a census be taken of the entire Roman world for the purposes of increasing his kingdom, his power, and his glory,

while 2400 km away, in a small backwater province of the empire,

[**slide 12**] a young couple makes a hazardous journey, resulting in the birth of a child in an obscure little town,

that just happens to be mentioned in Hebrew prophecy in relation to the coming of another king, another ruler.

The prophet Micah writes in the 8th century B.C.,

"But you, Bethlehem Eph-rá-thah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel."

And, as Luke tells us, it is at this birth that the angels sing, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom *his* favour rests."

[**slide 13, blank**] While this passage from Micah is very familiar to us, it is not so well understood.

We usually cut off the reading at v.2 of c.5. But when we read on, v.4 records words that would make Caesar Augustus very anxious:

"He [the coming king] will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.

And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth."

And v.5 goes on to say, "And he will be their peace."

How is this peace to be secured? The verses that follow describe how this coming King, born in Bethlehem,

will rescue his people from the hand of the foreign emperors.

In Micah's day, this foreign emperor was the Assyrian leader Sargon, who was succeeded by his son Sennacherib.

But Luke's readers would have no difficulty in transferring the meaning to Rome and its emperor, Augustus.

And Luke would have hoped that subsequent generations, including our own, would be equally adept at making contemporary applications.

As we watch what Luke is doing, this birth narrative ceases to be an idyllic, romantic story, with rural shepherds paying homage to the infant king.

Rather, it becomes a fairly clear statement of two kingdoms, kingdoms that are destined to clash,

kingdoms that offer radically different definitions of what peace and power and glory are all about.

[**slide 14**] On the one hand is Caesar Augustus, ruler of the world, turning 60 years of age in the year Jesus is born.

He represents the best that pagan kingdoms can do.

At least he knows that peace and stability are good things.

Unfortunately he has to kill a lot of people to bring them about, and kill a lot more, on a regular basis, to preserve them.

His real interest is in his own kingdom, power, and glory. Already, at this time in his life, many of his subjects have begun to regard him as divine.

[**slide 15**] On the other hand, and in stark contrast, in Bethlehem, lies the new-born king, born with a price on his head.

He represents the dangerous alternative, the possibility of a different kingdom, a different power, a different glory, and a different peace.

The two kingdoms stand over against one another.

As Tom Wright puts it, "Augustus' kingdom is like a well-lit room at night.

The lamps are arranged beautifully; they produce pretty patterns of light on the walls; but they haven't defeated the darkness outside.

Jesus' kingdom, however, is like the morning sun rising, signalling that it's time to blow out the candles, throw open the curtains, and welcome the new day that is dawning.

It is this double vision of reality we invoke every time we conclude the prayer Jesus taught us in Mt. 6 with the words,

"Yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever.""

[**slide 16, blank**] Now, if you look at the prayer in Mt. 6, you'll notice that this concluding doxology does not appear there.

It is absent from the earliest and best manuscripts we have of Matthew and Luke. You'll find it consigned as a footnote at best in most Bibles.

These words were added to the prayer in the decades following the death and resurrection of Jesus

and were well established in the church within a century or so of Jesus' day.

Does it really matter that they were not the words of Jesus himself in this prayer he taught us to pray?

Think of it this way. Mozart was commissioned, when he was ill and in the final months of his life, to write a Requiem Mass for the citizens of Vienna.

Feverishly he composed the opening sections. But his coughing spasms grew worse.

He began writing the beautiful "Lacrimosa" for his Requiem. It is the last piece of music Mozart put down to paper.

But he was only able to complete the opening eight bars. Then he died, and was buried in a common grave.

One of his students, however, Austrian Franz [Süss-my'r], could not bear that the haunting Requiem would remain unfinished and unsung.

So he studied Mozart's notes, he remembered Mozart's techniques, and he completed the Mass.

Today, whenever this Requiem is performed, its lyric beauty pays homage to its famous composer, not to the student who completed it.

So it is with the final phrase of this prayer. Though not the words of Jesus himself,

they are the testimony of his followers to the truth and reality of the kingdom he embodies.

"Yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever."

Finishing off a prayer this way was not uncommon in Judaism and early X'nity.

