

Ps 102:1,7
Hy 2
Ps 2:3,4
Ps 66:7,8
Ps 17:3; Hy 63:8
Luke 2:1-14
Luke 19:28-40
Lord's Day 52.128,129

Yarrow, April 10, 2011

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

We've just sung some very, very bold things in Ps 2. "Take heed, O rulers of the earth, and hear. Be wise, O kings, and let his edict warn you. Rejoice with trembling; serve the LORD with fear. Now kiss the Son, lest he in fury scorn you...." The terms "rulers of the earth" and "kings" sends our thoughts to the strong men, the influential, the movers and shakers of our society, folk like President Obama, Winnie Oprah, the media and the university professors, etc. In our songs we're saying to them: take God seriously, lest you experience His judgment.

Would you dare, congregation, say the words of this song to the President's face? Or Oprah's? Or the Prime Minister's? Or the professor's?? Somehow, the answer is No.... Why not?? Because we're sure that if we did, we'd be toast. I mean: these *are* the strong people of the world, and who am I that I should tell them their power is limited, that they need to repent and acknowledge the Lord God. They'll tell me straight: who do you think you are?!

It's a good question: who *do* we think we are? The answer needs to be: we're treasured servants of the King of kings! As people who take God for real, we see this world differently than the people of the world see the world. More, as servants of this King we have free access to His throne in heaven to speak with Him about matters in His kingdom – and then tell the kings on earth what His kingship means for them. That's the lesson of the closing words of the Lord's Prayer.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

ACKNOWLEDGING THE KING OF KINGS GIVES YOU SOMEONE TO PRAY TO IN ALL LIFE'S QUESTIONS.

1. The Addressee of Prayer
2. The Absurdity of Prayer
3. The Confidence of Prayer

1. The Addressee of Prayer

For the past number of weeks we've been following the lives of the disciples as the Lord Jesus Christ prepared them to pray the six petitions of the Lord's Prayer. I want to reach back this afternoon to an event that occurred before the disciples began to follow the Lord, yet an event Jesus undoubtedly told them about. I refer to the material surrounding Jesus' birth.

For as long as they could remember, James and Thaddeus and Judas and Matthew and the other disciples had seen Roman soldiers on the streets of their towns and had bumped into tax collectors as they travelled the roads of Israel and had handled Roman money as they did their teenage things. The point: Roman presence was everywhere, so that you could not help but take the emperor

for real and reckon with him as you made your plans. In fact, to oppose Rome, to ignore the soldiers and the laws of Rome was to ask for trouble, big trouble.

It's that reality, congregation, that makes the words of Luke 2 so delightful and exciting. We're so familiar with the Christmas story as we just read it, and we get nostalgic about the baby in the manger and the shepherds in the field.... But did you notice, congregation, that vs 1 describes a king-of-glory, Caesar Augustus, who ruled from sea to sea, an empire stretching from Britain to Egypt, from the Strait of Gibraltar to the Black Sea, covering much of present day Europe, Northern Africa, and the Middle East..., this man speaks a word and people everywhere get up to register themselves..., even that peasant in far off Nazareth.... Beyond a doubt: Caesar was a glorious king. But did you notice: the choir of angels mentioned in vs 13 does not go to Rome to sing in the night sky over Caesar's palace, but sings instead of the fields of Bethlehem over the birth place of an unknown child.... Caesar Augustus had ruled over his vast empire for some 30 years already, and established peace throughout his realm, a peace known as the Pax Romana – and for that peace he was regarded as divine, a god.... But listen to the angels in Bethlehem's night sky; they sing of peace on earth – yet not the Pax Romana of Caesar Augustus, but a peace that comes from God in heaven! The folk of Rome and the Roman Empire may hail Caesar and give him the glory, but the angels speak of “glory to God in the highest.” Had Caesar heard that song of the angels, his skin would have crawled from jealousy!

