

On Praying and Coming of Kingdom

Praying Matthew 6:5-15

6:5 How do you feel about praying in public? What thoughts go through your mind? Are you worried about what others think? The issue is praying to be seen. Jesus condemns those who want their reward now.

Illustration: My prof, Dave, tells of a time when he was asked to open the morning service with prayer. It was the 4th of July, so he worked up a very eloquent and patriotic prayer to impress everyone. He was nervous, he was excited, etc. He got up after one of the songs and prayed eloquently. When he got back to his seat, one of the deacons asked him who was the lady off the coast with scales in her hand. He had meant to refer to the Statue of Liberty.

Illustration: He also told of a later event. There was to be a MADD outdoor Christmas service, and he was supposed to be opening that service in prayer. When he was sitting up on the platform waiting for his turn, he noticed that the guest speaker was somebody famous—a great speaker. He began to be intimidated by even being on the same platform with him. He started looking out over the people in the crowd and saw a mother standing alone out there with tears in her eyes. She was someone in his congregation that had lost a son that year in a car accident with a drunk driver. Dave said he just wanted to go down off the platform and stand with her to comfort her. He was hurting for her and didn't even notice when he was called up to pray. They got his attention and he went forward forgetting all his rehearsed prayer. He just prayed from his heart. He said, God, sometimes it seems like it is always winter and never Christmas. And he didn't even remember the rest of the prayer. The next day he went to the church and sat down at his desk and the secretary brought in the town paper and the front page headline showed a picture of the outdoor Christmas service with the headline across the top of the page: "Always Winter, Never Christmas." Not a word was mentioned about the eloquent famous speaker.

Kingdom Come

In Matt. 6:10, the Lord's Prayer, Jesus says, "Your kingdom come, your will be done." I believe this is another instance of Jewish poetry being used by Jesus. English poetry repeats similar sounds: if the sound is at the end of a word it's called rhyme, if at the beginning alliteration, and if in the middle, assonance. But in Jewish poetry, similar sounds are not repeated, but similar concepts. Take a look at the first 8 verses of Psalms 2 for an example, but they're all over the Bible—why the Bible sometimes sounds so redundant to our ears. Here Jesus is poetically saying the same thing twice: your kingdom come, your will be done. As we now understand kingdom as the rule, reign, dominion, principles, or will of the king; and come/done as the fulfillment, manifestation, completion of that will in us and eventually throughout creation. And "will" here—sebyana—in Aramaic is the deepest desire, pleasure, and purpose of God. In this line, we are asking that God's deepest purpose and desire becomes ours—that it becomes real or fulfilled in us. Not that our will is overrun or overruled, but that ours comes into confluence with God's. So what does that look like? Feel like? Here's a little story that illustrates.--db

Illustration: Trouble at the Inn, by Dina Donohue.

For years now whenever Christmas pageants are talked about in a certain little town in the Midwest, someone is sure to mention the name of Wallace Purling. Wally's performance in one annual production of the Nativity play has slipped into the realm of legend. But the old timers who were in the audience that night never tire of recalling exactly what happened.

Wally was nine that year and in the second grade, though he should have been in the fourth. Most people in town knew that he had difficulty in keeping up. He was big and clumsy, slow in movement and mind. Still, Wally was well liked by the other children in his class, all of whom were smaller than he, though the boys had trouble hiding their irritation if the uncoordinated Wally asked to play ball with them.

Most often they'd find a way to keep him off the field, but Wally would hang around anyway—not sulking, just hoping. He was always a helpful boy, a willing and smiling one, and the natural protector, paradoxically, of the underdog. Sometimes if the older boys chased the younger ones away, it would always be Wally who'd say, "Can't they stay? They're no bother."

Wally fancied the idea of being a shepherd with a flute in the Christmas pageant that year, but the play's director, Miss Lumbard, assigned him to a more important role. After all, she reasoned, the Innkeeper did not have too many lines, and Wally's size would make his refusal of lodging to Joseph more forceful.

And so it happened that the usual large, partisan audience gathered for the town's Yuletide extravaganza of the staves and creches, of beards, crowns, halos and a whole stageful of squeaky voices. No one on stage or off was more caught up in the magic of the night than Wallace Purling. They said later that he stood in the wings and watched the performance with such fascination that from time to time Miss Lumbard had to make sure he didn't wander onstage before his cue.

Then the time came when Joseph appeared, slowly, tenderly guiding Mary to the door of the inn. Joseph knocked hard on the wooden door set into the painted backdrop. Wally the Innkeeper was there, waiting. "What do you want?" Wally said, swinging the door open with a brusque gesture.

"We seek lodging."

"Seek it elsewhere." Wally looked straight ahead but spoke vigorously. "The inn is filled."

"Sir, we have asked everywhere in vain. We have traveled far and are very weary."

"There is no room in this inn for you." Wally looked properly stern.

"Please, good innkeeper, this is my wife, Mary. She is heavy with child and needs a place to rest. Surely you must have some small corner for her. She is so tired."

Now, for the first time, the Innkeeper relaxed his stiff stance and looked down at Mary. With that, there was a long pause, long enough to make the audience a bit tense with embarrassment.

"No! Begone!" the prompter whispered from the wings.

"No!" Wally repeated automatically. "Begone!"

Joseph sadly placed his arm around Mary, and Mary laid her head upon his shoulder, and the two of them started to move away. The Innkeeper did not return inside his inn, however. Wally stood there in the doorway, watching the forlorn couple. His mouth was open, his brow creased with concern, his eyes filling unmistakably with tears.

"Don't go, Joseph," Wally called out. "Bring Mary back." And Wallace Purling's face grew into a bright smile. "You can have *my* room."

Some people in town thought that the pageant had been ruined. Yet there were others—many others—who considered it the most Christmas of all Christmas pageants they had ever seen.