

Harvest Thanksgiving B 04 February 2024
Matthew 6:25-33
St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth
Greg Bensted

Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the one true God, now and forever. Amen.

However, seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you [my translation]. Let's pray: ...

There's an implied warning in the saying, "Be careful what you wish for, you may just get it"? It resonates with St Paul's teaching, "All things are lawful for me, but not all things are beneficial" (1 Corinthians 6:12). In today's Gospel, Jesus invites us to see that there's a God pleasing order for our relationship with him with its subsequent promise and benefit of quelling our feelings of fear and uncertainty.

An illustration: Pichai Sundararajan, is the CEO of Alphabet, the parent company of Google. His rise to the top of this behemoth, trillion-dollar company was meteoric and in 2022, his executive remuneration was US\$226m. Now, there's no problem with being fairly compensated for one's labour: "the labourer deserves to be paid" (Luke 10:7; 1 Timothy 5:18), but there is a grave, moral issue with how such compensation was derived. (You'll notice that I didn't say, "earned" or "deserved").

In December of 2020, Google fired one of its top AI ethicists for failing to retract a paper she wrote on the dangers of large language models and for speaking against the company's treatment of minority employees. Her colleagues were extremely angry about how the firing was handled, and felt that management created a hostile work environment.

Like many large tech companies, Alphabet hired rapidly from 2020 to 2022. Over-hiring led to cost-cutting and the company said it would tighten up on its perks and travel budgets. The cuts culminated in layoffs in January 2023, when Google laid off 12,000 employees, or 6% of its global workforce.

Two months later, more than 1400 Google employees wrote an open letter to the CEO about the handling of the layoffs. It read, “Don’t be evil.” Pichai copped flack over his big payday in the face of the layoffs, and he was accused of “destroying morale and culture” at Google.

Another insight into the extent of his egotism was exposed when he said that AI technology is “one of the most important things that humanity is working on” and “more profound” than “electricity or fire.”* That’s cold comfort (pun intended) for those of us who don’t share his hubris.

The moment I read about this, the verse immediately before today’s Gospel sprang to mind, “‘No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth [mammon]’” (Matthew 6:24). Another is like it, “The wage of the righteous leads to life, the gain of the wicked to sin” (Proverbs 10:16). These verses state simple truths and I understand that things aren’t presently going swimmingly for Google.

I’m not picking on the CEO of Alphabet particularly; I’ve never met him. I’m merely using this as an illustration of the inclination of all human hearts, how things work out, and the harm that comes to others, when we put our priorities above those established and commanded by Jesus, for humanity’s true prosperity - salvation.

His [Jesus] is a much better; indeed, *the* better way because Jesus died so that we may live. Let’s break it down.

Jesus’ invitation is to “seek first”. “First” is self-explanatory. It simply means “before anything else”. Do what, before anything else? Seek! Jesus uses this word in its most extreme sense. It means more than having a Mummy look (Brothers, you know what I’m talking about). “Desire” is good. “Strive” is better. But what Jesus is talking about here is to “absolutely crave”. Crave what? The kingdom of God. Jesus doesn’t muck around when it comes to the object of his love and compassion – YOU! Nothing less than the kingdom of God is good enough for those Jesus calls family.

Now, it all sounds rather ethereal, intangible, untouchable even, because the kingdom of God is his sovereignty, royal power, kingship, authority, and rule. But it's actually more real and much closer than you realise. God's kingdom is in heaven, sure, but the absolute joy of heaven is the rule of Christ in a believer's heart. Brothers and Sisters, Jesus has brought the kingdom into your hearts, conferring his royal power and dignity on you, to transform you and give you new life.

The kingdom of God is that perfect order of things, established by Jesus, in which all who believe in him are gathered together into one society, the Church, intimately united with God, and made; hear that again; made, partakers of eternal salvation. As I said, this isn't some ethereal, pipe dream. Christ has firmly established his presence with us and we already enjoy his benefits: love, peace, mercy, patience, love, forgiveness, compassion, confidence, love, courage, wonder, joy, love, grace, reassurance, generosity, kindness, love, ... oh, and did I mention, love?

Yeah, yeah, yeah, Pastor, but when do we get the rest of the good oil you're always banging on about – the no more pain, tears, or death bit? Great question; I'm glad you asked.

Two ways. Either, you must die (sub-optimal as my son would put it), or, live long enough to see Jesus' majestic return from the skies, commanding the clouds to convey his passage, where the dead will be called to life again, the ills and wrongs that burden you now will be no more, and the powers hostile to God will be vanquished. This is the exalted and perfect order of things which already exists in heaven, into which you'll one day enter. Either way, you'll have a front row seat as, by Jesus' gracious invitation, you, the congregation, constitute the royal 'city of God'. God's kingdom is both now and yet to come. We enjoy the benefits of his love now, and look forward to the indescribable but assuredly even more wonderful things yet to come.

So, what do we have so far? Absolutely crave – before anything else – God's transformative love. And yet, Saints, even that's not enough for you. Jesus wants to add the gift of his righteousness.

His righteousness is God's divine approval. God has examined you according to what he deems to be right, and you have been approved. You are acceptable in his eyes. King Jesus, renders you, his subjects, acceptable to God, by virtue of his own perfect love, humility, and sinlessness. In sacrificing himself and dying on the cross, Jesus has imputed or credited his grace and goodwill to us, so that we can hope for salvation as though we had never sinned.

The only way to obtain this hope, is through faith; the gift bestowed on us by God at our baptism. By faith alone, we receive that priceless gift, God's grace, revealed and pledged in Christ. We possess grace through faith; we embrace the grace of God offered to us in the death of Jesus Christ. We bear the royal seal of approval; Christ's cross, also conferred at our baptism. We are justified in his sight.

It really is too grand to comprehend. Jesus enjoins us to absolutely crave before anything else, God's perfect love and grace. Why? That we may live; truly live with the dignity of royalty bestowed on us by our king, Jesus. And in doing so, all these things: what we will eat, drink, clothe ourselves with; indeed, everything we need each day** will not only be given to us, but will be added to in ever-increasing abundance.

Saints, this Harvest Thanksgiving, we're reminded to crave for the gift of eternal life, a carefree heart, a joyful life, freedom, and be thankful for God's goodness to us in Christ Jesus. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.

* <https://www.businessinsider.com/sundar-pichai-google-alphabet-ceo-career-life> - accessed 23/01/2024.

**"Give us today our daily bread". What is this? Answer: In fact, God gives daily bread without our prayer, even to all evil people, but we ask in this prayer that God cause us to recognise what our daily bread is and to receive it with thanksgiving. What then does "daily bread" mean? Answer: Everything included in the necessities and nourishment for our bodies, such as food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, farm, fields, livestock, money, property, an upright spouse, upright children, upright members of the household, upright and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, decency, honour, good friends, faithful neighbours, and the like. (BCKW:357.12-14, Luther's Small Catechism, The Lord's Prayer, The Fourth Petition).