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Thy Kingdom Come
by Henry George

A sermon delivered in the City Hall, Glasgow, Scotland, Sunday
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Just as society grows, so do the common needs grow, and so grows this value attaching to land — the provided fund from which they can be supplied. Here is a value that may be taken, without impairing the right of property, without taking anything from the producer, without lessening the natural rewards of industry and thrift.

We have just joined in the most solemn, the most sacred, the most catholic of all prayers: “Our Father which art in Heaven!” To all of us who have learned it in our infancy, it oft calls up the sweetest and most tender emotions. Sometimes with feeling, sometimes as a matter of course, how often have we repeated it? For centuries, daily, hourly, has that prayer gone up.

“Thy kingdom come!” Has it come? Let this Christian city of Glasgow answer — Glasgow, that was to “Flourish by the preaching of the word”.

“Thy kingdom come!” Day after day, Sunday after Sunday, week after week, century after century, has that prayer gone up; and today, in this so-called Christian city of Glasgow, 125,000 human beings — so your medical officer says — 125,000 children of God are living whole families in a single room.

“Thy kingdom come!” We have been praying for it and praying for it, yet it has not come. So long has it tarried that many think it will never come. Here is the vital point in which what we are accustomed to call the Christianity of the present day differs so much from that Christianity which overran the ancient world — that Christianity which, beneath a rotten old civilization, planted the seeds of a newer and a higher.

We have become accustomed to think that God’s kingdom, is not intended for this world; that, virtually, this is the devil’s world, and that God’s kingdom is in some other sphere, to which He is to take good people when they die — as good Americans are said when they die to go to Paris. If that be so, what is the use of praying for the coming of the kingdom? Is God the loving Father of whom Christ told — is He a God of that kind; a God who looks on this world, sees its sufferings and its miseries, sees high faculties aborted, lives stunted, innocence turned to vice and crime, and heartstrings strained and broken, yet, having it in His power, will not bring that kingdom of peace, and love, and plenty and happiness? Is God indeed a self-willed despot, whom we must coax to do the good He might?

Think of it. The Almighty — and I say it with reverence — the Almighty could not bring that kingdom of Himself. For, what is the kingdom of God; the kingdom that Christ taught us to pray for? Is it not in the doing of

God's will, not by automata, not by animals who are compelled, but by intelligent beings clothed with free will, intelligent beings knowing good from evil?

Swedenborg never said a deeper nor a truer thing, nor a thing more compatible with the philosophy of Christianity, than when he said God had never put anyone into hell; that the devils went to hell because they would rather go to hell than go to heaven. The spirits of evil would be unhappy in a place where the spirit of good reigned; wedded to injustice, and loving injustice, they would be miserable where justice was the law. And, correlatively, God could not put intelligent beings having free will into conditions where they must do right without destroying that free will. Nay! Nay!

“Thy kingdom come!” When Christ taught that prayer He did not mean that humans should idly phrase these words, but that for the coming of that kingdom humanity must work as well as pray!

Prayer! Consider what prayer is. How true is the old fable! The wagoner whose wagon was stuck in the rut knelt down and prayed to Jove to get it out. He might have prayed till the crack of doom, and the wagon would have stood there. This world — God's world — is not a world in which the repeating of words will get wagons out of mire or poverty out of slums. We who would pray with effect must work!

Divine and human intelligence

“Our Father which art in Heaven.” Not a despot, ruling by His arbitrary fiats, but a Father, a loving Father, Our Father; a Father for us all — that was Christ's message. He is Our Father, and we are His children.

But there are people, who, looking around on the suffering and injustice with which, even in so-called Christian countries, human life is full, say there is no Father in Heaven, there can be no God, or He would not permit this. How superficial is that thought!

What would we as fathers do for our children? Is there any man who, having a knowledge of the world and the laws of human life, would so surround his boy with safeguards that he could do no evil and could suffer no pain? What would he make by that course of education? A pampered animal, not a self-reliant man!

We are, indeed, His children. Yet, let one of us fall into the water, and if we have not learned to swim we will drown. And if we are a good distance from land and near no boat or anything on which we may get, we will drown anyhow, whether we can swim or not.

