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Ryan Jeffrey Pederson

The Missing Kingdom: Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* and the Sermon on the Mount in St. Matthew's Gospel

That Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* is full of religious imagery and themes is no secret. It is, after all, the story of a priest who struggles to fulfill his priestly duties in the face of persecution and relentless pursuit by a vehemently anti-religious lieutenant in the Mexican army. Much of the critical engagement with this novel's religious themes focuses on Greene's uneasy relationship with, and apparent critique of, Roman Catholic doctrine, especially dealing with mercy and damnation. Wilhelm Hortmann says that Greene devises borderline cases to show that the official view of damnation and divine mercy is inadequate (65). The priest at the center of *The Power and the Glory* is such a borderline case: a man who exists in a state of mortal sin in the eyes of the Church, but who still seems to be a saint. With these borderline cases, Greene expresses humane sentiments that are at odds with church teaching: "The suggestion...is that the Church is limited in its understanding of and provision for human failure, that we cannot expect true justice from it and that an all-understanding God will decide

differently" (67). Greene is pious and well intentioned, but, according to Hortmann, sets himself up as a heretic and outside of the Church by putting the individual above the established authority of the Church (68).

Robert Wichert, agreeing with Hortmann, says that Green concerns himself with sinners, especially those who may also be saints (99). He sees in Green a kinship with the French poet and religious thinker Charles Péguy, both of whom busy themselves with "challenging God in the cause of the damned" (101). Wichert, however, does not accuse Greene of heresy. Greene pities those who find themselves in a state of sin and yet love God, though his trust in such pity is incomplete. Greene knows that he may be wrong in his estimation of his sinners, but so might the Church be wrong. It is better to let God have the last word (103).

Both Hortmann and Wichert focus on Greene's approach to the Church's doctrine of damnation and God's mercy, though they come to different conclusions regarding Greene's standing within the Church. While it may be interesting to explore these specifically Catholic doctrinal issues, and they certainly seem to be present, there is far more going on in the novel in a religious sense than these doctrinal conflicts. The title of Greene's novel, *The Power and the Glory*, gives the reader a clue where to look. This phrase, "the power and the glory," comes from the Lord's Prayer as it is used in liturgical and devotional settings. This version of the prayer is originally found in St. Matthew's Gospel. It is in the middle, and at the heart, of the Sermon on the Mount (Luz 49). It is in the light of the Sermon on the Mount that the reader may find another way of seeing Greene's masterpiece.

The Sermon on the Mount is the first teaching discourse in St. Matthew's Gospel, where Jesus begins his teaching career (Harrington 76). This teaching discourse has to do with the gospel, or good news, of the "kingdom" (Luz 42). The idea of the kingdom, or the reign, of God

is central to the teaching of Jesus throughout St. Matthew's Gospel and is presented in contrast to the reign of the Roman Empire, which occupied Palestine in the first century C.E. While the Roman Empire promised peace, order, and prosperity, it functioned as a domination system extracting resources from the land and labor from the peasant and artisan classes to fund its military presence and the enrichment of the elite (Carter 39). The kingdom about which Jesus teaches is a life giving alternative to the kingdom that his audience, primarily Galilean peasants, knows too well: "The sermon sketches an alternative world marked not by oppression but by restructured societal relationships, and by redistributed and accessible resources" (128).

The Sermon on the Mount is made up of several subsections and contains a number of well-known sayings. One set of well-known sayings that is found at the beginning of the Sermon is known as the Beatitudes:

> Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
>
> Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
>
> Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
>
> Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
>
> Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
>
> Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
>
> Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
>
> Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
>
> Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in

> heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you (NOAB, Matthew 5.3-12).

This is a picture of the kingdom and those who find a place in it. The poor in spirit, or those who are hopelessly poor, are the very ones to whom the kingdom belongs. Those who mourn will find comfort. The meek, or those without an inheritance, will inherit not some small pittance, but the earth. Those who seek justice will find it. Those who show mercy will find it returned to them. Those who possess integrity will see God. Those who work for peace will not be called week or cowards, but children of God. Those who are opposed for working toward God's kingdom will find it.

The Lord's Prayer is another of the well-known sections of the Sermon:

> Our Father in Heaven,
>
> hallowed by your name.
>
> Your kingdom come.
>
> Your will be done
>
> on earth as it is in heaven.
>
> Give us this day our daily bread.
>
> And forgive us our debts,
>
> as we also have forgiven our debtors.
>
> And do not bring us to the time of trial,
>
> but rescue us from the evil one (Matthew 6.9b-13).

