

SERMON

“Your Kingdom Come”

Lund Cathedral

9/9/06

I bring you greetings from your brothers and sisters in Christ in Jerusalem and the Holy Land. I also bring you greetings from Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, Jerusalem. Sabeel is a grassroots Christian organization that seeks to make the Gospel relevant to people's lives in Palestine/Israel.

Jesus' disciples must have noticed that Jesus used to spend time in prayer. They came to him and said, "Lord, teach us to pray", so he taught them what we know as the Lord's Prayer, a prayer that has to do with our relationship with God, ourselves, and others. As we all know, it is one of the most beautiful prayers and one that millions of Christians use daily.

In the first section of the prayer, Jesus asks us to pray for the coming of God's Kingdom. When we pray "your kingdom come", we assume that we have chosen God as our Father and king and we desire to live as members of God's family and as citizens in God's kingdom. Therefore, in this prayer we acknowledge that it is God's kingdom that we wish for. It is God's kingdom that we need.

To begin with, we must understand this prayer within its historical context. When Jesus taught this prayer to his disciples, they were all living under the kingdom of Rome, the greatest empire of that day. I am certain that some people saw the benefits of that empire as Paul did later on when he was writing his letters to the churches. Others saw the brutality and oppressive nature of that empire and were very critical of it as was the writer of the book of Revelation who saw the emperor as the beast.

Be that as it may, when Jesus taught his disciples to pray for the coming of God's kingdom, he was theologically radical. He could not be satisfied with the kingdom of Rome nor could he be happy with the restoration of the kingdom of Israel and Judah in spite of the fact that his disciples were in favor of it. Jesus was lifting their thoughts and hearts to seek a new

kingdom where God is sovereign. By implication, Jesus was critiquing empire.

It is also important to emphasize that one of the greatest temptations which Jesus faced at the beginning of his ministry, and which I believe accompanied him throughout his ministry, was the temptation in which the devil offered him the kingdoms of the world if he would only walk the way of empire, the way of war and violence. The way that emphasizes God Sabbaoth – the god of the armies -- was the way of domination. Jesus refused and called attention to the importance of worshipping God alone. It is God's kingdom that Jesus was emphasizing.

As it was then, it is now. These days there is so much talk about Empire. Some see it represented in “global capital” where a handful of corporations and financial institutions control the market and media and exploit the weaker and poorer countries. Others see it represented in an American Empire that is expanding in its world domination and that wants a new Middle East built not on justice and the implementation of International Law but according to the imperial interest of America. They want to extend American empire so that nations must accept American hegemony and those who resist American power are suppressed and silenced.

One expression of this is the growing influence of Christian Zionism, which identifies the Gospel with the ideology of empire and militarism. It advances racial exclusiveness, war, and Armageddon rather than God's kingdom of universal love, redemption and reconciliation taught by Jesus Christ.

We must reject empire and pray and work for the coming of God's kingdom. God's kingdom is a kingdom of righteousness and justice; it is a kingdom of peace, love, and reconciliation. In fact, whenever we gather to worship God and we pray “your kingdom come”, we are making a public statement of political allegiance. We are rejecting the domination of empire and celebrating the reign of a just, righteous, and loving God.

To have God as sovereign over our lives means to resist empire that is built on the ideology of force and the oppression of others. To belong to the Kingdom of God is to build our communities on freedom and equality among all citizens, to champion human rights for all people, to insist on the

dignity and value of every human being, and to work for justice and peace. This is what we mean when we say, "your kingdom come, O God."

In her book, *The Rapture Exposed*, Barbara Rossing talks about the real message of the Book of Revelation. She calls us to engage in the struggle for "God's new world of salvation with justice... We are to be followers of God's slain Lamb, Jesus..." (p.134). The power of the Lamb is the power of nonviolent love to change the world. As Rossing notes, "True victory comes in our world not through military might but through self-giving love.... In Revelation, Jesus conquers not by inflicting violence but by accepting the violence inflicted upon him in the crucifixion" (p. 135). "The Lamb (Christ) is leading us on an exodus out of the heart of empire, out of the heart of addiction to violence, greed, fear, an unjust lifestyle or whatever holds each of us most captive. It is an exodus we can experience each day..." (p. 142).

God's kingdom starts in our hearts; that is why Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is within you." He knew that it must be planted as a seed in the heart and it must grow there. God's Kingdom must be established here and now and continue into the future. We can build God's kingdom in our lives today. When more and more people do God's will and live in the love of God and neighbor, we can experience a good measure of God's kingdom in our midst. This is what we must strive for. May God by the power of the Holy Spirit empower us to bring about God's righteous and peaceful kingdom. Amen.

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