



Transcripts from the thy Kingdom Come 2019 daily podcasts

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1. Ascension Day, May 30

Jesus

The biggest mistake you can make about Ascension Day is to suppose that Jesus has now abandoned us, that he's gone 'somewhere else'. We think like that because we imagine 'heaven' and 'earth' as utterly separate, so that if Jesus has gone to heaven he's left us by ourselves on earth. If that was true, then all our praying would be a kind of long-range messenger-service, shouting across a vast gap, like someone in Nigeria trying to call out to a friend in Brazil with the whole Atlantic Ocean between them.

But heaven and earth aren't like that, and Jesus has not left us by ourselves. In the Bible 'heaven' and 'earth' are the two halves of God's one good creation. They are made for each other. One day, we are told, they will come together in a single unity. The Jews celebrated that in the Temple, where heaven and earth came together as a sign of God's plan for the whole creation. And when Jesus came announcing God's kingdom he meant that it was time for this great coming-together to happen at last. He showed what that meant by healing people from all kinds of diseases. He demonstrated it dramatically by celebrating God's kingdom with all the wrong sort of people – the outcasts, the collaborators, the prostitutes; and when people complained he pointed out crisply that they have a party in heaven when sinners repent and that he was joining in.

Jesus was, in fact, the heaven-and-earth person, a kind of walking, talking Temple, joining effortlessly together the powerful but gentle presence of the creator God with the messy, awkward life of the present earth. Jesus plunged right into the middle of it all with a mixture of welcome and warning – a royal welcome to anyone who shared his vision of God's new regime, and a sharp warning to anyone who preferred the old regime of suspicion, hatred and violence. He saw how badly the world was out of joint, and he stood at the dangerous fault line between the way things are and the way God wants them to be, taking upon himself the full cost of turning the one into the other.

We know how the story ends – or do we? Jesus chose Passover, the great Jewish freedom-festival, to do what had to be done. He challenged the corrupt Temple rulers, and, behind them, the global might of Rome's empire. His acted message spoke not only of God's new regime, but of himself as somehow embodying, spearheading, that new world. Rome did what empires do, trying to destroy him and his dangerous message. But God raised him from

the dead and thereby declared that he was and is the coming king, the king under whose rescuing rule the whole earth would be full of heaven's glory. So when we speak of Jesus then ascending to heaven, we mean that he now shares the very throne of God the Father. Heaven is the manager's office, the place from which the business of the world is now to be run.

So why is the world still a mess? Because, as Jesus explained in the Sermon on the Mount, when God becomes king he doesn't change the world in the way we try to change the world – the poor, the meek, the mourners, the people who are hungry for justice, the pure in heart; and by the time the Caesars of this world have woken up to what's going on, the humble and meek and pure in heart are looking after the poor, have set up schools and hospitals, are bringing hope to God's world.

And that's where we come in. We are called to be part of this kingdom-project. And it always starts, from our point of view, with prayer. With prayer for the things you can see which are most obviously wrong in the world. With prayer for the friends whose lives are in a mess. That phrase 'Thy kingdom come' is at the heart of the Lord's Prayer; the Lord's Prayer is at the heart of the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew chapter 6; the Sermon on the Mount is at the heart of Jesus' kingdom-announcement; and Jesus himself is the very heart of God's saving purposes for the world. When we celebrate Ascension Day we celebrate God's victory over evil. When we pray 'thy kingdom come', especially with particular people and situations in mind, we unleash the power of that victory in ways we can never anticipate.

2. Friday May 31

Praise

The other evening I stepped outside the back door to take out the garbage. But before I'd gone three paces I glanced up and stopped in my tracks. The sky was completely clear of clouds, and the frost had cleared away the residual dampness and haze. There was no moon, but there were millions upon millions of stars, shimmering and twinkling: pinpricks of light that had travelled billions of miles, and in many cases billions of years, to reach my gaze here and now. And I thought of old Abraham, looking up at the stars and being told 'That's what your family will be like'. And I thought of the hymn that begins,

For the beauty of the earth,
For the beauty of the skies;
For the love that, from our birth,
Over and around us lies:
Lord of all, to thee we raise
This our sacrifice of praise.

Praise! Praise is what happens when we find ourselves in the presence of great beauty. Praise is what is drawn out of us by something we know at once is far greater than ourselves. Praise is what we utter, silently or out loud, when we are struck by some truth which makes sudden sense of ourselves, our lives, our world. Praise is what rises unbidden in our hearts when we see, even for a moment, who God really is, what God has done, what he is doing, what he

will do. Praise is at the heart of worship. Praise sets the table where the meal of prayer can then be enjoyed.

