CHAPTER TWO

Crossing to the Future

Prayer is a personal but not a private affair. Because prayer is so intimate, so personal, we sometimes fall into the misconception that it concerns no one but God and the one who prays. When we go into the prayer closet and shut the door, as Jesus told us to do, we think we have shut out the world. Time stops; taxes and wars and other affairs of state are irrelevant; all that matters is the meeting between God and the one who prays. When we enter the presence of the Holy One, we step out of history.

But that is an unbiblical notion of prayer, as a review of the Psalms will reveal. The Prayer Book of the Bible is full of references to kings and wars, enemies and conquests, oppression and liberation—all those matters we associate with history:

> Come, behold the works of the LORD;
> see what desolations he has brought on the earth.
> He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
> He breaks the bow, and shatters the spear... (Psalm 46:8-9b)

> The LORD works vindication and justice
> for all who are oppressed.
> He made known his ways to Moses,
> his acts to the people of Israel. (Psalm 103:6-7)

> He it was who struck down the firstborn of Egypt,
> both human beings and animals;
> he sent signs and wonders into your midst, O Egypt,
> against Pharaoh and all his servants.
> He struck down many nations and killed mighty kings... (Psalm 135:8-10)

Rather than snatch us out of history, prayer does quite the opposite. God is the Holy One of Israel. When we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Your kingdom come," we plunge

ourselves—like it or not—into the river of history. We acknowledge before God the existence of kingdoms, and with kingdoms come kings and also the wars in which kings inevitably involve us.

True, English history is a good deal more than a succession of kings and the wars they fought with the Spanish, the French, and the Germans. And mastery of Old Testament history requires more than a memorization of the kings of Israel and Judah. Nevertheless, there is no history without kings. When humans lived in small farming villages and there were no larger states to exact tribute or carry out wars, there was no history in the modern sense. There was a cycle of the seasons, punctuated by the rituals of planting and harvest, and there was an occasional natural disaster, such as a flood or hurricane or volcanic eruption. And there might be an occasional skirmish with persons from another village, sent out on a raiding party. But one year was pretty much like another; what went around, came around. The advent of kings changed all of that. With kings came nations, states, armies, conquest, taxation, civil wars, and what we call political economy. Humans, like it or not, had history.

In the years following their occupation of the Promised Land, the Israelites discovered history. When Israel was a tiny, vulnerable collection of tribes and villages, the elders came to Samuel and begged for a king. The story is told in **1 Samuel 8**. Open your Bible to it now. "You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways," the elders said to Samuel. "Appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations." (v. 5) The request seems reasonable enough. We read in the Book of Judges what life was like for the tribes of Yahweh in the early years of occupation. They were vulnerable to the city states of the Canaanites, and particularly to those of the Philistines. For a time they relied on judges, charismatic leaders like Deborah and Gideon, who came to the fore in times of crisis and led volunteer armies against invaders and oppressors. That strategy, however, had become institutionalized. Samuel had made his sons judges over Israel. They were corrupt and used their office for their own profit. So the elders of Israel had had enough of judges. They wanted a king like other nations.

This request displeased both Samuel and Yahweh. Samuel felt that his leadership had been rejected. But God told him, "They have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them." (v. 7) And then God added, "Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day..." (v. 8)

The reference to Egypt brings to the reader's mind the most notable king of that time, the Pharaoh of Egypt. One might have thought that the memory of slavery in Egypt would have forever disabused Israelites of wanting a king of their own. Indeed, Yahweh told Samuel to warn the elders what would happen if they had a king. Their sons would be

conscripted into the army. Their daughters would be taken into service. They would be taxed to support the royal court. They would all be the king's slaves.

But even though Samuel dutifully warned the elders what a king would demand of them, they would not listen. They wanted someone who would go out before them and fight their battles. In the end Samuel relented and agreed to select a king for them. And in 1 Samuel 9-10 we are told how Samuel anointed Saul to be that king.

With the anointing of Saul the history of Israel may properly be said to begin. Now Israel is a nation like other nations, with a royal house, battles, defeats, taxes, an economy, and all the trappings of nationhood so familiar to us. And when in the Lord's Prayer we plead, "Your kingdom come," it is with that history in view.