This is a different translation from what is most commonly used in liturgical and devotional settings, but it is a better translation. This version lacks the doxological ending from whence Greene takes his title, because more recent translations rely on earlier manuscripts that do not

include “For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever, amen” (Harrington 95). Though this doxology is an addition to later, less reliable manuscripts it is important to consider since it continues to be used in liturgical and devotional settings and is part of the best known version of the Lord's Prayer. When Jesus teaches his disciples how to pray this is the example he gives them. It begins by acknowledging God's place in the order of things and asks that God be known as holy throughout the world. The next petition asks that God's kingdom come in fullness (95). Then the prayer asks that God's will be done, that there may be perfect harmony between the way things are on earth and in heaven (95). It asks that we have enough resources for the day and that our debts may be forgiven to the degree that we forgive the debts of others, that we may practice mutual forgiveness. The prayer ends by asking God to save us from the persecution that is inevitable to those who seek God's kingdom. Finally, the traditional doxology acknowledges that the kingdom, power, and glory belong to God for all time. This is a prayer for all of humanity (Luz 49). It seeks a different ordering of relationships between God and creation and among people. A world defined by God's reign of peace, where everyone has enough, all are prepared to forgive the debts that enslave, and there is no persecution for working toward this end. As Warren Carter says, “To pray this prayer is to seek nothing less than the total transformation of life on earth” (169).

The Sermon contains teaching on how to live with one's enemies: “You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5.43-45a). This is one of the more difficult teachings from the Sermon. It implies that ethnicity, gender, social status, appearance, and wealth are no basis for withholding love and that one's enemies are to be treated as neighbors (Carter 154-155). Treating one's

enemies as one's neighbors includes seeking the good for one's enemies and praying for them (155). Of course, one can challenge the injustice and oppression enacted by an enemy while still loving them. This is not a mandate to accommodate mistreatment with "niceness" (155).

Public displays of piety are another area that the Sermon addresses:

> Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.
>
> So whenever you give alms, do not sound the trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, They have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you (Matthew 6.1-6).

The point here seems obvious: to practice one's faith sincerely without making a show of it. It is the practice that matters, not others' perception and appreciation of it. Indeed, this is not a critique of acts of piety, but the public display of private piety (Harrington 97).

The Sermon addresses anxiety and one's attitude toward life:

> Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor

> gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?".... But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well (Matthew 6.25-31,33).

If one "strives" for the kingdom of God and God's righteousness or justice, there is no need to worry. God will provide for the needs of the faithful, just as God provides for the needs of the birds and the lilies. Besides, worrying about these things will not help, anyway.

Another of the well known sayings from the Sermon on the Mount has come to be known as the Golden Rule: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets" (Matthew 7.12). Jesus says to treat others how you would like to be treated. If you follow this you will be following all that the Torah and prophets teach. The Golden Rule generalizes and universalizes all the commandments given in the Sermon on the Mount while also serving as a conclusion (Luz 44).

The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' first foray into teaching in St. Matthew's Gospel. There he paints a picture of what life in the kingdom of God looks like. God's kingdom is one where the poor have a place, those whose hearts are broken have them mended, those without an inheritance are heirs to the earth, where mercy is returned with mercy, forgiveness is matched with forgiveness. It is a kingdom where there is no worry about "daily bread." All are clothed

and sheltered. People act with integrity and treat others how they would like to be treated. It is with this picture of the kingdom in mind that we turn to Greene's novel.

The title, *The Power and the Glory*, feels incomplete. It is a nice length: not too long, not too short. It is made up of two parts, each with a very evocative word joined by a conjunction. But the title is a clear reference to the Lord's Prayer, and as such is missing a very important component: the kingdom. The kingdom is not just missing from the title of Greene's novel, but it is missing from the world he describes, the world his characters inhabit.

Greene often has his characters and the narrator describe the world as a terrible place. In the beginning, in conversation with Tench, the dentist, the whiskey priest says of the world: "It is awful" (15). He hears voices from all over the world telling him that he is "no good" (17). Tench agrees, "It is always an awful place. Lonely" (17). Father José thinks:

The glittering worlds lay there in space like a promise – the world was not the universe. Somewhere Christ might not have died. He could not believe that to a watcher there this world could shine with such brilliance: it would roll heavily in space under its fog like a burning and abandoned ship. The whole globe was blanketed with his own sin (29).

There is hope for other worlds, but it is hard to imagine that this world could ever be any better. The narrator describes Captain Fellows and his wife as "companions cut off from all the world: there was no meaning anywhere outside their own hearts: they were carried like children in a coach through the huge spaces without any knowledge of their destination" (39). For Fellows and his wife the world is the home of their isolation, meaninglessness, and disorientation. In describing the mestizo's sins as less than impressive, the narrator says that the world is full of "treachery, violence, and lust" (97). Sitting in the cell the priest realizes that the prison is like the world, "overcrowded with lust and crime and unhappy love, it stank to heaven"

(125). The whiskey priest says, agreeing with the lieutenant, "that the world's unhappy whether you are rich or poor" (194). The world of the novel is a terrible place, in a general sense. People are miserable, hopeless, alone, and liable to fall victim to violence.

