

May 16, 2021
The Seventh Sunday of Easter, Year B
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Acts 1:15-17, 21-26
Psalm 1
1 John 5:9-13
John 17:6-19

On Wednesday, the daily newsletter from the Episcopal News Service included this headline: “Thy Kingdom Come annual global prayer movement gears up.” I vaguely remembered previously hearing of Thy Kingdom Come, but knew only that it’s a program out of the Church of England for the worldwide Anglican Communion, of which The Episcopal Church is a part.

I should confess here that I tend to be a little skeptical of things coming out of the Church of England. That’s because the Church of England tends to be much more traditionalist than The Episcopal Church, lagging behind on many issues that are important to me. Take, for example, the ordination of women. The Episcopal Church began ordaining women in 1974 and regularized that practice in 1976; the Church of England began ordaining women twenty years later, in 1994. Consider also women bishops. The first woman bishop in the Anglican Communion was Barbara Harris, elected by the Diocese of Massachusetts in 1988. It took twenty-six years for the Church of England to approve women bishops and appoint its first, so that was only in 2014. The Church of England still won’t ordain out gay people or bless same-sex relationships. I try to ignore this because it annoys me. Unlike some of my Episcopal clergy colleagues, I am not a particular Anglophile, so I don’t have that to lure me closer.

Still, I do try to give our “parent” church credit where it is due. And because I was planning to preach about prayer this week anyway, I decided to learn more about Thy Kingdom Come, the “global prayer movement.” I quickly ascertained three facts. One, Thy Kingdom Come was founded in 2016 by then Archbishop of York John Sentamu and then-and-current Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby. Two, the idea was to set aside a time of intentional prayer from Ascension Day through the Day of Pentecost. In other words, this year, it started on Thursday and extends through next Sunday. So far, so good. It was on fact three that I got stuck. As the Episcopal New Service story describes it: “Thy Kingdom Come has expanded to include many denominations in its call for each Christian to pray for the world and for five people close to them to come to know Jesus.”¹

“To come to know Jesus”? What? That couldn’t be right. A few minutes of Googling later, I was on the official Thy Kingdom Come website,² and alas, there it was, a cute-and-perky two-and-a-half-minute animated video that begins with this: “God placed on the Archbishops of Canterbury and York’s heart the importance of evangelism and witness. And, of course, this must start in prayer. So in 2016 the Archbishops of Canterbury and York put out a call to prayer. The message was to the Anglican Church worldwide to come to faith in Jesus Christ.”³ It continues, “Before long, Roman Catholics, Methodists, Baptists, and many other denominations across the world began to join in Thy Kingdom Come Momentum quickly built up with Christians in different countries around the world beginning to pray together during these eleven days for five people they knew to become Christians.” The Church of England resources don’t even include the part about praying for the world; the Episcopal New Service must have thrown that in so it would go down easier on this side of the Atlantic.

Well. I hope we can all agree that evangelism and witness are important. And that prayer, including prayer for the world and prayer for people we know, is important. But prayer for people “to become Christians”—that is more than a little dicey. For example, I think it’s fair to say that the most leaders in The Episcopal Church, recognizing some very problematic parts of Christian history, no longer sanction praying for the Christian conversion of Jews, Muslims, Hindus or Buddhists. Admittedly, there are some remnants of this in the Book of Common Prayer. Even so, most of us are now very careful *not* to suggest that Christianity is the only valid religious path. Besides, in places like New England, the notion that we might pray for Christian conversion is rightly likely to scare people off. In other words, it’s not even a good strategy for its supposed purpose, which is evangelism and witness.

Let’s turn briefly to Ascension and Pentecost. The Ascension is when Jesus went to heaven; Pentecost is when the disciples received the Holy Spirit. Remember, the four gospels offer four very different versions of what Jesus did after the resurrection. The Book of Acts also features the post-resurrection Jesus; though written by Luke, it’s yet different from Luke. We observe the Ascension forty days after Easter and Pentecost ten days after that. That timeline is specifically from the Book of Acts. Between Ascension and Pentecost, post-Jesus but pre-Spirit, there’s a sort of liminality. While I’m cautious about praying for people to become Christians, I like the idea of using this in-between time for intentional prayer. As is so often the case when it comes to the Church of England, maybe we Episcopalians need to slightly go our own way. And it seems to me that, as we approach Pentecost, the “birthday” of the church, it makes sense to pray most especially for the members of the church.