God the Creator might have made us so that we could swim like the fishes, but how could He have made us so that we could swim like the fishes and yet have adapted this wonderful frame of ours to all the purposes for which the intelligence that is lodged within it requires it to be used? God can make a fish; He can make a bird; but does He, His laws being what they are, make an animal that might at once swim as well as a fish and fly as well as a bird?

That the intelligence which we must recognise behind nature is almighty does not mean that it can contradict itself and stultify its own laws. No; we are the children of God. But what God is, who shall say? But everyone is conscious of this, that behind what one sees there must have been a power to bring that forth; that behind what one knows there is an intelligence far greater than that which is lodged in the human mind, but which human intelligence does in some infinitely less degree resemble.

Yes; we are His children. We in some sort have that power of adapting things which we know must have been exerted to bring this universe into being. Consider those great ships for which this port of Glasgow is famous all over the world. Consider one of those great ocean steamers, such as the Umbria, or the Etruria, or the City of New York, or the City of Paris. There, in the ocean which such ships cleave, are the porpoises, there are the whales, there are the dolphins, there are all manner of fish. They are today just as they were when Caesar crossed to this island, just as they were before the first ancient Briton launched his leather-covered boat.

Humanity today can swim no better than humanity could swim then, but consider how, by our intelligence, we have advanced higher and higher, how our power of making things has developed, until now we cross the great ocean quicker than any fish. Consider one of these great steamers forcing her way across the Atlantic Ocean, 400 miles a day, against a living gale. Is she not in some sort a product of a God-like power — a machine of some sort like the very fishes that swim underneath.

Here is the distinguishing thing between humankind and the animals; here is the broad and impassable gulf. We among all the animals are the only maker; we among all the animals are the only ones that possess that God-like power of adapting means to ends. And is it possible that we who possess the power of so adapting means to ends that we can cross the Atlantic in six days do not possess the power of abolishing the conditions that crowd thousands of families into houses of one room?

When we consider the achievements of humanity and then look upon the misery that exists today in the very centres of wealth; upon the ignorance, the weakness, the injustice, that characterise our highest civilization, we may know of a surety that it is not the fault of God; it is the fault of humanity. May we not know that in that very power that God has given to His children here, in that power of rising higher, there is involved — and necessarily involved — the power of falling lower.

“Our Father!” “Our Father!” Whose? Not my Father — that is not the prayer. “Our Father” — not the father of any sect, or any class, but the Father of all humanity. The All-Father, the equal Father, the loving Father. He it is we ask to bring the kingdom. Aye, we ask it with our lips! We call Him “Our Father,” the All, the Universal Father, when we kneel down to pray to Him.

But that He is the All-Father — that He is all people’s Father — we deny by our institutions. The All-Father who made the world, the All-Father who created us in His image, and put us upon the earth to draw subsistence from its bosom; to find in the earth all the materials that satisfy our wants, waiting only to be worked up by our labor! If He is the All-Father, then are not all human beings, all children of the Creator, equally entitled to the use of His bounty? And, yet, our laws say that this God’s earth is not here for the use of all His children, but only for the use of a privileged few!

There was a little dialogue published in the United States, in the west, some time ago. Possibly you may have seen it. It is between a boy and his father when visiting a brickyard. The boy looks at the men making bricks, and he asks who those dirty men are, why they are making up the clay, and what they are doing it for. He learns, and then he asks about the owner of the brickyard. “He does not make any bricks; he gets his income from letting the other men make bricks.”

Then the boy wants to know how the man who owns the brickyard gets his title to the brickyard — whether he made it. “No, he did not make it,” the father replies: “God made it.” The boy asks, “Did God make it for him?” Whereat his father tells him that he must not ask questions such as that, but that anyhow it is all right, and it is all in accordance with God’s law. The boy, who of course was a Sunday school boy, and had been to church, goes

off mumbling to himself “that God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son to die for all men”; but that He so loved the owner of this brickyard that He gave him the brickyard too.

This has a blasphemous sound. But I do not refer to it lightly. I do not like to speak lightly of sacred subjects. Yet it is well sometimes that we should be fairly shocked into thinking.