Many bible scholars think this final phrase was fashioned from the words of David's prayer in 1 Chron. 29.10-11:

"Praise be to you, LORD, the God of our father Israel, from everlasting to everlasting.

Yours, LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendour, for everything in heaven and earth is yours.

Yours, LORD, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all."

Whatever the source, this final phrase sums up the message of the prayer as a whole:

God's kingdom, God's power, and God's glory are what it's all about.

It is a prayer that this alternative kingdom vision - the vision of God's kingdom, not Caesars' or anybody else's -

may become the one, true reality in our lives, not just for the future, but also in the present.

When we pray this concluding phrase of the prayer we are praying that the babe in Bethlehem may be the reality of which Emperor Augustus is the parody.

Like Augustus, we can make the error of thinking, "It's all about my kingdom, my power, and my glory."

One of the best commentaries I know on this is found in a book by that world-renowned theologian, Dr. Seuss entitled, [**slide 17**] "Yurtle the Turtle."

It's a story about a pond full of little turtles who were ruled by a king turtle named Yurtle.

And one day Yurtle, the turtle king, decides that his kingdom needs expanding.

"I'm ruler of all I see.
But I don't see enough.
That's the trouble with me."

So he began to stack turtles up underneath his throne.

The king lifts his finger and a whole pond of turtles scramble to obey, first dozens and then hundreds.

They all exist for his sake, his kingdom, his power, his glory, and he could see for miles.

"I'm Yurtle the turtle!
Oh, marvellous me!
For I am the ruler of all that I see!"

And he thought his throne was as secure as a throne could be. And I suppose in a way it was. But in the end, his throne collapsed.

"And [the turtle on the bottom]
did a plain little thing.
He burped! And his burp
shook the throne of the king!

And today that great Yurtle,
that Marvellous he,
is King of the Mud.
That is all he can see."

[**slide 18, blank**] You see, it's not about my kingdom, my power, and my glory. That's what the ending of this prayer reminds us of.

"Yours, O God, my Abba Father, is the kingdom, yours is the power, and yours is the glory forever."

I think one of the reasons these words were added to the prayer

– besides being the testimony of his followers to the reality of God's kingdom, power, and glory –

is because you and I can have a kingdom, power, and glory problem.

Like Yurtle the turtle, we want to build our little kingdoms, have our own power and glory.

Some people are bold and obvious about this, while others are sneaky and subtle. But everybody can have a kingdom, power, and glory problem.

For example, you may think, "When I walk into work, I want things being run my way, I want people doing what I want them to do.

What does that mean? It means, "I'm in charge here. This is my kingdom. I have the power. I want the glory."

Or when at home, "In my kid's rooms the beds have to be made just as I prescribe. Chores are to be done just as I command."

What does that mean? It means this is my little kingdom. I have the power and I want the glory.

For myself, when I walk in the door at the end of the day, I want my slippers laid out by the Lazy Boy,

my tea ready to drink, the paper waiting for me to read, and my dinner ready to eat.

What does that mean? It means, "I've walked into the wrong house. This is somebody else's kingdom. I have no power or glory here."

Some of us are obvious and bold about this while others are sneaky and subtle. But we can all have kingdom, power and glory problems.

It's about my agenda, my comfort, my money, my success, my lifestyle, my achievements, my career, my opportunities, my security –

I just keep stacking the throne a little higher.

But the day is coming when some turtle somewhere is going to burp

and I'm going to learn the truth about whose kingdom, power, and glory is the reality and which is the parody.

And so we are reminded at the end of this prayer that it's all about God's kingdom, power, and glory.

[slide 19] When praying these words, we are surrendering ourselves to God and his kingdom, his power, and his glory.

So let me ask you, what areas of your life do you need to surrender to God today? Where have you been trying to build up your own little kingdom, power and glory?

It's time to surrender and say to your Abba Father, "It's all about your kingdom, your power, and your glory. Not mine."

I wonder how the world would have been different if Caesar had somehow found his way to Bethlehem

and knelt by the manger and surrendered his life to the world's true King of kings.

This is your time to do just that. I urge you to make Jesus king of your life by surrendering your life to him as we sing, “I surrender all.”