

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours

St Stephen, Canonbury
Sunday 25th October 2015

Prayer

Come Holy Spirit, may I speak the Word of God and in the Word may we all see a vision of God, who is Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen.

Introduction

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and for ever. In our series of the Lord's Prayer, last week Theresa completed our reflections on the main section of the prayer. This week we come to the final section which is more declaration than prayer. It is a statement about why we have prayed what we have prayed. We could see it as a mini-creed. A statement of what we believe; a statement which is in three parts: for the kingdom is yours, for the power is yours, and for the glory is yours. So let us explore this Trinity together!

The Kingdom is yours

Theresa spoke last week on 'Lead us not into Temptation'. In that context, I wonder what we make of the Temptation of Christ. Luke records, "The devil led Jesus up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendour, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. So if you worship me, it will all be yours." I wonder if we are ever tempted by wanting to have control. If only, says the tempter, if only you will give me your allegiance.

Jesus answered, "It is written 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'" The spiritual principle here is that God is King. When the people of Israel demanded a king to lead them, the prophet Samuel was displeased so he prayed and God said to him, "Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you."

I wonder if we are always following the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ or do we sometimes follow another god we have chosen for ourselves, or do we even get others to follow us instead. It's very easy to set up a kingdom (sometimes we call it an empire or a fiefdom or a tower), anyone who says "I make the decisions round here" is saying this is my kingdom. I'm god here.

If you have experienced this happening when all you want is to follow God, I think God would say to you as he said to Samuel, "it's not you they have rejected, it's me they have rejected as their king".

So Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" "Yes, it is as you say" Jesus replied. As they crucified him, Pilate had a sign put on the cross which reminded the Jews that they had again rejected their king.

Assured that there is salvation through Jesus, the Apostle Paul declares to Timothy, "God the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no-one has seen or can see. To him be honour and might, for ever. Amen." It is this King Jesus whom we worship and seek to follow, and as we do this so the Kingdom of God grows.

The Power is yours

We have declared afresh this morning what we believe about God. That God as Father is creator, that God in Jesus Christ his Son is alive in our hearts, and that God as Holy Spirit strengthens us with power from on high.

“His incomparably great power for us who believe; power like the working of his mighty strength” wrote St Paul to the Church in Ephesus, and to the Church in Corinth he wrote, “Christ the power of God; for the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength.”

The power of God to heal and to save. Power which works through the Holy Spirit, and which works through us as the people of God. I wonder how we experience this power in us. I wonder how this power is revealed through us to others.

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. This is what the Holy Spirit looks like. This is the power of God! A very different description of power from normal expectations of power.

Justin Welby has said that as Archbishop of Canterbury he has little power to decide what is going to happen in the Anglican Communion, but he does have the power to convene. He has the power to influence and he has persuaded all the archbishops of the Anglican Communion to meet in January. He has persuaded them through his relationship with each one, through taking the time to meet them all individually.

When I was in Angola recently, I convened a meeting to resolve a difficult situation which had caused some relationships to break. Nothing as serious as the task of our archbishop, but just like Justin, I had no power other than the power to convene and pray that the Holy Spirit would produce the fruit, and that’s what happened.

The power that comes through the Holy Spirit is a power to be given away. Jesus was not a Robert Mugabe nor a Sassou Nguesso who is having a referendum in the Republic of Congo today so that he can hold onto power for even longer.

The power that comes through the Holy Spirit is a power to be shared. The power that a minister has to convene is the power to call the Body of Christ into being. The Holy Spirit gives each of us gifts and these gifts are for sharing with others so that together we can discern what God would have the church do. If we choose not to use the power to convene, the church remains weak. I think this is true of all gifts of the Spirit. They are given to build up the Church, so if we choose not to use them, the Church is weaker than God intends. The Holy Spirit is the power of God!

The Glory is yours

I wonder what you think glory is.

On the Mountain of Transfiguration, Peter, James and John "saw his glory" and the "glorious splendour" of Moses & Elijah. I think this tells us that whatever glory is, it is something which can be seen and it also tells us that glory isn’t restricted to God.

One of the first bishops of the church, St Irenaeus, wrote: The glory of God is a human being fully alive, and the glory of man is to see a vision of God. I think this supports my suggestions that glory is to be seen, and that whatever glory is, it is not restricted to God but human beings too can be glorious.

Let’s first think about glory as seeing a vision of God. God is God, so God is not limited by the vision of any one of us. Therefore it is likely that our visions of God will be different.

St Stephen presented his vision of God to the Sanhedrin at his trial. This is described in Acts Chapter 7, and portrayed by Brian Thomas in the mural in front of you. We shouldn't expect this to be everyone else's vision of God, and of course it isn't! But even if it isn't anyone else's vision it was Stephen's as interpreted by an artist.

I wonder what your vision of God is. Mine is The Trinity as seen in The Hospitality of Abraham as painted by Andrej Rublev. This icon sits on my desk and on my mobile phone, constantly inviting me into relationship with God-in-Community.

I wonder whether you are comfortable with gazing on someone else's vision of God. Are you disturbed by Stephen's vision interpreted by Brian Thomas, or Andrej Rublev's vision, or anyone else's? Can you receive them and value the insights they bring of a characteristic of God? As a church community we love being diverse but we sometimes find the implications of our diversity challenging. That's not surprising but we are called to find unity in our diversity through the power of the Holy Spirit, and it seems to me we need to become more comfortable with having different visions of God between us. For as Irenaeus said, our glory is to see a vision of God, and how much more glorious it would be for us all to see God in another's vision.

So now to the glorious splendour of Moses & Elijah. As St Paul wrote to the Church in Corinth, we all reflect the Lord's glory and are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. So we are all being changed from one degree of glory to another, says the Apostle, as the Holy Spirit acts in the lives of the believers.

I think we can also discern that glory must be tangible and it must be holy. For me, there must be something about a person or an image which leads me to wonder, and it must give me a sense of the presence of God. Then I can rejoice. Glory!

Kingdom, power and glory

We have explored the three parts of the kingdom, the power and the glory of God. But I wonder if the whole is greater than the sum of the three parts?

It seems to me that each informs the other.

What is the Kingdom of God without the power exercised in it being the Holy Spirit?

What is the power of God unless it gives glory to God by showing an image of God?

What is the glory of God unless it is seen in the context of the kingdom of God?

I suggested at the beginning that we would explore this Trinity, and for me, the image of Trinity involves an invitation to a personal relationship. To be in the Kingdom, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, and living in such a way that everyone sees something glorious and praises God, whose glory it is. Halleluiah!

This then is the culmination of the Lord's Prayer that we are so drawn into the presence of God, that we become One with Him.

Prayer

God, the giver of life,
whose Holy Spirit wells up within your Church:
by the Spirit's gifts equip us to live the gospel of Christ
and make us eager to do your will,
that we may share with the whole creation
the joys of eternal life;
for the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours,
now and for ever.
Amen.