Think of what Christianity teaches us; think of the life and death of Him who came to die for us! Think of His teachings, that we are all the equal children of an Almighty Father, who is no respecter of persons, and then think of this legalised injustice — this denial of the most important, most fundamental rights of the children of God, which so many of the very men who teach Christianity uphold; nay, which they blasphemously assert is the design and the intent of the Creator Himself.

Better to me, higher to me, is the atheist, who says there is no God, than the professed Christian who, prating of the goodness and the Fatherhood of God, tells us in words as some do, or tells us indirectly as others do, that millions and millions of human creatures — [at this point a child was heard crying] — don’t take the little thing out — that millions and millions of human beings, like that little baby, are being brought into the world daily by the creative fiat, and no place in this world provided for them.

Aye! Tells us that, by the laws of God, the poor are created in order that the rich may have the unctuous satisfaction of dealing out charity to them, and attributes to the laws of God the state of things which exists in this city of Glasgow, as in other great cities on both sides of the Atlantic, where little children are dying every day, dying by hundreds of thousands, because having come into this world — those children of God, with His fiat, by His decree — they find that there is not space on the earth sufficient for them to live; and are driven out of God’s world because they cannot get room enough, cannot get air enough, cannot get sustenance enough.

I believe in no such god. If I did, though I might bend before him in fear, I would hate him in my heart. Not room for the little children here! Look around any country in the civilised world; is there not room enough and to spare? Not food enough? Look at the unemployed labor, look at the idle acres, look through every country and see natural opportunities going to waste. Aye! That Christianity puts on the Creator the evil, the injustice, the degradation that are due to humanity’s injustice is worse, far worse, than atheism. That is the blasphemy, and if there be a sin against the Holy Ghost, that is the unpardonable sin!

Why, consider: “Give us this day our daily bread.” I stopped in a hotel last week — a hydropathic establishment. A hundred or more guests sat down to table together. Before they ate anything, a man stood up, and, thanking God, asked Him to make us all grateful for His bounty. And it is so at every mealtime — such an acknowledgement is made over well-filled boards. What do we mean by it?

If Adam, when he got out of Eden, had sat down and commenced to pray, he might have prayed till this time without getting anything to eat unless he went to work for it. Yet food is God’s bounty. He does not bring meat and vegetables all prepared. What He gives are the opportunities of producing these things — of bringing them forth by labor. His mandate is — it is written in the Holy Word, it is graven on every fact in nature — that by labor we shall bring forth these things. Nature gives to labor and to nothing else.

What God gives are the natural elements that are indispensable to labor. He gives them, not to one, not to some, not to one generation, but to all. They are His gifts, His bounty to the whole human race. And yet in all our civilised countries what do we see? That a few people have appropriated these bounties, claiming them as theirs

alone, while the great majority have no legal right to apply their labor to the reservoirs of Nature and draw from the Creator's bounty.

Thus it happens that all over the civilized world that class that is called peculiarly 'the laboring class' is the poor class, and that people who do no labor, who pride themselves on never having done honest labor, and on being descended from fathers and grandfathers who never did a stroke of honest labor in their lives, revel in a superabundance of the things that labor brings forth.

Mr Abner Thomas, of New York, a strict orthodox Presbyterian — and the son of Rev Dr Thomas, author of a commentary on the bible — wrote a little while ago an allegory. Dozing off in his chair, he dreamt that he was ferried over the River of Death, and, taking the straight and narrow way, came at last within sight of the Golden City. A fine-looking old gentleman angel opened the wicket, inquired his name, and let him in; warning him, at the same time, that it would be better if he chose his company in heaven, and did not associate with disreputable angels.

"What!" said the newcomer, in astonishment: "Is not this heaven?"

"Yes," said the warden: "But there are a lot of tramp angels here now."

"How can that be?" asked Mr Thomas. "I thought everybody had plenty in heaven."

"It used to be that way some time ago," said the warden: "And if you wanted to get your harp polished or your wings combed, you had to do it yourself. But matters have changed since we adopted the same kind of property regulations in heaven as you have in civilised countries on earth, and we find it a great improvement, at least for the better class."

Then the warden told the newcomer that he had better decide where he was going to board.

"I don't want to board anywhere," said Thomas: "I would much rather go over to that beautiful green knoll and lie down."