Here's the paradox of praise. You might think that when you praise something which is obviously greater, more beautiful, more powerful, more wonderful than you are yourself, it would make *you* feel very small. It would show up your insignificance. And we don't want that. That's why, as a culture, we have become cynical, teaching one another to see the cracks in the shiny surface, the flaws in the diamond, the pride peeping through all human life. It's a defence mechanism: don't praise anything too much, because you end up being diminished. You can see how this works when tyrants or dictators get millions of their subjects to turn up and applaud everything they do and say. Those assembled crowds really do become less than fully human. But to withhold praise because praising the wrong thing makes you shrink misses the point. When you praise something that is genuinely worthy of praise – not necessarily spotlessly perfect, but praiseworthy none the less – you become more than you were, not less. You grow.

Watch what follows from this. Many people today speak as though the place to find the truth, to find 'who you really are', is inside you. Some people even suggest that God is already inside you, so you just have to look deeply within and you'll see him there. But that's not how praise works. We are made to be genuinely *human*; and humans are made to exult in being part of something much larger, much greater, more beautiful than they are – but to be part of it none the less. This is the great thing about humility, which again sounds today as though it means putting yourself down, having low self-esteem, and so on. No. That's fake humility. The real humility can sigh with relief because I don't have to pretend I'm as clever as Einstein; I don't have to imagine that my small understanding has grasped the secrets of the cosmos. I can celebrate having a real part to play in a creational purpose that is much bigger than myself. When I praise the beauty in the world, a piece of work well done, the taste of a ripe apple, the glory of a great symphony, I discover something about who I really am that I could never have found out by looking inside myself.

All our prayer, for the world, for our friends, then finds its home within the praise of the God of creation and new creation. There's a great old hymn which shows how to do it: it's called the 'Benedicite', and it's found in some ancient texts as an extra bit of the book of Daniel. 'O all ye works of the Lord,' it begins, 'bless ye the Lord; praise him and magnify him for ever'. There follows a remarkable catalogue of all created things, called to praise God. In the original setting, it is what the three young men sang as they were thrown into the furnace of fire for refusing to worship alien gods. Now there's a thought.

3. Saturday June 1

Thanks

A year ago today, my mother died. She was in her mid-nineties, and she'd lived a good, busy and faithful life. It was her time to go, and she was ready. And as I look back at her life and work I want to give thanks. She wasn't perfect, of course; none of us is, and when you are close to someone, decade after decade, their faults become only too familiar, as our own do to

them. But thanks are still appropriate – especially, in my case, when I consider how many people in today’s world grow up without the solid basis of a loving and stable home.

As I think about thanking God for someone close to me like that, the circles of thanksgiving get wider and wider. I am thankful for my parents (despite their faults and limitations; I hope my children will be thankful for me, despite mine!). I am thankful for my teachers, even though some of them were less than fully adequate to the task. I am thankful to have been spared the horrors of war faced by the previous two generations. I am specially thankful for my wife, my children and my grandchildren, not least because they know me very well and love me anyway. I do not take these things for granted. Many people are deprived of them, for whatever reason.

And, perhaps in consequence, many find it hard to be thankful. What Shakespeare called ‘the whips and scorns of time’ take their toll; and though people may still grunt out a ‘thank you’ when someone serves them in a shop they have largely forgotten how to be truly thankful. And, like someone who’s had a stroke, and has to learn to talk again one syllable at a time, it’s important that people who have forgotten how to be thankful should learn once again. As with the stroke patient, this may mean starting with small things and working slowly outwards from there.

Thanksgiving is what happens to praise when it looks around it, when it refuses to take anything for granted, and celebrates one thing after another, one person after another. The habit of thanksgiving can be built on the habit of praise, or sometimes it’s the other way around. Sometimes they just grow together. But thanksgiving, in particular, depends for its full force on an underlying assumption about creation itself. The thanksgiving to which Paul urges his converts – it’s one of the main themes of those twin letters, Ephesians and Colossians – is based on the belief that the world is the good creation of the good God. Of course things have gone wrong with the world, but it’s still God’s good creation. The many things we see in it that are occasions for thanksgiving are not flukes. They are not flashes of strange light in an otherwise dark night. They are the signs that behind the cloud there is real sunlight. Paul, writing those letters from prison, urges his readers to be thankful, and sets up the framework for understanding why. The world in which they live is already God’s good creation; by the work of Jesus and the Spirit the world is being rescued and renewed; and they themselves are a part of that. So although there will be sorrows, irritants, dangers and death itself, they are to thank God in and for everything, because the world is still so full of so many glorious things, from breath itself to the smile of a child, from the kindness of strangers to the bliss of sleep.