Note carefully that the second petition looks forward and not backward. We do not pray for the restoration of a former state of affairs, when Yahweh was king over Israel. We do not ask to be carried back to the time before the monarchy in Israel, when there was not yet conscription and a royal house and a bureaucracy and taxes and all that. It is not for some former Golden Age that we plead, nor for a return to the "good old days." We pray for a kingdom that is yet in the future.

What Kind of Kingdom?

The coming of that kingdom was central in Jesus' preaching and teaching. Mark's Gospel tells us that after John's arrest, "Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying,'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news'." (Mark 1:14b-15) What kind of kingdom is it? Jesus taught about it in parables, those tantalizing stories that reveal by concealment. **Matthew 13** is a collection of Jesus' parables of the kingdom. Turn to that chapter now. There we read:

> The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone
> who sowed good seed in his field... (v. 24)
>
> The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that
> someone took and sowed in his field... (v. 31)
>
> The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took
> and mixed in with three measures of flour... (v. 33)
>
> The kingdom of heaven is like treasure
> hidden in a field... (v. 44)

The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant
in search of fine pearls... (v. 45)

The kingdom of heaven is like a net
that was thrown into the sea... (v. 47)

Those similes do not give us a very satisfactory description of what the kingdom of heaven will be like. However, we need to heed the warning delivered in the parable of the sower, with which the chapter begins. Jesus said: "A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path...other seeds fell on rocky ground...other seeds fell among thorns...other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain." (Matthew 13:4-8) When his disciples asked why he taught in parables, he responded by expounding the parable of the sower. To some it is given to know the secrets of the kingdom; to others it is not given. These latter folk are like rocky or shallow or thorny soil. They receive the seeds, but do not bear fruit. They hear the good news of the kingdom, but do not internalize it—it makes no difference in their lives. So even if we were given a precise blueprint of the kingdom, there is no reason to believe that our behavior would be much different.

Our human frailties aside, why did Jesus describe the kingdom in terms of a process rather than a product? Why did he not provide a blueprint of "the good society?" Why is it difficult to extract from Jesus' parables the building materials for any kind of human kingdom known to us?

The difficulty of developing a program of kingdom building, based on the parables, is illustrated in the parable of the yeast in Matthew 13:33. Jesus said that the kingdom is like yeast that a woman put in several measures of flour, until all was leavened. How are we to turn that parable into a program for human betterment? Is the flour supposed to represent the world? Then what is the yeast—the gospel? And if so, does that mean that the world will endure until the gospel has been preached to everyone? That is one possible explanation—one that calls for an all-out emphasis on evangelism. But suppose we understand the flour to be society and the yeast to be justice? Does that mean that we are we to wait with hands folded until oppression and racism and poverty gradually fade away?

Had Jesus wanted to picture the kingdom in more understandable terms, there were several models available for use. There was the Roman Empire, of which Judah was a part. Like the British Empire of the nineteenth century, it had its defects. But like the British Empire, it unified vastly different peoples and brought law and order to millions upon millions. Jesus dismissed it with the terse statement: "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." (Matthew 22:21) There were the Kingdoms of David and Solomon in Israel's glorious past. There were the

forty years in the wilderness, when God was present as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night—when Israel needed no king, because Yahweh was guide and guarantor. But Jesus drew on none of these available models. He preferred the indirect descriptions of the parables. Why?

One explanation is that Jesus did not want the Romans to think that he was preaching insurrection. A more probable explanation is that Jesus looked forward to a kingdom that was better than any that the world had known or could even imagine. To cast the coming kingdom in social or political terms would have been to describe the "city of humankind," not the "city of God."