"I would not advise you to do so," said the warden: "The angel who owns that knoll does not like to encourage trespassing. Some centuries ago, as I told you, we introduced the system of private property into the soil of heaven. So we divided the land up. It is all private property now."

"I hope I was considered in that division?" said Thomas.

"No," said the warden: "You were not; but if you go to work, and are saving, you can easily earn enough in a couple of centuries to buy yourself a nice piece. You get a pair of wings free as you come in, and you will have no difficulty in hypothecating them for a few days board until you find work. But I should advise you to be quick about it, as our population is constantly increasing, and there is a great surplus of labor. Tramp angels are, in fact, becoming quite a nuisance."

"What shall I go to work at?" asked Thomas.

"Our principal industries are the making of harps and crowns and the growing of flowers," responded the warden: "But there are many opportunities for employment in personal service."

“I love flowers,” said Thomas. “I will go to work growing them, There is a beautiful piece of land over there that nobody seems to be using. I will go to work on that.”

“You can’t do that,” said the warden. “That property belongs to one of our most far-sighted angels who has got very rich by the advance of land values, and who is holding that piece for a rise. You will have to buy it or rent it before you can work on it, and you can’t do that yet.”

The story goes on to describe how the roads of heaven, the streets of the New Jerusalem, were filled with disconsolate tramp angels, who had pawned their wings, and were outcasts in Heaven itself.

You laugh, and it is ridiculous. But there is a moral in it that is worth serious thought. Is it not ridiculous to imagine the application to God’s heaven of the same rules of division that we apply to God’s earth, even while we pray that His will may be done on earth as it is done in Heaven?

Really, if we could imagine it, it is impossible to think of heaven treated as we treat this earth, without seeing that, no matter how salubrious were its air, no matter how bright the light that filled it, no matter how magnificent its vegetable growth, there would be poverty, and suffering, and a division of classes in heaven itself, if heaven were parcelled out as we have parceled out the earth. And, conversely, if people were to act towards each other as we must suppose the inhabitants of heaven to do, would not this earth be a very heaven?

“Thy kingdom come.” No one can think of the kingdom for which the prayer asks without feeling that it must be a kingdom of justice and equality — not necessarily of equality in condition, but of equality in opportunity. And no one can think of it without seeing that a very kingdom of God might be brought on this earth if people would but seek to do justice — if people would but acknowledge the essential principle of Christianity, that of doing to others as we would have others do to us, and of recognising that we are all here equally the children of the one Father, equally entitled to share His bounty, equally entitled to live our lives and develop our faculties, and to apply our labor to the raw material that He has provided.

Aye! When a person sees that, then there arises that hope of the coming of the kingdom that carried the gospel through the streets of Rome, that carried it into pagan lands, that made it, against the most ferocious persecution, the dominant religion of the world.

Early Christianity did not mean, in its prayer for the coming of Christ’s kingdom, a kingdom in heaven, but a kingdom on earth. If Christ had simply preached of the other world, the high priests and the Pharisees would not have persecuted Him, the Roman soldiery would not have nailed His hands to the cross. Why was Christianity persecuted? Why were its first professors thrown to wild beasts, burned to light a tyrant’s gardens, hounded, tortured, put to death by all the cruel devices that a devilish ingenuity could suggest? Not that it was a new religion, referring only to the future. Rome was tolerant of all religions. It was the boast of Rome that all gods were sheltered in her Pantheon; it was the boast of Rome that she made no interference with the religions of peoples she conquered.

What was persecuted was a great movement for social reform — the gospel of justice — heard by common fishermen with gladness, carried by laborers and slaves into the imperial city of Rome. The Christian revelation was the doctrine of human equality, of the fatherhood of God, of the brotherhood and sisterhood of humanity. It struck at the very basis of that monstrous tyranny that then oppressed the civilised world; it struck at the fetters of the captive, and at the bonds of the slave, at that monstrous injustice which allowed a class to revel on the proceeds of labor, while those who did the labor fared scantily.

That is the reason why early Christianity was persecuted. And when they could no longer hold it down, then the privileged classes adopted and perverted the new faith, and it became, in its very triumph, not the pure Christianity of the early days, but a Christianity that, to a very great extent, was the servitor of the privileged classes.