For ideas about how to do this, we might turn to our reading from the Gospel of John. That’s where I originally got the idea to preach about prayer today. Of course, “thy kingdom come” is from the Lord’s Prayer, which is found with slight variations in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. There, Jesus teaches the disciples how to pray. Here, in John, we eavesdrop as Jesus prays for the disciples. The gospels include a number of *short* quotations of Jesus at prayer. But this is the only *long* one. While Jesus isn’t teaching about prayer here, it might yet hold lessons for us.

To set the scene, it’s the Last Supper, during which we know John’s Jesus had a lot to say. Jesus has just delivered his three-chapter farewell monologue to the disciples. Now, he delivers a one-chapter monologue to God. Today’s reading is the middle of that monologue; several verses precede what we heard, and several verses follow. Once Jesus wraps it up, he will head off to the garden.

Considering it as a whole, the first thing I noticed about Jesus’ prayer is that most of it is observational: I’m on my way back, here’s what I’ve been working on, here’s the status. It’s as if Jesus has been on a business trip, and he’s reporting back to the boss. The second thing I noticed is that Jesus makes only a handful of requests to God, which seem fairly summarized as such:

- a. Glorify me
- b. Protect and sanctify these followers; unify them and show them my glory
- c. Apply item b to future followers who will come to me because of them

Maybe these first and second points could be applied to our own prayer lives. If so, to the first point, we should be spending a lot of time just checking in with God. Ironically, I think this is the part of prayer that we're most likely to forget. It's not a book report. You won't be graded. You can be honest. Hey, God, this is what has been going on in my life. And to the second point, maybe our prayer for our community would be something like, "Protect and sanctify these followers; unify them and show them your glory." We might even follow the lead of the Church of England, and each pray this from now until Pentecost specifically for five members of this congregation or five other Christians you know: "Protect and sanctify these followers; unify them and show them your glory."

In a bit of a turn, I want to note that May is Mental Health Awareness Month. To learn more, check out the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI). You can always contact me if you're looking for resources, for yourself, for a family member, or for a friend.

Last week I stumbled on an April paper in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* stating that while religion "constrained crisis response during crucial early days of the COVID-19 pandemic," it also "protected mental health."⁴ I also learned that, in early May, the American Psychiatric Association released the results of a new public opinion poll. Their report says that "concern about COVID-19 remains high, especially concern over loved ones, and more people are reporting mental health impacts from pandemic than last year. Parents are especially concerned about their children's mental well-being." Perhaps most startling to me was that "(49%) of parents surveyed who have children under 18 say their child has received help from a mental health professional since the start of the pandemic."⁵

I don't know how prayer works, but I do believe it helps. And here's the thing: it helps the *pray-ee*, and it helps the *pray-er*. Through prayer we build networks of love. Clearly, now is an especially good time to pray, whomever you pray for, and however you pray. Just pray.

Notes

¹ "Thy Kingdom Come annual global prayer movement gears up," *Episcopal News Service*, May 12, 2021, available online at <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2021/05/12/thy-kingdom-come-annual-global-prayer-movement-gears-up/> (accessed May 17, 2021).

² The Thy Kingdom Come official website is available online at <https://www.thykingdomcome.global/> (accessed May 17, 2021).

³ The video is available either on the home page of the official website for They Kingdom Come, or directly on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3k3pIwVqisA&t=23s> (accessed May 17, 2021).

⁴ Landen Schnabel and Scott Schieman, "Religion Protected Mental Health but Constrained Crisis Response During Crucial Early Days of the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, April 7, 2021, available online at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/jssr.12720> (accessed May 17, 2021).

⁵ "New APA Poll Shows Sustained Anxiety Among Americans; More than Half of Parents are Concerned About the Mental Well-being of Their Children," American Psychiatric Association, May 2, 2021, available online at <https://www.psychiatry.org/newsroom/news-releases/new-apa-poll-shows-sustained-anxiety-among-americans-more-than-half-of-parents-are-concerned-about-the-mental-well-being-of-their-children> (accessed May 17, 2021).