

Blessed is the Kingdom - Epistle of 17th Sunday
October 5, 2014

Every Divine Liturgy begins with the same words. Do you know them? "Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."

Why do we begin our Liturgy in this way? St. Nicholas Cabasilas notes that there are four basic patterns of prayer: petition, confession, thanksgiving and doxology. In petition we seek the advancement of our own interests; in confession we seek to be delivered from evils; in thanksgiving, we rejoice in the good things that God has given us. "In doxology," he writes, "we lay aside ourselves and all our interests and glorify the Lord for his own sake, for his power and his glory" (On the Divine Liturgy, 1966, p. 43).

The reason we begin the Liturgy with an expression of doxology is this: "When grateful servants approach their Master it is fitting that they should begin not by pushing their own affairs into the foreground, but should concentrate on those of their Master" (ibid).

Every Divine Liturgy begins with the same words. "Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit." God's kingdom is also mentioned in the most common of all Christian prayers: "Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done." Lest we forget, St. Matthew's gospel (4:17) says that the Lord began his preaching with the words, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Where and when is God's Kingdom? A most fitting description of it lies in today's epistle reading, "God said, 'I will live in them and move among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.'"

The problem with all this is that God's Kingdom does not seem close at all. We see the Islamic State beheading yet another innocent victim, the ebola virus has come to Texas, income inequality is increasing: there seems to be a lot of reasons to question whether God's Kingdom is real and if it is present at all in our world.

The Orthodox Christian answer is this: God's Kingdom is here now, but incompletely. We see it in many forms. It is present in the hopes and aspirations of the faithful. I have told you many times the story of the 40 Martyrs of Sevasteia, where 39 soldiers endure a slow, painful form of execution and then one of the executioners, moved by what he witnessed, joined the 39 to make the number of martyrs into 40. We see it in the martyrs of the early and the modern church, the tens of thousands of Russian Christians who went to the gulags and often to death for the sake of their faith. We see it in the miracles of life- myrrh-streaming icons and inexplicable healings and prayers that are answered.

In 1939 the German theologian and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer was studying in New York. He had taken advantage of his religious connections to obtain permission to remain in the country for several years. An open opponent of the Nazi regime, he nonetheless returned to Germany, explaining to his friends that "I will have no right to share in my country's rebuilding if I do not also share in its suffering." He was executed by the Nazis just weeks before the Third Reich fell.

"In 1944 Zakynthos Mayor Loukas Carrer ordered at gunpoint to hand over a list of Jews residing on the island. The list was presented to the Germans by Bishop Chrysostomos containing only two names: Mayor Carrer and Bishop Chrysostomos" (*Greek American*, Vol 8, Issue 6 p 12).

Can we not see in both these cases the kingdom of God in all its glory? Yes there was the ugliness of the Nazi regime, but there was also God working through faithful leaders.

I wrote in the most recent *Koinonia* newsletter of my experience with Zacchaio and his parents, a 7-month old boy here for brain surgery. I saw God working both in the blessed myrrh with which he was anointed and also in the hearts of the people that supported Zacchaio and his parents.

We see God's Kingdom in the Divine Liturgy, where the Lord's Blood is united with ours and his Body with ours. This is not to say that the priests who lead or the singers who respond always do their work with musical or moral perfection, but God's kingdom is here.

"God said, 'I will live in them and move among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people...I will be a father to you, and you shall be my sons and daughters,' says the Lord Almighty." I cannot think of a more beautiful promise. There is a "but" however. God asks something of us. "Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean..."

God asks us to make a conscious decision to separate ourselves from sin. "Come out from them," he says, "be separate from them... touch nothing unclean." Be separate from them: what does it mean? The separation is not physical; Christians were never expected to leave society and create cultic communities. Monasteries are the exception to the rule, and even monasteries have relations with the community at large. The separation is not physical, but rather moral. It is an attitude, an outlook, a way of living, that says, "Yes the world can be difficult, but God is at work here. I will trust in him and I will live as he wants me to live."

God's kingdom is here but yet incomplete. When it is perfected it will resemble the description told at the end of Revelation,

"I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away

every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away...

“In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him. They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. There shall be no night there: They need no lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light. And they shall reign forever and ever.”

We pray that God’s Kingdom comes to us and grows every day. Amen.

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Text: 2 Corinthians 6:16-18; 7:1

BRETHREN, you are the temple of the living God; as God said, "I will live in them and move among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty."

Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, and make holiness perfect in the fear of God.