

Thy Kingdom Come.
Thy will be done on earth,
as it is in heaven.

When these words were first spoken and later recorded, people of the time viewed the world they lived in as a three-decker universe. It consisted of the blue sky above, a flat earth here below and the underworld. The sky or heaven above was inhabited by God (as in “Our Father in heaven”), the earth was inhabited by all living creatures, and the underworld was inhabited by the shades of the dead.

We must always remember this when we read the New Testament and early Christian documents. For example, when the Apostles' Creed says, that Jesus "descended into Hell", it is referring to the abode of the dead and not to a place of eternal punishment. When it further goes on to say, “he ascended into heaven” it was from the underworld of the dead that he rose. Of necessity, on his way up, he had to pass through the earth. This is quaintly reflected in St John’s Gospel account of the rising of Jesus, for, when he encounters Mary Magdalene he says, “Do not touch me,...for I am ascending to my Father”. She was moving upwards, passing through the middle layer of the universe on the way.

It was only from the second century onwards that Christian imagination began to develop a slightly modified version of that three-decker universe. During the first century Christians lived in the expectation that Jesus would shortly return to earth from heaven above. When this occurred, those who had died in the meantime would be resurrected from their graves to participate in the Kingdom.

But when the first century came to end and Christians were still awaiting the return of Jesus, they began to feel concern about those who had died and remained in the grave. During the second century they solved this problem by slowly adopting Plato's view of the human condition - something all Christians retained in their belief systems thereafter until quite recent times. Plato thought of the human being, not as a psycho-somatic unity (as the Jews did, and as most of us now do) but as an immortal spiritual soul temporarily residing in a physical body.

As a result of Plato's influence it became orthodox Christian doctrine to teach that the soul immediately faced the Last Judgement on surviving the death of the body. The righteous souls were thought then to ascend into heaven to be with God, while the wicked ones descended into the underworld. This then became transformed into Hell - the habitation of the damned and ruled by Satan, the personification of evil.

Rather strangely, the original expectation of the Last Judgement at the end of time, far from being replaced and dropping out of the picture, was retained and combined with this new view. It declared that when the Lord returned, the bodies of the dead would be resurrected from their graves, rejoined with their souls and judged all over again. Even my

rather conservative theological teacher from Aberdeen, John Dickie, loved to point out to us how superfluous was this reduplication of the Last Judgement.

So this is how the original three-decker universe of the first century became modified because of the Christian belief in the Last Judgement. From about the fifth century onwards it underwent a further modification, and for this reason. Most people felt they were not really righteous enough to enter Heaven immediately, but on the other hand they were surely not wicked enough to be consigned to Hell. So to meet this growing concern, an additional deck was introduced between earth and heaven. It was known as Purgatory. It was considered to be a place in this imagined spiritual world, where the soul could be purged of its remaining impurities to prepare it for its final home in heaven.

This served the Christian view of reality very well until an enterprising Pope in the Middle Ages thought up a plan for exploiting it in order to raise funds for the building of the new St. Peter's Cathedral at Rome. He arranged to sell Indulgences to the recently bereaved. These Indulgences would supposedly lessen the time spent in Purgatory spent by their loved ones.

This proved to be the straw which broke the camel's back of this imagined and slowly evolving unseen other-world. The Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther, not only condemned the selling of Indulgences but also in one fell swoop abolished Purgatory from the Christian world-view on the grounds that the practice had no biblical warrant.

Not surprisingly this had the effect of increasing the fear of dying among the Protestants since it meant that on death they faced Divine Judgment immediately. Over the next century or two, and indeed up to the time of Billy Graham, Protestant clergymen made the most of this opportunity to add an element of urgency to their preaching. Even my rather old-fashioned Scottish preacher of First Church, Dunedin that I belonged to, frequently used the phrase "you dare not die before making your peace with God".