Just as some people need to learn the habit of thanksgiving slowly and painfully, working through the traumas and sorrows that make the world seem nothing but a dark and horrid nightmare, so all of us need to upgrade our present level of thanksgiving into a fuller gratitude for the extraordinary riches both of creation and of God’s new creation in and through Jesus. Make lists – and even if you lose them, or don’t like that approach, they will jog your elbow to think of things you normally take for granted. For a start, how about the fact that the world ‘works’ at all, that day and night, summer and winter, plant and animal life, are what they are! Add some silly ‘extras’ – the way your favourite singer pronounces a particular word, the fact that the blackbird in the garden chirped at you this morning. Whatever it is. The angels in Isaiah 6 sang that ‘the whole earth is full of God’s glory’. Psalm

119 declares that the earth is full of his steadfast love. Full! Look around; think about it. And thank him for it.

4. Sunday after Ascension, June 2

Sorry

It is of course the hardest word in the language. The lawyers tell you never to apologise – the ‘other side’ may seize upon it and sue you. Our pride tells us never to apologise: after all, the other person was just as much in the wrong. In family life, saying ‘sorry’ opens us right up to whatever domestic rebuke or reprisal may come our way. At the very least, it will bring us down off our perch of perceived perfection . . .

. . . which is of course the point. That’s why saying ‘sorry’ goes closely, however surprisingly, with praise and thanksgiving. As we’ve seen, to praise anything at all, but especially to praise God, requires what you might call a cheerful humility: I am not the centre of the universe, I am not complete or perfect as I am, and I am delighted and blessed to be part of a world bigger and more beautiful than I am, surrounded by a thousand good gifts which I didn’t plan and didn’t make. The more you learn humility by the practice of praise, the easier it will be to put the same humility into practice in apologising.

And after all we all know we need to do it. Sometimes one particular failing can make us blind to all the others, so that if we have a besetting sin, a destructive habit we can’t shift, we can spend all our time confessing that to God, or apologising for it to the people around us, and then fool ourselves that this is the *only* thing that’s wrong – when in fact, if only we could see get that first thing sorted out, there would be plenty of others to be working on as well.

‘Working on’: Hmm, yes, that’s the problem. Jesus confronted his contemporaries with a stark challenge: ‘the Kingdom of God is at hand; so repent, and believe the good news’. When we pray ‘thy Kingdom come’, we should expect that God will reply: ‘Very well; so are you repenting and believing?’ ‘Repentance’ in Jesus’ day was as much about turning away from false social and political visions of God’s kingdom as it was about what we think of as ‘personal sins’, but this was never an either/or. Human life is out of joint at every level. The challenge to ‘repent’, to the change of mind and heart which wraps itself up in the word ‘sorry’, goes all the way down, down into the structures of the way we think, the way we look at the world and other people, down into our imagination and secret hopes, fears and longings.

Into that dreamy world, the word ‘sorry’ intrudes like an alarm clock. But here’s the difference. In politics and public life, if you admit a mistake you don’t get forgiven; you just get branded and sneered at for ever. In God’s new regime, repentance leads to forgiveness. To the slate being wiped clean. Being honest is hard but hopeful. We are to recognise and admit, before God and one another, that we’ve blown it again, that we’ve taken our eye off the ball yet one more time, that we’ve spent the last weeks or months blundering down the wrong road, that in our heart of hearts we knew it but somehow it happened anyway . . .

And of course we all have ways of avoiding getting to that point. I read somewhere recently that ‘the sin is not complete until it is excused’: in other words, that, as Paul says in Romans,

there comes a point when we are so far gone that *our sense of moral direction is itself* warped, and we now imagine that actually the sin was a good thing all along. First we sin; then we make excuses for ourselves ('I couldn't help it', 'I didn't really mean it'; 'it was so-and-so's fault anyway'); then we explain that actually, seen from *this* light now, perhaps it wasn't really sin at all, perhaps it was a good thing in disguise, or perhaps it only appears sinful within an old-fashioned culture we have left behind. This is bad enough when it happens with individuals. It is disastrous when it happens with societies, as was obviously the case in different parts of the world in the twentieth century, and is arguably the case right now. Saying 'sorry' ourselves thus leads us back to prayer: prayer for God's wounded world, prayer for our friends as we and they live in that world and long for its redemption.

5. Monday June 3

Offer

It may sound odd to say that God gives us good gifts so that we can give them back to him. But that's the point. God isn't simply a kindly old benefactor dishing out goodies at random. God has plans for his world, and he gives us good gifts so that through our responsible use of them we can be part of those plans.