The world is also a terrible place in a more particular sense, specifically because of poverty. The villages and countrysides of southern Mexico described in the novel suffer under the weight of grinding poverty. Many of the people live in a state of malnutrition, without adequate clothing or shelter. They cannot afford the necessities of life, nor can they afford to pay their taxes and so are beaten (69). The whiskey priest grew up amidst such poverty. He feared it as a child and hated it "like a crime; he had believed that when he was a priest he would be rich and proud" (67). Indeed, he was rich: when he returns to the village that is the home of Maria and Brigitta the people are surprised because he is dressed so poorly and looks like a "common man" (61). The lieutenant also hated poverty as a child, but he took a different route from the priest. His goal is to eradicate religion because it only wants the people's money: "What has God ever done for you? Have you got enough to eat? Have your children got enough to eat? Instead of food they talk to you about heaven" (74). Along similar lines, Mr. Lehr, the German Lutheran, criticizes the "luxury" of the Church "while the people starve" (162). The world of the novel is the home of great poverty, even while there is luxury present.

The world of Greene's novel is a terrible world, where people are alienated, miserable, and endure all kinds of suffering. It is a world where poverty breaks the spirits of many of its inhabitants, while the few who are wealthy remain unhappy. It is in stark contrast to the image of the kingdom from St. Matthew's Gospel. In the world of the novel, the poor do not posses any kind of dignified place. Those who mourn continue to mourn. Those without an inheritance are heirs to only more suffering. Those who strive for righteousness or justice are frustrated. There

are few people who are pure in heart, or who live with integrity. Are there any peacemakers? God's place in the order of things is not widely acknowledged to any consequence. There is no harmony between the world of the novel and heaven. Many go without their daily bread. There is very little love between enemies, though perhaps some respect. Much of the pious expression is of a self-satisfied or public variety. There is a great deal of anxiety in the novel having to do with sustenance, and for good reason: so many are malnourished and poorly clothed or sheltered. And yet, as the narrator says, expressing the whiskey priest's thoughts, "It was for this world that Christ had died; the more evil you saw and heard about you, the greater glory lay around the death. It was too easy to die for what was good or beautiful, for home or children or a civilization – it needed a God to die for the half-hearted and the corrupt" (97).

One consequence of reading The Power and the Glory with the image of the kingdom in mind is that the whiskey priest and the lieutenant no longer seem to be diametrically opposed. Instead they become doubles, different sides of the same coin, working towards similar ends but by different means. Both the whiskey priest and the lieutenant hated the poverty they saw in their youth, but attempted to address it in very different ways: the priest by comforting the poor and the lieutenant by trying to improve their material situation. The priest, in his sermon to the villagers, says that "joy always depends on pain. Pain is part of joy. We are hungry and then think of how we enjoy food at last....That is why I tell you that heaven is here: this is a part of heaven just as pain is a part of pleasure. Pray that you will suffer more and more and more. Never get tired of suffering" (69). The comfort that the priest tries to provide has to do with reminding people that eventually their suffering will stop. So, the more intense the suffering the more the one who suffers will appreciate the end to the suffering. But when will the suffering end? Apparently the priest does not expect it to end during his listeners' lifetime. The lieutenant,

speaking to the same villagers says: “What has God ever done for you? Have you got enough to eat? Have your children got enough to eat? Instead of food they talk to you about heaven. Oh, everything will be fine after you are dead, they say. I tell you – everything will be fine when they are dead, and you must help” (74). The lieutenant is sure that the people's situation will improve once the Church is out of the way. But how?

Late at night, after the lieutenant has finally caught the whiskey priest, they have a conversation. The lieutenant tells the priest that he regrets having had to kill the hostages he took in an effort to find him. He wanted to give them the “whole world” (198). The priest responds that perhaps he did, by killing them. The lieutenant reacts in anger. Each offers up a critique of the other's view, both making points that are difficult to refute. In the end, the issue remains unresolved. The scene ends with the priest telling the lieutenant that “I don't know a thing about the mercy of God: I don't know how awful the human heart looks to Him. But I do know this – that if there's ever been a single man in this state damned, then I'll be damned too. I wouldn't want it to be any different. I just want justice, that's all” (200). In the end the priest claims ignorance about God's mercy, but acknowledges that he, too, expects to face damnation because of his faults. The lieutenant has nothing else to say. The confrontation ends in a kind of stalemate. These two men who seem to be so opposed to each other, in the end are not so different. The priest is killed, dying outside of the mercy of the Church, disappointed that he could not be absolved. And now that the lieutenant has caught his priest he feels “without a purpose, as if life had drained out of the world” (207). The priest dies, believing in his own damnation, while the lieutenant lives on without purpose. The end both were pursuing evades them: the priest with his comfort in the afterlife and the lieutenant with restructured world. In the end, if the priest is to be seen as a flawed saint, then the lieutenant must be seen as one, too.

While Greene's conflict with the Church's teaching on mercy and damnation is visible in *The Power and the Glory*, it is the conflict around the missing kingdom that gives this novel its richness. The whiskey priest and the lieutenant, though by different means, work toward similar ends, only to be disappointed. In the end the kingdom of God is missing in a troubling way.

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