But the abolition of Purgatory was only the beginning of the vanishing of the spiritual world imagined by Christians. It began slowly to dissolve still further as a consequence of what Galileo saw through his telescope. He discovered that the planets and stars in the heavens above, far from being the lights of heaven, were all part of a vast physical universe. They operated by the same natural laws as those already discovered for planet earth. From then onwards Heaven slowly began to lose its reality as a spiritual realm.

Of course it took three to four centuries for the full significance of Galileo's discovery to sink in. In the meantime, from about 1880, Christian theologians began to question the very concept of Hell on moral grounds. A place of eternal punishment was judged to be inconsistent with the affirmation of a God of love. Hell had largely disappeared from the Christian picture of reality when I joined the church in the 1930's. Heaven, however, was then still then very real in the popular Christian imagination. But during the course of the 20th century I observed how it also began to fade out of the picture.

This may be illustrated by the change that took place in the average funeral service during the last century. In 1900 it was very clearly a ritual that marked how the deceased person was being sent-off to the next world. But by the year 2000 it had mostly become a time to celebrate, by means of eulogies, a finite life that had come to its natural end.

The vanishing of heaven from our view of reality does not mean, however, that it vanished without trace. Rather, heaven has remained as a symbolic term. It is a blue-print of the ideal life - one in which love and righteousness always prevail. We even find this use of the term surviving in frozen exclamations, as when someone replies, "Oh that would be heavenly!"

Thus, when we use the word 'heaven' in the context of today's secular world therefore, we are using a frozen metaphor to refer to the set of our highest values. This was acknowledged by no less an authority than Pope John Paul II in 1999, when he said,—“Heaven is not a physical place in the clouds, but a living, personal relationship with the Holy Trinity”.

As I said at the outset, we must always remember when we read the New Testament that it was written by people who saw the world they lived in as a flat surface, sandwiched between heaven and the underworld, in a three-decker universe

But we, on the contrary, see ourselves living on a tiny planet in a vast universe of stars and galaxies, that slowly evolved by its own internal laws over some fourteen billion years. For the message of the New Testament to be relevant to people of our world, it calls for some quite radical re-interpretation. This is a process which the great biblical scholar of the twentieth century, Rudolf Bultmann, referred to as 'demythologising'. By this he meant translating the essential Christian message from its original context in the mythical and now outmoded three-decker universe, into a form appropriate to our current secular world. This is a task that scholars and preachers have been learning how to do during the last century, but sometimes only with limited success.

How are we to demythologise the words of the Lord's prayer? Indeed, first of all, how are we to demythologise the practice of prayer in our secular world? For the traditional mental picture of God as a bearded Father in the sky has lost all reality? Indeed, even the very concept of God as a supernatural personal being, who controls the world and answers our prayers, no longer wins widespread conviction. Some theologians suddenly startled the world in the middle of last century by announcing that 'God is dead'. They meant that very idea of God was dead.

So if we are no longer speaking to a God in heaven when we pray in our secular world, what are we doing? Let me make some suggestions. We are engaging in a form of meditation. In our prayers of confession we are subjecting ourselves to an act of self-examination. In our minds we are searching our past behaviour to see where we have made moral mistakes and could have done better. Further, we are looking for ways in which we can emend our past failures.

In our prayers of intercession we are expressing our common hopes and wishes for the future, not only for ourselves, but also for others. We are also acknowledging that we must accept our share of the responsibility for ensuring these prayers are fulfilled.

Let me illustrate this with a little story I picked up after World War II and which I often used as a parish minister long ago. In the ruins of a bombed city in Germany they found a fallen statue of the Christ figure. They set it up again on its pedestal. But the hands of the figure had broken off and could not be found. So on the base of the statue they inscribed the words "I have no other hands but yours". So, as I said, we must accept our share of the responsibility for ensuring our prayers are fulfilled.