The point of it all? The people of Israel and the people of Britain and the people of Gaul all had to take the emperor for real; he was a *somebody* you ignored at your own peril. But the angels on that Christmas night ignored him! Well, No, they didn't. They deliberately belittled him, passed his palace by in favour of the fields of Bethlehem.... Why? Because there was a second king and so a second kingdom. And the King born in Bethlehem was greater, more powerful, more glorious than the king who'd ruled the empire from Rome for the past 30 years. The folk of Rome might think that Caesar had claim to “the kingdom and the power and the glory”, but the angels were *better informed*; they knew from their Maker whose was the kingdom and the power and the glory, and so they took baby Jesus *more seriously* than they took the emperor of Rome. That's why they came to sing in Bethlehem and not in Rome. *And if the angels took the King in Bethlehem more seriously than the king in Rome, what ought the shepherds in the fields to do?*

Over the years that followed, life in Israel continued as it always had – and that's to say that Roman soldiers and Roman tax collectors and Roman coinage was everywhere; you just had to take Rome for real in your decisions and conversations and actions. The evidence was so *in your face*: Caesar was the strong man of the world, even in Israel.

Then one day the talk of town changed. A man appeared out of the backwater of Galilee who healed a leper and so many other sick people (Luke 5:12f, 15), then forgave the sins of a paralytic and made him walk as evidence of forgiveness (5:17ff). He raised a widow's son from the dead (7:11ff), calmed a storm on the Sea of Galilee (8:22ff), healed a demon-possessed man and drowned a herd of pigs (8:26ff), fed a crowd of 5000 men (9:10ff), and the list of stories about this man continued to grow. Caesar rules the world, but raise the dead he can't, and feed a crowd with 5 loaves and 2 fish he can't either. Caesar is accredited with establishing peace, but still a storm at sea he can't, and cast demons out of tormented people he can't either. What the people saw raised questions in their minds: *who is this Jesus of Nazareth?* Even the disciples couldn't get His identity all straight in their minds, but they certainly knew that Jesus was different, that Jesus was a prophet, that Jesus had heavenly powers no one else had. So the day came that they sought from him instruction on how to pray (Luke 11:1). Jesus taught them, unambiguously. In a world where God was small and Caesar was big, where the push of society was to sing up Caesar's glory, the disciples were to pray: “Father, Hallowed be *Your* Name.” In a

context where Roman soldiers underlined the reality of Caesar's kingdom, Jesus told the disciples to pray, "Father, *Your* kingdom come." In a culture where you resisted official public opinion to your own hurt, the disciples had to pray, "Father, *Your* will be done on earth as it is in heaven." In the midst of a people who looked to people for their daily needs (including the safety and the peace that Rome provided), Jesus told the twelve to say, "Father, give us each day our daily bread." In a world where submission was enforced through the sword (and so grudges and fear and distrust smouldered under the surface), Jesus instructed His disciples to ask, "Father, forgive us our debts as we also forgive everyone who sins against us" – including the Romans. Amongst a people where the Romans were officially seen as the source of all good and unofficially seen as the source of all evil, Jesus told the twelve to pray, "Father, lead us not into temptation."

What do you think, now, congregation: did it make sense for John and Judas and Bartholomew and the rest to come to God with such requests? Given that the kingdom and the power and the glory belonged to Caesar, ought the disciples not to direct their petitions to Rome – as Darius once told his subjects to do?? If Caesar is divine, if he brought peace on earth, if he's the king of kings, ought the disciples not to go to him with their prayers??

Do you see, congregation, what Jesus is doing with His instruction about prayer? He's teaching the disciples that, contrary to the official position of the day, Caesar is *not* the king of kings, his is *not* the kingdom and the power and the glory! That honour belongs to another, and so the disciples are to take this Other One for real and therefore direct their petitions to *Him*. Here the Rabbi from Nazareth is working with the revelation of God as caught in the decision of the angels to sing their song not at Caesar's palace but instead over the fields of Bethlehem! And it's the reality of *God's greater sovereignty* that gives the reason why prayer to God makes sense; though public opinion has it that the kingdom and the power and the glory belong to Caesar, Christ Jesus knows the falsehood of that opinion and so directs His disciples to Him who in fact has the kingdom and the power and the glory – and that is God in heaven. Since He in truth is Master of the Universe, it follows that the disciples are to direct their petitions to *Him* and not to Caesar, are to hope in Him and not in Caesar.

We come to our second point:

2. The Absurdity of Prayer

Jesus' instruction in the Lord's Prayer was clear enough, particularly in light of His own miracles. But observe now, congregation, how much of a joke really is.... So prayer makes no sense....