Does that mean that the coming kingdom is some kind of magical, fairy tale realm, where ordinary rules and laws do not apply? Not at all. The advantages of God's rule over human affairs are not concealed from us. God's intentions for us are quite plain, written for all who will read: justice and mercy and truth. The prophet Micah summed up the intentions in a single sentence:

> He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
> and what does the LORD require of you
> but to do justice, and to love kindness,
> and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah. 6:8)

Nothing could be plainer than that! At the minimum, justice means a fair and sustaining share of the world's resources for every man, woman, and child. It means the granting of basic liberties to all, of whatever race, creed, or status. It means a level playing field of opportunity. At the minimum, kindness means care for the sick, the aged, and the severely handicapped. It means material and moral support for the widow, the alien, and the orphan. It means comfort for the grieving and distressed. And to walk humbly with God is what we discussed in the first session of this study. It means to know from whom we came, to whom we owe our lives, and to whom we go when we die.

The historical record is plain enough. Why did the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah fail, one after the other? Because of a dearth of justice and mercy and a right knowledge of God. Within earshot of every king was a prophet, whose burden it was to remind that ruler that failure to be obedient to Yahweh meant certain social and political disaster. There is nothing mysterious about Amos' condemnation of the oppression of the poor in the reign of Jeroboam II, nor Micah's groanings about the plundering of small farmers by great landholders, or Isaiah's warnings to King Hezekiah against putting his trust in alliances with rapacious nations.

When in the Lord's Prayer we pray, "Your kingdom come," we take upon ourselves something of the burdens of Amos, Micah, and Isaiah. We accept as our own God's

intentions for the world. We pray for a more just economic order. We pray for an end to child abuse and rape—and for the cessation of rapacious wars. We concern ourselves with the dearth of justice and mercy and a right knowledge of God. We look back at the sorry record of human affairs. We look forward to a new and better state of affairs, one that moves beyond our imagination. We pray for the welfare of those who have been set to rule over us—and also that they will rule more wisely and more justly. We pray for the preservation of our nation—and also that its sovereignty might give way to the sovereignty of God. We pray as those who trust that God rules history—and also as those who know they do not yet stand within God's realm.

Prayer is not an escape from history. We pray as those who are only too aware of depressions, oppressions, and war's devastation—as well as the possibilities for a more just and equitable society. We pray for the establishment of God's gracious rule.

Kingdom, Realm or Rule?

Would it make the second petition of the Lord's Prayer more meaningful if we substituted "rule" or "realm" for "kingdom?" In *An Inclusive Language Lectionary* published by the National Council of Churches the term "kingdom" is replaced with the term "realm." The argument offered is that kingdom suggests the rule of a male monarch, while a realm does not suggest the gender of the sovereign. And so in the interest of eliminating gender-specific language about God, "realm" replaces "kingdom."

The point about gender-specific language is well taken. God is neither male nor female. However, there is something to be said for retaining the kingdom language. "The kingdom of heaven" or "the kingdom of God," as we find it variously referred to in Scripture, is always a little out of focus, somewhat mysterious, never precisely delineated. When we pray in the second petition for the coming of God's kingdom, we do not know all that we are asking for. We are children, haltingly making our request. We are using all-too-human language to point to what is, in the final analysis, not a human construct or enterprise.

Of course, to hang on doggedly to the kingdom language is to be a bit like the elders who came to Samuel. They were sure they knew what was best for them—and that was what was most commonly accepted and approved by the surrounding peoples. Custom is not always the wisest mentor, and what is traditional is not always what is best. Granted that the traditional language names God as king and father, nevertheless we do not want to be ruled by a patriarchal monarch, even a patriarchal God!

It may be wisest, therefore, to employ various terms in praying the second petition. Let us sometimes pray for the coming of God's kingdom, sometimes for the coming of God's realm, sometimes for the coming of God's rule.

And when we pray, we might imagine ourselves standing in the middle of a rushing stream or river, much like the people of Israel as they crossed over the Jordan into the Promised Land. We are asking God to allow us and to help us cross over to a place of plenty and security and peace. We want to live in a land where there is a full measure of justice and mercy and the right knowledge of God. We know that our present dwelling place is not such a land.

There is a great temptation to walk up the stream, back to its source, to the garden from which the river flows. Utopian schemes like Brook Farm and its imitators have been an attempt to get back to the Garden of Eden, as it were. These schemes ignore the Fall, the knowledge of good and evil, the propensity of men and women to sin. To try to get back to the garden is an attempt to escape from history; as such it is an act of disobedience.