In the light of this let us now turn our attention to the words of the Lord's Prayer, "Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

According to the Gospel records, Jesus spent his ministry teaching about the nature of the Kingdom of God and preparing people for its coming. Jesus was not the divine figure his followers later transformed him into. He did not come from heaven to save us for an afterlife above. Jesus was a wisdom teacher. He was very this-worldly and told stories about how we should live in **this** life. (We call them parables). Whenever he said, "The Kingdom of God is like this... and like this", he was describing the way we should our lives in the here and now. Indeed the very first name his followers used to describe his teaching was simply "The Way". A good summary of his teaching is found in the well-known Sermon on the Mount of St. Matthew's Gospel.

He used such striking words as "You should love your enemies and do good to those who hate you".

"If someone steals your cloak, give him your coat as well".

"Do not be judgmental to others and they will not be judgmental to you."

"If someone strikes you in the cheek, turn the other cheek and challenge them to strike that also."

Moreover the way of life that Jesus described under the term, 'Kingdom of God' or sometimes 'Kingdom of heaven', was not intended as preparation for some hoped-for future in another world after death. It was to be regarded as an ever present possibility in this world of here and now. Whenever we observe an act of kindness or hear some words of sympathy or loving encouragement, there we find evidence that the Kingdom has come in our midst. He even rebuked those who did not recognise it. "There the Kingdom of God is displayed before your eyes", he implied, "and you do not see it".

In the light of this let us quickly survey the twentieth century just past. Instead of deploring the acts of cruelty and terrorism still occurring today, let us take note of some of the achievements. In 1900 we built lunatic asylums for the insane and virtually threw away the key. Those unfortunate children who had lost both parents we put in dormitory-like

orphanages and provided them with food and clothing. We built hospitals for the sick but often left them with heavy debts that took a life-time to repay.

In 1900 we were strongly individualistic and had little sympathy for the poor and destitute. We were strongly nationalistic and we glorified the role of the soldier. We regarded patriotism so highly that we sanctified those who were willing to die for their country. We cruelly treated and even despised all conscientious objectors. We frowned upon divorce. We showed no mercy to murderers but hanged them on the gallows. We condemned, absolutely, all sexual acts of gays and lesbians.

In the course of the century much of that changed. Whereas sexual acts between the same gender were treated as criminal acts in 1900, we gradually came to understand the complex nature of human sexuality and to acknowledge that it is quite natural for individuals to be at different points on the sexual spectrum. As a result, the community developed a more balanced and positive attitude towards of gays and lesbians and decriminalized sexual acts between persons of the same gender.

We introduced legislation which helped the needy, the orphan, the widow. We brought in free hospitalisation to help the sick. Prime Minister Michael Savage referred to the Social Security legislation he introduced in the late 1930's as 'applied Christianity'.

The first half of the twentieth century was marred by two world wars. After the Great War (fought incidentally between Christian nations) there was a period in which people hoped it was the 'war to end all wars' and the League of Nations was established to prevent any further wars. But the outbreak of World War II in 1939 showed it was powerless to do so. Yet the second attempt to prevent war - the founding of the United Nations in 1945 - has been much more successful, for there has been no major war since it came into being.

Moreover, there has been a massive change of attitude towards war itself. Whereas during the 18th century and the early part of the 19th century the role of the soldier was glorified, as I said, there began to develop in the public mind a strong dislike of war. It even included a wave of pacifism in the 1920's and '30's. War came to be regarded as something to be avoided if at all possible, and especially if it involves nuclear weapons. Indeed, the advent of nuclear weapons has to date proved to be something of an antidote against war.

During the last century we became less individualistic and more community minded. I have witnessed all this change in my one hundred years and rejoice in it. Of course there is still much more to be done to develop a more caring and just society, but let us not overlook what has been achieved in the twentieth century. If Jesus of old were in our midst he would say, "Look around you and see all these things for what they are - living evidence of the coming of the Kingdom of God". Those who pray "Thy Kingdom come" have some cause for rejoicing. As we entered the twenty-first century, we were a little nearer than we were in 1900, to the realisation of the kingdom of God on earth.

(An address delivered by Lloyd Geering at St Andrew's-on-the-Terrace, on Sunday March 4, 2018.)