The disciples were with Jesus when He approached Jerusalem sitting on that donkey's colt (Luke 19:28ff). You can see it in the eye of your mind: the animal is still young and so not fully grown, but astride this colt is an adult, presumably of average height, with His feet dragging on the ground.... The twelve disciples heard the crowd's response: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" and "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" (vs 38). With Roman soldiers anywhere and everywhere, with Roman coinage in their pockets, there was no doubt as to who was king; that was Caesar! Peace came from him, for his was the kingdom and the power and the glory.... But the people sing anyway..., and we recognize in their second song – "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest" – echoes of the song of the angels over the fields of Bethlehem on the night of Jesus' birth....

But the picture is so ridiculous.... If Jesus is a king, why not commandeer a stallion? Why a measly donkey, and a colt at that?? Then again, why sing about "peace in heaven and glory in the highest"? How does that help people in the struggles of this life-on-earth? At least Caesar organized a Pax Romana, peace on earth. And Jesus doesn't correct the crowd, tell them to cut out this kingship thing, doesn't rally them either to overthrow the Roman king.... He let's them think He's a king ... on a donkey's colt.... It's a force....

The Twelve were there some days later when a crowd of temple police came into the Garden of Gethsemane under Judas' leadership to arrest their Master. Scripture tells us that one of the disciples understood what was about to happen, pulled out his sword and cut off the right ear of high priest's servant (Luke 22:50). The right thing to do, isn't it, if your Master is a king.... But isn't Jesus' response lame; He tells His disciple to cut out that nonsense, and He goes and heals His enemy's ear! What a sissy thing to do ...; how can you ever stand up against the kingdom and the power and the glory of Rome with that sort of an attitude!

The same is to be said of Jesus' confrontation with Caesar's point man in Jerusalem, Pontius Pilate. The angels sang at *Jesus'* birth, not Caesar's; so when Jesus met Caesar's man in Jerusalem you'd expect some clear evidence that Jesus was in fact the greater of the two. But if ever it was clear that Luke 2 was a farce, surely this was it. Under Pilate's authority Jesus is questioned, mocked, spit on, crowned with thorns, robed in royal purple, decorated with a reed sceptre – simply made to look the fool. And all the while Jesus did nothing to defend Himself.... O, He has some big talk, something about calling down a legion of angels to defend Him..., and something about Pilate having no authority unless it were given him from above.... But it's empty talk.... And no angels come to defend Him, no angels come to sing for Him either. He's no challenge for the soldiers as they make Him pick up His own cross and drag it out the city to the place of execution. In fact, He's too weak to do the job.... Royal? Strong? Kingly?? It's all a joke....

Tell me, congregation: are you proud of Jesus Christ? He told His disciples to pray, told them what to pray: "Father, Hallowed be Your Name, Your kingdom come, Your will be done, Give us today...." But He's a wimp. If this is the Son, why esteem the Father? Rome obviously calls the shots in Jerusalem, not heaven – so why hallow, why glorify the name of God?! It's all about Caesar! Rome controls the kingdom, not heaven; Rome has the power, not heaven; *and Jesus doesn't even offer resistance to Caesar* – so why ask God to make His kingdom come – aren't you supposed to *work* and pray?? Proud of Jesus Christ? Jump on His bandwagon and pray the prayer ... of ... that ... wimp?? Truly, it's a tragic, terrible joke....

But what the eye sees, congregation, is not the final measure of reality – as we well know from daily living. So dig with me further, to the deeper level of things. That'll be our last point:

3. The Confidence of Prayer.

In the night sky over Bethlehem sang a heavenly choir of angels, and there was nothing Caesar and his soldiers could do to silence the singing or to bring that choir to Caesar's palace. Point: Caesar and his soldiers don't have all the power and the glory! It is as Paul wrote to the Ephesians: "Be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power.... For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (6:10,12). The Jesus whom the disciples saw during those three years of His earthly ministry was not simply a man of flesh and blood, limited by the boundaries of what the human eye can see. He was God-in-the-flesh, divine, and at His beck and call were indeed all the angelic hosts of heaven – the very crowd that sang its song of praise when Jesus was born. Caesar, on the other hand, was but a man, flesh and blood, and though people considered him divine on account of the peace he brought to earth, he soon went the way of all flesh; dust he was, and to dust he returned. Yet behind Caesar was indeed an angelic realm that applauded his deeds, a devilish choir that sought to make the world believe a *lie*, the lie that Caesar's was the kingdom and the power and the glory. That's Paul's conviction in the passage I just quoted: "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:10,12). It's a reality the eye does not see, but it's a reality

nevertheless: fallen angels, commonly known as demons, operate in the air of the world, seeking to bring glory to their leader Satan.

