

#786 Kumbaya Revisited

Colleagues,

This week's treat is intended especially for any of you who learned as I did, somewhere along the line, to despise the song "Kumbaya." It was hot stuff in the popular culture of the '60s, thanks to the likes of Pete Seeger and Joan Baez. In the '70s it became a fixture in the folk masses that signaled a general itch for relief from the tedium of public worship in mainline denominations. Soon after that, some cynical wag skewered it with one of those lines that spreads like wildfire, all of us suddenly knowing it without recalling how or where we came to know it. In this case the line was a smackdown of the naïve, unserious Christian who seems to imagine that effecting peace in the world involves little more than wishing for it really, really hard. Of them it was said (assuming they existed), "they all held hands around the campfire and sang Kumbaya," the silly song for silly people, or thus the implication; and that's how I, for one, have regarded it ever since.

That changed last month, when the song showed up in the liturgical prayer of some very serious people in Cape Town, South Africa, and I got to hear it. The occasion was the opening service for the Second Ordinary Meeting of the 13th Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in South Africa (Cape Church). Americans would call this a church assembly, or a convention, perhaps. The liturgist at the service was the Rev. Felix Meylahn, Vice Chairman of the Cape Church Council, i.e. second in rank to the bishop. Many of you will remember Pr. Meylahn. Either you heard him in person when he delivered a stunning presentation at the 2012 Crossings Conference, or else you read that presentation when we passed it along in successive Thursday Theology posts (numbers [723](#) and [724](#)) a month or so later. You'll

hear echoes in the Prayer of the Church that he pulled together for the aforementioned service, drawn, he told me, from a variety of sources and tailored for the occasion.

South Africa is famous for extracting treasure from dirt. It seems to me that Pr. Meylahn did that in this prayer. And whether you agree with that assessment or not, I'm quite certain you won't repeat the mistake of dismissing the song as nothing more than a bit of vacuous fluff.

This being technically a Fourth of July post, however late it may be in getting to you, let me add the wish that those of us who serve Christ in the U.S. might be as earnest and thoughtful about praying for the well-being of the country we belong to as our South African counterparts seem to be.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

Prayer of the Church at the opening liturgy of a meeting of the Cape Church Synod, June 7, 2013—

The bidding prayer today is based on the well-known song "Kum ba yah," which means, "Come by here," or better, "Be present Lord, in our trouble." We can sing the song between the prayer sections as a responsory to the prayers. We start with, "Someone's crying, Lord, Kum ba yah," and then I'll announce the next phrase as we come to it.

"Someone's crying, Lord, Kum ba yah"

Someone is crying Lord, somewhere. Some is millions, somewhere is many places. There are tears of suffering. There are tears of weakness and disappointment, there are tears of strength and resistance, there are tears of the rich and the tears of the

poor. Someone is crying Lord, redeem the times.

“Someone’s dying, Lord, Kum ba yah”

Some are dying of hunger and thirst, someone’s dying because somebody else is enjoying too many unnecessary and superfluous things. Someone is dying because people go on exploiting one another. Some are dying because there are structures and systems which crush the poor and alienate people from one another. Some are dying because there are some in power that appoint incompetent people to positions of authority and responsibility. Someone’s dying, Lord, because we are still not prepared to stand up for the truth, to be witnesses for justice and proper government. Someone’s dying, Lord, be with us in our trouble.

“Someone’s shouting Lord, Kum ba yah”

Someone’s shouting out loudly and clearly. Someone has found the courage to stand up against the injustice of our times. Someone is shouting out, offering their very existence in love and anger to fight the death that surrounds us, to wrestle with the evils with which we crucify each other. Someone’s shouting, Lord, to call us all to responsibility before You, reminding us that we are accountable to you for our lives and deeds. Someone’s shouting Lord, sustain these shouting voices and redeem our times.

“Someone’s praying Lord, Kum ba yah”

Someone’s praying Lord. We are praying in tears and anger, in frustration and weakness, in strength and endurance. We are shouting and wrestling, as Jacob wrestled with the angel and was touched, and was marked and became a blessing. So we are praying, Lord, that you would forgive us our sins, our sins of commission and our sins of omission, the things we did, and the things we failed to do. Before you we are sinners and all we can do is ask for your mercy. Someone’s praying Lord, be present in our troubles with your forgiveness and mercy.

"Someone's praising, Lord, Kum ba yah"

Someone's praising, Lord, praising you for your goodness, thanking you for your kindness and mercy in Jesus Christ. In Him you have let us know where you want us to be. Help us to be there during this coming week and be with us, touch us, mark us, bless us and let us be a blessing, let your power be present in our weakness. Someone's praising, Lord, redeem our times and set us free. Amen