Some people object. So, they suggest, God doesn't really *love* us, but simply manipulates us for his own ends? Are we just pawns on his chessboard? Absolutely not. We are *human beings*, made in God's image – made to reflect God into the world and to reflect the praises of the world back to him. *But this will only happen if we offer God's gifts back to him, to use as he chooses.*

The point, of course – to say it again – is that our relationship with God is more complicated than the relationship with a disinterested benefactor. God wants us to be his friends, his working partners, even – dare I say – his design consultants. God, having given us gifts, really wants our contribution, the free, creative, spontaneous work that we come up with in whatever sphere it may be. God himself is the source of utter, generous, creative love. In making us in his image, he wants us to be people of utter, generous, creative love ourselves. But this won't be random. It will be tied in to his purposes in the world. The gifts of God and the mission of God go closely together.

Putting it like that may sound straightforward, but of course it isn't. We easily deceive ourselves about vocation, and start to write imaginary life-scripts in which (guess what!) we end up playing the hero. Back again to the challenge of humility: 'I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God', wrote the Psalmist, 'than to dwell in the tents of ungodliness'. And when we come to Jesus the challenge is even starker. If you love your life, he says, you'll lose it; and if you hate it you will keep it for the Age to Come. What does he mean?

Jesus said those words knowing full well that he himself was to go to Jerusalem and, as he said, 'to give his life as a ransom for many'. We know the story so well that we often miss the point: here was Jesus, launching God's kingdom, healing the sick, teaching the truth, challenging the rich and powerful, giving thousands of people a reason to hope, a fresh vision of God . . . so why did it have to stop so soon? Wouldn't it have been better for him to face

down the opposition, to stick around for a decade or two, to travel more widely, and to launch the movement on a sensible, broad-based foundation?

Such a suggestion would have earned the rebuke Jesus gave to Peter: ‘Get behind me, Satan; you’re thinking like humans think, not like God thinks.’ Jesus’ public career was only one aspect of his vocation. At its heart lay the darker challenge: to meet the unseen lord of death in face-to-face combat, to go to the place of utter darkness in order to overthrow its power and to emerge with new light and life for the world. And Jesus was challenging his followers to do the same. The gift of life itself is given in order to be laid down.

Every subsequent generation has faced the same challenge in different ways. Many then, and many now, have quite literally put their lives on the line for Jesus. Many have chosen to work hard for the gospel in obscurity and relative poverty rather than do a flashy job with a big salary but no kingdom-impact. Many have given up the prospect of marriage and family to work for God’s kingdom with breath they take. In all this they are aware, as my old teacher used to put it, of ‘a debt of love which only love could repay’. They think of Jesus going to the cross, and they say to themselves, He did all that for me, and the very least I can do is to give back to him my little life and its small ambitions. And when we pray for our friends, that is part of what we should most want for them: that they will discover the glorious freedom that comes when we stop gripping tightly on to the controls of our lives and offer every aspect of them to God.

When people think like that, then, as with Jesus himself going to his death, the world has no idea what might happen next.

6. Tuesday June 4

Pray For . . .

‘O Lord,’ goes the old song, ‘won’t you buy me a Mercedes-Benz!’ Most of us would look away in embarrassment at such a suggestion; that’s not what prayer is for (which is, of course, the point of the song). What sort of god do we think God is, anyway?

But many people, recognising that obvious danger, swing the other way. They decide it’s trivial, demeaning, or even ‘unspiritual’ to ask God for anything so small-scale and specific. Wouldn’t it be better, they suggest, simply to meditate on God and the world in the hope that this will somehow make things better?

Well, such meditation might be a start. But supposing God, being the sort of God he really is, actually wants a more lively relationship? Supposing he wants to enlist us as active participants in his projects? Supposing he gives each of us, whether in gentle hints or with the megaphone treatment, the sense that he wants *you*, right *now*, to pray for *this* particular and very specific need?

Or even, this particular and specific *want*? Does God *only* act in the world when there is a real *need*? God the creator is, after all, lavish to the point of being a bit quirky. He made elephants and antelopes; he made chocolate and cauliflowers; as the hymn puts it, his hands ‘flung stars into space’. The true God is much more like one of the old unpredictable pagan gods, who actually *did* things, than he is like the tranquil, ethereal gods of the philosophers.

After all, Jesus taught us to pray to God as to a loving father: if you ask your father for bread, is he going to give you a serpent? And Paul throws in a kind of ‘whatever’ clause: ‘Have no anxiety about anything,’ he says, ‘but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God’. When you do that, he says, then ‘the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Messiah Jesus’ (Philippians 4).

The experience of trying this for a lifetime suggests three lessons here. First, most of us start off asking for inappropriate things: perhaps not a Mercedes-Benz, but certainly things we really ‘want’ rather than ‘need’. But if we are also praising, thanking and saying ‘sorry’, and thinking about how to use his gifts for his glory, then our priorities may well change. Sometimes people over-emphasize this, and say that prayer changes us rather than God. Well, it *does* change us; but I think it’s too glib to think that it has no effect on God. In the famous words of Archbishop William Temple, ‘When I pray, coincidences happen; when I stop praying, the coincidences stop happening.’

