

Homily of Cardinal Vincent Nichols given at the Ecumenical Service in Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral on the Solemnity of Pentecost, 4th June 2017.

'Thy Kingdom Come!' These three words stand at the heart of Christian prayer. Thankfully, they have stood at the heart of much prayer in these last eight days, a prayer shared openly and deliberately by many Christians of different churches and traditions, in many parts of the world. We thank God as we bring to a close this Octave of Christian prayer for our shared Christian mission, which has helped to make these three words resonate afresh in so many hearts and minds.

'Thy Kingdom Come!' This is at the heart of Christian prayer because it is at the centre of the ministry of Jesus, our gracious and loving Lord. His coming was announced by John the Baptist in this manner (Mk 1.15). He himself broke the silence of his early years with the words: 'Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is close at hand' (Mt 3.2).

The coming of his Kingdom is his promise and, as his disciples, it is our hope. For this coming, we pray every day.

The texts of the Gospels affirm this focus. The Kingdom of Heaven, or the Kingdom of God, is mentioned 61 times in the Gospel texts, yet its precise meaning is hard to pin down.

At times it has been taken to indicate the coming of a visible reality akin to, or replacing, an oppressive political order. Perhaps this was the first thought of the disciples. It has been entertained many times since then. Yet the phrase has also been taken to mean a truly 'spiritual kingdom', a kingdom of the heart, an inner moral ethic. Perhaps this has been part of a particularly liberal vision, which has seen humanity progressing on a pathway of continual growth and goodness. Then the 'Kingdom of God' has an eschatological meaning, pointing to the close of history and the restoration of all in Christ. But the meaning that is surely most clearly reflected in the prayer the Lord gave us is that his Kingdom will come, his will be done 'on earth as it is in heaven'. The Kingdom is a reality both already secured for the eternal future and still to be realised step by step, in our lives, both individually and in the way we fashion our communities and societies.

This Kingdom, then, this conformity to the will of the Father, is central to our Christian endeavour, to our discipleship. But here I think we benefit from one firm clarification: that we are not primarily called to build the Kingdom as to seek to enter it. We are not so much its prime movers as its recipients. Our radical quest is to enter the Kingdom, to dwell in it and to be shaped by it, both now and in the fullness of time: our limited, personal time and in the fullness of all created time.

The unfolding of this Kingdom, and of these intertwining histories, is the work of the Holy Spirit. Of that there can be no doubt, for it is this Holy Spirit who hovered over the chaos at the emerging of time and rendered that chaos into an ordered world, a cosmos. So too the final eschaton will be achieved by the power of the same Holy Spirit, when all things are rendered whole and pure and brought into the presence of God. And now, each day, the Holy Spirit refashions our nature, in as much as we permit, into an image of the life of God, seen in its fullness in Christ Jesus.

So, there cannot be a better day than this day of Pentecost on which to pray anew these same three words: 'Thy Kingdom Come!' For on this day we seek to be in the place of the first apostles, gathered with Mary, to receive afresh this gift so that we too may be heralds

of this Kingdom, now and in the days to come. This is the pattern of the coming of the Kingdom, even as we have heard in the words of the Gospel: 'As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you. Receive the Holy Spirit' (John 20.20).

St Cyril of Jerusalem, writing in the fourth century, provides us with such a beautiful commentary on the work of the Holy Spirit among us. His words are both reassuring and challenging. He refers first to the image of water, used by Jesus himself 'on the last and greatest day of the festival' when he said that we were to come to him and drink for 'from his breast shall flow fountains of living water' (John 7.37-38). Then Cyril asks: 'But why did Christ call the grace of the Spirit water?' And his answer is wonderful:

'Because all things are dependent on water..... Water comes down from heaven as rain, and although it is always the same in itself, it produces many different effects, one in the palm tree, another in the vine, and so on throughout the whole of creation. It does not come down, now as one thing, now as another, but while remaining essentially the same, it adapts itself to the needs of every creature that receives it.'

He continues: 'In the same way the Holy Spirit, whose nature is always the same, simple and indivisible, apportions grace to each person as he wills. Like a dry tree, which puts forth shoots when watered; the soul bears the fruit of holiness when repentance has made it worthy of receiving the Holy Spirit. Although the Spirit never changes, the effects of his action, by the will of God and in the name of Christ, are both many and marvellous.'

Then he says: 'The Spirit makes one person a teacher of divine truth, inspires another to prophesy, gives another the power of casting out devils, enables another to interpret Holy Scripture. The Spirit strengthens one person's self-control, shows another how to help the poor, teaches another to fast and lead a life of asceticism, makes another oblivious to the needs of the body, trains another for martyrdom. His action is different in different people, but the Spirit is always the same. In each person, Scripture says, the Spirit reveals his presence in a particular way for the common good.'

St Cyril, then, assures us that today too we need not fear our differences if we are truly open to the same Holy Spirit. Nor should we feel hesitant in our task of mission 'for the common good', for that is precisely the purpose for which this Spirit nurtures our different gifts and reciprocal relationships. We should be fearful if we are not repentant, for as Jesus himself said, the first purpose of this great gift is for the forgiveness of sins, and we can hardly be ready to receive this gift if, at heart, we do not acknowledge and repent of our sins and of our divisions. This too should be the fruit of our prayer.

'Thy Kingdom Come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven!' This prayer has inspired so much Christian endeavour across the centuries and continues to do so. Surely, it has sustained the long and costly effort of the construction of these two great cathedrals, built to the glory of God and as a sign and place of his realm and the peace it gives. At the Metropolitan Cathedral, we celebrate our 50th birthday. May this occasion and this prayer reinforce our commitment to each other and our deep desire to work side by side, in a profound unity of spirit. We pray that as we seek to enter the Kingdom the will of the Father and the power of the Holy Spirit may indeed be seen in our lives and revealed to be at the source of so much good in our society today, for we know that the Spirit always blows where he wills. And for this too, this utter freedom of the Holy Spirit, we give thanks today and always.

Amen.