And, instead of preaching the essential Fatherhood of God, the essential brotherhood and sisterhood of humankind, its high priests grafted onto the pure truths of the gospel the blasphemous doctrine that the All-Father is a respecter of persons, and that by His will and on His mandate is founded that monstrous injustice which condemns the great mass of humanity to unrequited hard toil. There has been no failure of Christianity. The failure has been in the sort of Christianity that has been preached.

Nothing is clearer than that if we are all children of the universal Father, we are all entitled to the use of His bounty. No one dare deny that proposition. But the people who set their faces against its carrying out say, virtually: “Oh, yes! that is true; but it is impracticable to carry it into effect!” Just think of what this means. This is God’s world, and yet such people say that it is a world in which God’s justice, God’s will, cannot be carried into effect. What a monstrous absurdity, what a monstrous blasphemy!

If the loving God does reign, if His laws are the laws not merely of the physical, but of the moral universe, there must be a way of carrying His will into effect, there must be a way of doing equal justice to all of His creatures.

There is. The people who deny that there is any practical way of carrying into effect the perception that all human beings are equally children of the Creator shut their eyes to the plain and obvious way. It is, of course, impossible in a civilization like this of ours to divide land up into equal pieces. Such a system might have done in a primitive state of society. We have progressed in civilization beyond such rude devices, but we have not, nor can we, progress beyond God’s providence.

There is a way of securing the equal rights of all, not by dividing land up into equal pieces, but by taking for the use of all that value which attaches to land, not as the result of individual labor upon it, but as the result of the increase in population, and the improvement of society. In that way everyone would be equally interested in the land of one’s native country. Here is the simple way. It is a way that impresses the person who really sees its beauty with a more vivid idea of the beneficence of the providence of the All-Father than, it seems to me, does anything else.

One cannot look, it seems to me, through nature — whether one looks at the stars through a telescope, or have the microscope reveal to one those worlds that we find in drops of water. Whether one considers the human frame, the adjustments of the animal kingdom, or any department of physical nature, one must see that there has been a contriver and adjuster, that there has been an intent. So strong is that feeling, so natural is it to our minds, that even people who deny the Creative Intelligence are forced, in spite of themselves, to talk of intent; the claws on one animal were intended, we say, to climb with, the fins of another to propel it through the water.

Yet, while in looking through the laws of physical nature, we find intelligence we do not so clearly find beneficence. But in the great social fact that as population increases, and improvements are made, and men progress in civilization, the one thing that rises everywhere in value is land, and in this we may see a proof of the beneficence of the Creator.

Why, consider what it means! It means that the social laws are adapted to progressive humanity! In a rude state of society where there is no need for common expenditure, there is no value attaching to land. The only value

which attaches there is to things produced by labor. But as civilization goes on, as a division of labor takes place, as people come into centers, so do the common wants increase, and so does the necessity for public revenue arise. And so in that value which attaches to land, not by reason of anything the individual does, but by reason of the growth of the community, is a provision intended — we may safely say intended — to meet that social want.

Just as society grows, so do the common needs grow, and so grows this value attaching to land — the provided fund from which they can be supplied. Here is a value that may be taken, without impairing the right of property, without taking anything from the producer, without lessening the natural rewards of industry and thrift. Nay, here is a value that must be taken if we would prevent the most monstrous of all monopolies. What does all this mean? It means that in the creative plan, the natural advance in civilization is an advance to a greater and greater equality instead of to a more and more monstrous inequality.

“Thy kingdom come!” It may be that we shall never see it. But to those people who realise that it may come, to those who realize that it is given to them to work for the coming of God’s kingdom on earth, there is for them, though they never see that kingdom here, an exceedingly great reward — the reward of feeling that they, little and insignificant though they may be, are doing something to help the coming of that kingdom, doing something on the side of that Good Power that shows all through the universe, doing something to tear this world from the devil’s grasp and make it the kingdom of righteousness.

Aye, and though it should never come, yet those who struggle for it know in the depths of their hearts that it must exist somewhere — they know that, somewhere, sometime, those who strive their best for the coming of the kingdom will be welcomed into the kingdom, and that to them, even to them, sometime, somewhere, the King shall say: “Well done, thou good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.”