Perhaps, second, this is because God frequently allows his friends to find themselves facing what seems like a brick wall, precisely so that they can pray their way through or round it. Then they will *know* that whatever it is they have been praying for, having thus gone through the ‘impossibility’ barrier, is indeed God’s will. There are many times when that will then serve as an anchor in days to come, when one might look back and ask, ‘were we *really* supposed to take this job? Did God *really* want us to live here?’ Yes, comes the answer: don’t you remember, it was impossible, we prayed about it, and God did it. That is part of the adventure of normal Christian living.

But third, we must always remember that one of the most specific and urgent prayers prayed by Jesus himself received the answer ‘No’. In Gethsemane, Jesus sweated and wept drops of blood, pleading with his father for some other way. We can only guess, with fear and trembling, what was in his mind and heart that terrible night. And his loving Father, with whom he had enjoyed unbroken fellowship throughout his life, insisted that there was no other way. If that was so for him, it will be so for us. But it doesn’t detract from his own promises about asking God for anything and everything.

Once we realise how important all this is, we may well want to branch out. Prayer isn’t just about us, our families and our immediate concerns. Paul insists in 1 Timothy 2 that we ought to be praying for all people: for monarchs and rulers, for nations and governments. Make the newspaper part of your prayer diary – though watch out for its editorial bias! Pray, particularly, for the next generation of global leaders, both in the powerful countries and in the vulnerable ones. James (1.5) insisted that we should pray for *wisdom* – for ourselves, and presumably for others too. That’s a good place to start.

7. Wednesday June 5

Help

‘Help’ comes on a sliding scale. At Stage One, I am washing dishes, and a little help would turn a ten-minute job into a five-minute one. In ‘Help’ Stage Two, I am fixing a door-handle and I need someone to hold the other side while I tighten the screw on this side. Not difficult

but I couldn't finish the job without it. At Stage Three, I thought I could carry this fridge into the kitchen but if someone doesn't help me *right now* I am going to drop it with potentially disastrous consequences. At Stage Four, I am driving in a strange city, with ten minutes to go before I'm due to speak at a meeting, and I am totally lost. At Stage Five, it's dark and I've just skidded off a lonely country road into a ditch, my phone won't work here and I think I've broken my ankle . . .

You get the picture. The call for 'help' comes in many varieties. Translate those little scenarios into the situations that Christians around the world are facing: all the way from needing help with setting up a new training course to the crisis when the masked gunmen are at the door. Help! It's the right prayer at the right time. Though it's the most natural thing in the world to pray it in a tight spot (people sometimes sneer that there are no atheists on a battlefield, as though you might pray 'help' when things get tough but then you'd forget it afterwards) it's also thoroughly biblical. The Psalms are always asking for help, sometimes in pretty dire circumstances. Jesus' disciples scream for help when the boat starts to sink. Paul can speak of the different things that keep him going, including 'the help of the spirit of Messiah Jesus' (Philippians 1.19). He speaks of his congregations 'helping together by prayer' in his regular work.

All this suggests – in case we need reminding – that we should see the Christian life as a large-scale combined enterprise. We never know when we are suddenly going to need help or when other people will suddenly need ours. And in that enterprise there are, broadly, two kinds of help: the practical sort, when someone turns up to help with the work, or to get you out of the ditch, and the prayerful sort, when people – perhaps people you don't even know – are praying for you, and you have a sense of being surrounded with love and strength even if you still don't know how things are going to get sorted out. And of course the two join up. When people are praying for you, then sometimes the person who you need to come to your practical rescue suddenly feels a strong unexplained compulsion to stop by for a visit. That sort of thing happens more often than you might think.

So there is no shame in calling 'Help!' when things suddenly go badly wrong. Whether or not someone prays regularly and carefully – in which case the ground is well prepared – God is not proud. (He isn't mocked, either, as Paul says in Galatians 6; you can't just fool around with him; but he is always, *always*, ready to listen and able to help, even though not always in the way we want.)

Psalms 107 celebrates God's answers to the 'Help!' prayer. It works through four scenarios where people are in danger or difficulty through ill fortune, folly, sickness, or sea travel. In each case 'they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress' (verses 6–7, 13–14, 19–20 and 28–30). In each case, the Psalmist declares that now they should thank and praise the Lord for his steadfast love and his wonderful works. This, after all, is where 'Help!' joins up with the other themes we have been investigating.

That, too, is where all these themes hold together the particular concerns we are praying about in these days between Ascension and Pentecost. Everyone you know, including the particular friends you are praying for, have needs and anxieties. Almost everybody, if you ask them 'is there anything you need help with right now?' will mention something – perhaps something urgent and alarming. Let's imagine each of them praying 'Help!'; let's surround

them with the prayers that will help *them*; so that they too may praise the Lord for his steadfast love and his wonderful works.

