



**Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 1<sup>st</sup> December 2024**

**Readings:** *Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25; Luke 21:25-36*

**Advent Sunday**

How's your December going to be? Lots of Cs, I expect: cards, carols, *cadeaux*, and catering. And all in service to one of life's biggest Cs, Christmas. I get all of that, and join in quite a lot of it.

Part of me is sorry, though, not because I don't like such things but because all of those Cs sort of take over from another C, which I think is what the Church's December is really about. And this other C is one that we use every single week, not just in Advent. Indeed, there will be many of you who use it every day, because it's in The Lord's Prayer. 'Your kingdom come', we pray. C for 'come'. Advent – adventus – coming.

'Your kingdom come' tells of something vital about the Church's December. You see, the cards, carols, *cadeaux*, and catering all push us from Remembrance Sunday to Christmas Day as if there were not several significant weeks in between. Indeed, the recent publication of Allie Esiri's *A poem for every day of Christmas* offers some super items for reading on each date of December, but I'd prefer to be reading almost all of them in January. In fact, the piece by an American poet, Oliver Herford, thrusts us even farther into the New Year:

I heard a bird sing  
In the dark of December.  
A magical thing  
And sweet to remember.  
"We are nearer to Spring  
Than we were in September,"  
I heard a bird sing  
In the dark of December.<sup>1</sup>

The problem with all but missing out Advent and diving head long into Christmas is that Christmas tends to focus on joyful celebration that God came amongst us in the baby Jesus, and stayed in the Holy Spirit. That is wondrous and worth celebrating. But for me, that celebrating is what January is for! To understand my point, you perhaps need to know that I grew up in a Church that had its Carol Service on the first Sunday after Christmas – the carols a wonderful crowning of the cards and catering of previous weeks. That way, December – and especially the four Sundays of Advent - are about *preparing ourselves* in heart and mind for the impact of the basic Christian idea that God is with us, and God will come again. '*Hark! the herald angels sing glory to the new born king*'<sup>2</sup> follows, '*O come, O come Immanuel and ransom captive Israel*'.<sup>3</sup> Ransom your people. As an aside, be it known that for forty years I have lost the argument that the Carol Service should be after Christmas, so don't panic that I am about to upset any liturgical apple carts!

In the weeks before Christmas, that phrase from the Lord's Prayer, 'your kingdom come' is worth lingering over. It's no throw away 'wish you were here' postcard message. 'Your kingdom come' really does invite the radical, transforming presence and power of God. Stephen read to us of how Jeremiah envisions that as the coming of justice, righteousness and safety, when the people will be saved. Then we heard St Luke's record of Jesus in Jerusalem in the days before his death. He seems to imply that so much of concern to us in the world - warring nations, roaring seas, disordered and worried individuals - is the precursor of God's kingdom; the storm before the calm of God's ultimate reign, as it were. Why should we not in the world as it is pray, 'your kingdom come'?

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<sup>1</sup> Herford, Oliver (1863-1935), cited in *A poem for every day of Christmas* edited by Allie Esiri 2024 London: Macmillan page 25

<sup>2</sup> from the eponymous hymn by Charles Wesley 1707-88, RS 159.1.1f

<sup>3</sup> from the eponymous Latin hymn based on 9<sup>th</sup> century antiphons, translated by J. M. Neale 1818-66, RS 126.1.1f

When Matthew and Luke give us the prayer that Jesus taught his followers, they both have the same phrase, and they both use the same verb in exactly the same form. As an imperative it has a particular meaning. Imperatives instruct someone or something to perform an action. 'Eat up', we say to a cabbage-refusing child. 'Buzz off', we say to a persistent wasp. Imperatives. When we pray, 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come', we are not instructing *God* to bring in the kingdom. Rather, we are effectively beseeching the kingdom to come. Moreover, it is not a future imperative – there's no such thing in Biblical Greek. So, we are not commanding the kingdom to come when it gets round to it. We are entreating its impact here and now. You see why it really is an Advent prayer? A *crucial part* of our preparing to celebrate Christmas and for the impact of God's incarnate presence is to cry out, 'your kingdom come'.

So, What do we mean by this word 'kingdom'? I realise that not everyone warms to monarchy as a system of government today, but I see the Bible offering it as a concept or image that can open a window for us onto what taking God seriously offers and asks. What is it for the coming of which we are longing this Advent?