And see: it's in *that* sphere that Christ Jesus engaged the battle during His time on earth. The spiritual hosts of darkness could not silence the choirs of heavenly angels on the night of Jesus' birth. The spiritual hosts of darkness could not stop Christ Jesus from driving the demons from the demonic and then drowning the resulting demon-possessed pigs in the sea. The spiritual hosts of darkness could not stop Christ Jesus from raising the dead, healing the sick, stilling the storm, feeding the 5000 – all of which pointed out that Jesus Christ was in fact undoing the bitter effects of the fall into sin and so restoring sinners to Paradise. When Jesus was arrested, Jesus did not engage the battle on the level of swords and physical force – for that wasn't the level at which the battle was in fact being fought. When Jesus was mocked and hit and spit upon, He didn't respond with kicks and screams and insults – for that wasn't the level at which the real battle was being fought. Instead, He fought the battle on the level of the spirits, and so in the torments of His suffering, when His oppressors bombarded Him with works of the flesh –hatred, discord, rage, selfish ambition, envy (Galatians 5:20f)– He continued to bring forth the fruits of the Spirit: love, peace, kindness, goodness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians 5:22f). Over His head on the cross was fixed that sign that was meant to engender howls of devilish derision: "This is the King of the Jews." And Jesus, king as He was, and mandated to bring heaven's peace to earth, asked the Father to forgive His persecutors...; talk about achieving peace! More, by that attitude He demonstrated that He was *more* than the powers of darkness, stronger than the spiritual hosts of wickedness. That's why Paul could write that on the cross Christ "disarmed the powers and authorities" (Colossians 2:15), demonstrating publicly that He was greater than Satan and his demons. It's the victory of the cross!

In turn Christ ascended into heaven to receive from God the throne over all the world. In the words of the apostle in Ephesians 1: God "seated [Christ] at His right hand above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come" (vs 20f). You heard it: Christ has a position *more honourable, more powerful* that "every title that can be given" – and Caesar had a powerful title; when he spoke in Rome people throughout his vast domain got up to be registered (and woe be they who resist). But Christ has kingdom and power and glory far beyond what Caesar could ever achieve, and that's true not just in terms of geographical spread (so that Christ is in fact King of Canada today!), but is true also in terms of depth of control and style of control; He doesn't rule by the sword, but by the Word – and His control is not limited to the world of humanity, but He is master over winds and crops, tectonic plates under the earth and the angelic spirits of the air above the earth (whether obedient angels or rebellious demons).

I know well: the eye of man does not see the vast extent of Jesus' reign, doesn't see that His domain reaches beyond the reach of 'sea to sea to sea', beyond the depths of oil fields and the heights of clouds above. But the eye of the finite creature man does not define the limits of reality. The public of Bethlehem didn't wake up when the choirs belted out their songs of praise on the night of the Saviour's birth – but that didn't change the fact that the angels sang. Pilate and his soldiers did not see with their eyes the battle of the spirits happening at the cross of Calvary, and Caesar never had a chance to draw his sword on the realm of fallen angels driving him. But that limitation doesn't change the reality any – no more than the fact that Caesar didn't know what oxygen was negated the fact that there was oxygen in the air in breathed. But the child of God embraces eagerly the word of God: angels around the throne in heaven sing endlessly the drift of the song they sang at Jesus' birth; "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise" (Revelation 5:12). And the child of God embraces eagerly the echo of that song that comes from the mouth of every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth, "To Him who sits on the

throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power, for ever and ever" (Revelation 5:13). To Christ is given a kingdom and a power and a glory far beyond what Caesar could ever achieve, and far beyond what a President Obama or a Winnie Oprah or a star of whatever field you wish on Planet Earth could ever achieve. See there your Saviour!

Should you then pray to Him? Does prayer make sense? It's the wrong question.... *Failing* to bring your petitions to Him – *that's* what makes no sense!!