8. Thursday June 6

Adore

‘O come, let us adore him’, we sing each Christmas. But many of us would struggle to say we really *adore* the baby Jesus – though some, following St Francis, may be moved to genuine adoration.

That, I assume, is why today’s reading is a passage from the Song of Songs. Anyone who’s been in love will know the feeling. Suddenly the sight, sound, thought, smell, presence and touch of the beloved is utterly compulsive, irresistible, electrifying. It isn’t simply that we feel more alive in their presence; we feel as though we couldn’t be alive any other way. We are helpless with adoration. We know that level of emotional intensity can’t last, but it’s powerful while it’s there.

So what does it mean to ‘adore’ God? Should we really aspire to that? Isn’t it enough to say that we believe in him, that we’re grateful for his powerful, rescuing love, for the presence of his Spirit and the promise of being part of his new creation? Well, that’s a good start. As with romances, perhaps that’s the level of ‘normal’ life. But, again as with romance, it’s good to rekindle the flame now and then.

Christians down the years have developed ways of doing just that. After all, our allegiance to our great God is always under threat. Our world is full of idols, whispering their lies into our ears and our hearts. It’s much easier to resist them if obeying them means turning away from one you adore than from one you merely believe in – important though belief is.

When the ancient Israelites were being taught to stay loyal, they were constantly reminded what God had done for them in the Exodus. He had remembered the promises he’d made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; he had overthrown the Egyptians, bringing Israel out through the Red Sea; and he was now leading them through the desert to their promised inheritance. All this was because of his ‘covenant’, his marriage promises to Israel, his unshakeable *love*. They knew all this but they were still wayward. Moses, however, was allowed to come in to the Tabernacle, to the place where God had promised to meet him; and when he came out his face was shining.

In the New Testament, the place of the Tabernacle and the Temple in the Old Testament is taken by Jesus and the Spirit. Jesus himself simply *is* the living, ‘tabernacling’ presence of God, as John says in one of his most famous lines (literally, ‘the Word became flesh and *tabernacled* in our midst’, 1.14). And when the Spirit comes to dwell in a person, or a community, they are ‘the Temple of the living God’, the reality for which even the Jerusalem Temple was just an advance signpost. As the Spirit helps us to get to know Jesus – and that is the primary thing the Spirit wants to do – we are getting to know God. And if it is really Jesus we are getting to know, the man from Nazareth, the crucified and risen saviour, the one ‘who loved me and gave himself for me’, then as we allow our ideas about ‘God’ to be refashioned around him we discover, perhaps fleetingly at first, something new growing in our hearts.

Something which, like hearing the name of a lover, makes us almost blush and stammer. Something which might even bring tears to our eyes. Adoration.

As with romance, there is no sure-fire formula. But there are tried and tested ways of rekindling the flame. Read the stories of Jesus again and again. Read them hungrily. Imagine yourself as a character in them, a bystander to begin with and then a participant in the conversation. Get inside the stories. Work your way to the front of the crowd and tell Jesus what's on *your* heart and mind. Sit with the disciples as Jesus washes their feet, and let him wash yours. Use the moment to blurt out everything that's worrying or bothering you.

And come, regularly, to worship with other Jesus-followers, particularly at the 'bread-breaking' which was Jesus' own way of explaining his death as an Exodus-like act of generous, nourishing, rescuing love. We share the mystery-filled bread and wine. In some traditions, we gaze at them in awe. In heart and mind, we share the moment with the friends for whom we pray. And we hear Jesus' voice: Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.

O come, let us adore him.

9. Friday June 7

Celebrate

We came out of the stadium in a glow of delirium. Thousands of us had watched the match with our hearts in our mouths. The game had swung this way and that – but finally, in the last few minutes, our team had made the final all-important score, and we had won! We had done it at last! We were singing, we were waving, we were dancing, we were texting friends in faraway places. We were celebrating.

Now celebrations can of course get out of hand. You perhaps don't want to get in the way of an excited crowd like that. But here's the point: nobody told us to celebrate. Nobody said 'Now it's time to look happy, so make sure you sing and dance as you go down the street.' There was nothing artificial about it. It was natural! You couldn't have stopped it if you'd tried.

That, I think, was the mood in the celebratory meals that Jesus shared with his friends, especially the disreputable ones. Don't imagine that these were nice little western-style dinner parties with some polite laughter and smiles all round. Have you ever *been* to a middle-eastern celebration? These were rollicking, dance-in-the-street gatherings. This was what everybody had been waiting for! This was the new day, dawning at last! This was the kingdom of God! Everything was going to be different now!