But so also is it an act of disobedience to cast ourselves into the current and let ourselves be carried off to wherever it might take us. Passivity and resignation to the currents of history are not faithful to Scripture. Those who simply shrug and name everything the inscrutable will of God are no more faithful than the Utopians.

Also, it would be an act of disobedience to retreat to the bank from which we started out. For Israel retreat meant a return to Egypt; for us it means a return to the past—an attempt to recreate the "Old South" or the "good old days" before the progressive income tax or some other former time in the history of one's nation.

Biblical Spirituality

What does this suggest about biblical spirituality? In the first session we stressed the biblical emphasis on the holiness of God, with its implications for our humanity. In this session we have emphasized that God is the Holy One of Israel. To pray to this God is to pray oneself into the history of Israel and of all other nations. But what about the biblical view of history? Is the Bible optimistic about human history? pessimistic? progressive? heroic? The metaphor of the rushing stream would argue against such adjectives as "optimistic" and "pessimistic," both of which suggest some kind of philosophical stance. What the Bible does instead is to set us down in the midst of the river, with the command to cross over into a better country. We need both courage and patience, both imagination and dogged perseverance, both strength and help. Either optimism or pessimism is a hindrance to our crossing—not a help. For at the next step forward, we may lose our footing and be plunged into the torrent. But if we stand still, we will never get to the

other side! In the narratives of the Old Testament, Yahweh helps the people across the troubled waters. In our prayers we ask God to do the same for us. Prayer is the Christian's alternative to either optimism or pessimism. Life is a difficult river to cross, so we pray for help. Life is a difficult river to cross, so we ask that the crossing be worth the effort.

Pressing Questions

You may be left with the persistent question, "What can we do besides praying to hurry the coming kingdom?" Simple answers are worse than none. Those who want a careful description of the options are directed to H. Richard Niebuhr's classic work, *Christ and Culture* (Harper and Brothers, 1951). In language that nontheologians can readily understand, Niebuhr describes the five ways in which Christians and churches have sought to be obedient in history. He calls these positions "Christ against culture," "the Christ of culture," "Christ above culture," "Christ and culture in paradox," and "Christ the transformer of culture." Each tradition—Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed—is assigned its place in the scheme. You should be able to find your own present point of view in the scheme as well.

Several years ago I wrote a book, *Parables at Work* (Westminster, 1985), in which I tried to answer the question, "How can our daily work advance the better future promised by God?" I built my study around Jesus' kingdom parables, including some of those in Matthew 13. If you want to explore the relationship of work and the kingdom, you may wish to read *Parables at Work.*

For Further Study and Reflection

Memory Bank

1. Micah 6:8
2. Matthew 13:44
3. Matthew 22:21

Research

1. A thesaurus gives as synonyms for "kingdom" such words as these: realm, domain, suzerainty, country, dominion, sway, rule. What other words might be added to the list? Using a large dictionary, and paying attention to root meanings of the words, what are the most appropriate alternatives for kingdom of God/kingdom of heaven?

2. Isaiah maintained that the kingdom was coming, but that there would be a period of suffering and purgation in the meantime. What do you make of such passages as Isaiah 24:21-23; 28:16, 17; and 30:18-26?

3. Study the hymn, "I Love Thy Kingdom, Lord." In your judgment, how valid and useful is it to identify the kingdom with the church?

4. In what ways do the following hymns describe the kingdom: "'Thy Kingdom Come,' on Bended Knee," and "Thy Kingdom Come, O Lord?" What changes in social attitudes and conditions are implied by the coming of the kingdom?

Reflection

1. Many Christians see the kingdom as present, but not completely realized, while others see it not present now, but coming in the future. In your judgment, which is more accurate? Why?

2. Try various possibilities for finishing, "The kingdom of God/kingdom of heaven is like...," keeping Matthew 13 in mind, but using contemporary parables.

3. Compose a prayer in which you ask for the coming, or the full realization, of the kingdom.