Well, living in a kingdom is about living under the reign of a monarch. Humanly speaking, whether they (or elected officials) are tyrannical despots or constitutionally benign servants depends upon the nation and the person. The kingdom of *God*, though, speaks to me **first** of living under the reign of the God we see in Jesus, or in a community shaped by the character and priorities of God that Jesus reveals. The Bible helps us to see that they include such things as truth, mercy, peace, justice and compassion. Of greatest significance, though, Jesus stresses in Holy Week that God's purpose includes redemption: <sup>4</sup> healing and restoring of the imperfections and inadequacies of creation.

**Secondly**, for me the reign of God is characterised by God's *chesed* – that steadfast loving kindness of which countless Hebrew writers speak, and which insists that God's judgement, which is essential in a world of such imperfection, comes 'with healing in its wings'.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, such is God's redeeming *chesed*, that it leads to a restored and renewed community rich in God's *shalom* - wholeness, completeness, welfare, safety, and peace.

And **thirdly**, for me, the kingdom of God is not only about *God's reign* but also about *our citizenship*. To pray 'your kingdom come' is to commit ourselves to live according to its virtues – to let God's truth, mercy, and peace; justice, compassion inspire our own commitment and community.

'Your kingdom come'. If that really is a prayer longing for God's reign in the way I have suggested, it seems to me to be of immediate and urgent relevance to our world and to the Church. It is an imperative, where we beseech the coming of God's Kingdom here and now. And perhaps it is a prayer we might all make about our own personal lives, too.

In a **world** shaped by a resort to violence, and a subjection to nature's force as evident today as ever it has been, 'your kingdom come' is no mere religious mantra hidden in the rest of the prayer's words. It's the impassioned imperative of those who know the limits of relying on themselves, but who trust that their help comes from the One who made heaven and earth. <sup>6</sup> 'Your kingdom come'.

In a **Church** timorously adjusting to what it means in twenty-first century Western Europe to be faithful to God and relevant to the world, 'your kingdom come' is an urgent plea. We know that emulating the servant-heart of King Jesus we are not called to set ourselves *above* secular society, but nor are we to ape it, when it neither knows its need of God's *chesed*, nor embodies God's *shalom*. Advent calls us as the Church to live our prayer, 'Your kingdom come'.

And what about more **personal lives**? Are you rejoicing in some success, or new opportunity? Are you regretting some silly mistake, or even a crime? Are you worried about someone you treasure, or missing someone who has gone from your life? What does 'your kingdom come' mean there? Just by sitting here or tuning in to the live stream this morning, I imagine we are people who aspire to be faithful

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 21.28

<sup>5</sup> from the hymn, *Hark! the herald angels sing* by Charles Wesley 1707-88, Rejoice & Sing 15

<sup>6</sup> cf Psalm 121.1

followers of Jesus. Let's face it: we don't have to come. But here we are, 'not necessarily attractive and saintly people along with other not necessarily attractive and saintly people'<sup>7</sup> praying 'your kingdom come – your will be done [in me] as in heaven.' As Rowan Williams suggests, 'where we are and who we are is the furnace where the Son of God walks'.<sup>8</sup> In all our flawed, fearful, falteringly faithful ordinariness, December invites us to spend some time getting ourselves ready to be that furnace into which the fire of God's searching truth and saving love comes as, in a few weeks we sing,

'O Holy Child of Bethlehem,  
descend to us, we pray;  
cast out our sin, and enter in,  
be born in us today.'<sup>9</sup>

And, as he ponders the daily prayers of these 'not necessarily attractive and saintly people', Dr Williams concludes,

'here we are deciding daily [in our prayers] to recognise the prose of ourselves and each other as material for something unimaginably greater – the kingdom of God...'<sup>10</sup>

Of course December requires us to get the cards and catering ready. And of course I will delight in the eight carol services. But let's make sure it is also about a fervent Advent prayer, 'your kingdom come'.

And so, before a moment of silence, we offer the Lord's Prayer again, this time in the traditional form.

**Our Father, who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name;  
thy kingdom come;  
thy will be done;  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our trespasses,  
as we forgive those who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation.  
but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom,  
the power and the glory,  
for ever and ever. Amen**

N. P. Uden

1<sup>st</sup> December 2024

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<sup>7</sup> Williams, Rowan 2003 *Silence and Honey Cakes: the wisdom of the desert* Oxford: Lion Books page 97

<sup>8</sup> *ibid* page 98

<sup>9</sup> from the hymn, *O little town of Bethlehem*, by Phillips Brooks 1835-93, Rejoice & Sing 145

<sup>10</sup> *ibid* page 97