Of course, the difference they got wasn't the difference they'd been hoping for. Caesar was still on the throne when Jesus was raised from the dead. Herod Antipas was still 'king of the Jews' on the day of Pentecost. Caiaphas and his cronies were still running the Temple, still making sure the system worked to their benefit. Several of those who had celebrated with Jesus earlier must have thought, sorrowfully, that they had got it wrong. He wasn't the Messiah after all.

But, as with the two on the road to Emmaus, the lesson was that this *was* what the scriptures had foretold. It just wasn't how people had imagined it. It was the dawn of new creation, and

new creation, like the original one, starts small and grows. And ever since the excited gathering in the Upper Room, when the two from Emmaus rushed back to tell their friends that Jesus really was alive again, the celebration has been going on, spreading round the world. It hasn't stopped yet, and it won't stop until the ultimate party when heaven and earth come together, the dead are raised, and (as Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 15.28) God is 'all in all'.

New creation, by the way, is much more celebration-worthy than the old Platonic vision of 'going to heaven'. Yes, it might be nice to sit around on a cloud playing a harp – for a day or two. But not a patch on the combination of new heavens and new earth, and new bodies for us to engage in new tasks, with the living presence of God himself to adore and to serve. And we get to celebrate this in advance, with every sign of that new creation in the present.

So what are these signs? The things which show Jesus' presence in our midst, as he was there celebrating with his followers in Galilee; and the things which show, etched into the lives of individuals and communities, the meaning of his death and resurrection. The unity and holiness of the church are paramount. If anyone thinks those are not causes of celebration they should pause, read the texts and think again.

So when Paul tells the Philippians to 'rejoice always – I'll say it again, rejoice!' I don't think he means simply 'please feel very happy inside'. I think he wants them to get out on the street, and sing and dance. I think he wants Philippi to know that someone has won a famous victory, even though the neighbours won't understand. He does go on to say that everyone around should know how gentle and gracious they are – in other words, they should celebrate as wildly as they want, as long as everyone knows they are wonderful neighbours. After all, when many Jews returned from Babylon and rebuilt the city wall, we read that 'the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away' (Nehemiah 12.43). Joy was something you could *hear* – and from a long way away. That's real celebration.

That's why I always encourage people to celebrate Jesus' resurrection and ascension and the gift of his Spirit *properly*. New creation means justice and joy; it means art and music; it means singing and dancing. If it doesn't mean these things – if, in other words, we restrain or curtail our celebrations – why should anyone take our message seriously?

10. Saturday June 8

Silence

I am always a bit suspicious when people say they like silence. After all, I am in the business of writing and talking, talking and writing. Anyone who says they prefer silence may be telling me to shut up. Perhaps they're right.

In any case, many people are by nature 'introverted'. They renew and restore their inner energy by being quiet and alone. That's just how they are; fair enough. The extraverts among us, who renew and restore our energy by being with other people, may then be tempted to regard silence as an introvert's luxury, a way of escaping from the real world (as perceived by us) in which talk, music, human company, is what we want. The first time I had a sabbatical from my teaching job, and was able to spend all day in a room without seeing anyone, I found that by mid-afternoon I physically needed to go out on the street, find a café,

and sit and read or write with all the city life going on around me. So silence, in itself, isn't either a 'good' or a 'bad' thing.

But perhaps there are different *kinds* of silence. For some, the silence they crave is simply the absence of sound. But I suspect there is another kind: the silence that is framed by love, and that enables that love to be enjoyed and deepened.

I first really appreciated that sense of a 'framed' silence when I was a College Chaplain in Oxford – a busy job indeed, full of words and music and more words. But every Thursday evening we had a late service, a Eucharist at 10 pm. There was no hurry. People expected it to take time. And we developed the habit, once people had received Communion, of going back to our places and being still, and quiet. For several minutes. I remember discovering that the silence after Communion was rich, and close, and loving, like the firm and gentle embrace of a lover. Christians in other traditions had probably known this all along. My own background hadn't prepared me for it. But I learned to love those post-Communion silences, and I still do.

And that has nudged me into thinking of other ways in which a 'framed' silence can be just what we need. At the small-scale level, some Christians read the Psalms with a pause between the two halves of the verse. This can become simply a liturgical nervous twitch, but it can also be a way of stopping long enough to let the two halves of the verse resonate against one another, sometimes producing something else, a hidden mystery, in between. The same thing can happen when you have two scripture readings with a pause either in between, or afterwards, or both. The pause isn't simply for, as we say 'cognitive' reflection – in other words, thinking hard about 'what these passages mean'. That's important too; but the silence can also be the time for a sense of presence, the presence of Jesus himself, especially following a Gospel reading.

This can be expanded again, into the structure of good liturgy. Of course, it's no good simply stopping in the middle of a service and hoping that 'silence' will suddenly 'work'. People will wonder what's going on. Part of the joy of 'good' silence is that nobody is wondering anything, nobody is worried about who's in charge, whether the organist has gone to sleep, or whatever. The worshippers need to be led gently into silence, not bombarded with 'things to think about' apart from what the liturgy has already given them. Telling people what to do or think in the silence is a way of not trusting the Holy Spirit. If the liturgy has been prepared properly, the Spirit will do what the Spirit will do, perhaps quite different things for different people, and certainly not under the control of whoever's leading the service.

The important thing, perhaps particularly in the modern world which is so full of noise, phones, text messages, and so on, is a kind of rinsing out of the memory and the imagination. Imagine a world where none of that noise happened . . . where you could listen for the wind . . . for a distant birdsong . . . for God. Imagine that world. Find ways of opening yourself to it. Find ways of worshipping together with others and opening yourselves, together, to it. And, as you do so, pray for all those on your hearts, that God will break through the noise of the world and the noise of their lives and bring them, awestruck and silent, into his presence.

Thy Kingdom Come

Let's get one thing clear we begin. In Luke 23.42, the criminal next to the crucified Jesus says 'Jesus, remember me, when you come in your kingdom' – meaning, perhaps, 'Jesus, remember me when you finally become king'. Jesus responded to him, 'I'm telling you the truth: you'll be with me in paradise, this very day'.

Many people have misunderstood this. They have assumed that 'paradise' and 'Jesus' kingdom' are basically the same thing, so that the criminal would be saying 'remember me in heaven after we die' and Jesus would be saying 'Sure, we'll be there very soon now'. But Jesus' kingdom, as Luke makes clear, is not about 'going to heaven'. It is about God becoming king in a new way, *through the work of Jesus*, 'on earth as in heaven'. That is what all four gospels are about – and that is what we have been praying for through these last ten days. That is the theme of Luke's second volume, The Acts of the Apostles. This is what it looks like when King Jesus sends out his messengers to summon people to allegiance.

In any case, as Luke well knows, wherever Jesus may be on the evening of Good Friday, on the third day he was alive again and appearing to the disciples. So wherever 'paradise' may be, Jesus didn't stay there long. By 'paradise' he meant the place of bliss and rest *in between* bodily death and bodily resurrection. That two-stage sequence was all important for the early Christians. They believed that God's kingdom had already been launched by Jesus, was continuing through the work of the Spirit, and would eventually result in the whole creation being transformed, heaven and earth coming together as one, and all God's people being raised from the dead (having waited in 'paradise' in the meantime).

So what's all this got to do with Pentecost? Where have we now got to in our prayerful exploration of God's kingdom?

I said at the beginning of this little series that, for the Jews, the Temple was where heaven and earth came together. We can add to this: many believed that the Torah, God's holy Law, was the way in which heaven's life became effective on earth. So the kingdom of God, as seen by Jesus' first followers, is what happened when the Temple became human with Jesus, and when the Torah became embodied in human lives by the Spirit.

Look at it this way. In the Ascension, Jesus joins earth and heaven in his own person. At Pentecost (the Jewish feast of the giving of Torah), heaven's life and energy – God's kingdom-power! – comes in a new way to earth. As the Law defined Israel as God's people, the people in whose midst God would come to live in the pillar of cloud and fire, so now the Spirit defines Jesus' followers as the renewed, restored people of God. They are the people in whose very hearts and tongues God has come to live, to enable them to praise him, to pray for the world and for their friends in particular, and to bear witness to the whole world (whatever it may cost!) that Jesus is Lord. By raising him from the dead, God the creator has declared that the new day had dawned and that the kingdom was now under way. On earth as in heaven.

This means that we now pray 'Thy Kingdom Come' from a position of paradoxical strength. Strength, because the kingdom is already a reality. Ascension is the true 'Feast of Christ the King' (some people, forgetting this, have invented another one in late November, which misses the point). But it's paradoxical, because the 'kingdom of God', whose coming we celebrate and for whose powerful extension we pray, makes its way in the world in the same

way that Jesus' own work made its way: through healing and feasting, through clear teaching and sharp challenge, through controversy and suffering, through holiness and hope. As we pray for the world, as we pray for our friends, as we pray in faith and love for whatever God lays on our hearts, so we pray in that paradoxical strength, that kingdom-reality, that Spirit-reality, that Jesus-reality.

Humanly speaking, it was extremely unlikely that this strange new movement would ever catch on. But within a generation it was the talk of the town in Rome itself, however dangerous that proved to be. So, humanly speaking, you might suppose that to have a few Christians around the world praying 'thy Kingdom come' in our own day might not have much effect. Well: let's go on praying it, and we'll see.