

Readings for Rogation Sunday

9th May 2021

First Reading: Deuteronomy 8:7-18

The LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. You shall eat your fill and bless the LORD your God for the good land that he has given you.

Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today. When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good. Do not say to yourself, “My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.” But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today.

Second Reading: 1 Timothy 6:6-10

There is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.

Gospel: St Matthew 6:25-33

Jesus said: “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?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

A Reflection for Rogation Sunday

The last time I remember being part of a church that celebrated Rogation Sunday, I was still a teenager, and that is quite a long time ago! I have to confess that, when I saw it in the list of services that Nicholas kindly passed on to me, I felt somewhat uncertain about it. However, I have had an interesting and informative week learning about Rogation, what it has meant in the past and what it might mean for us today.

In the Scottish Prayer Book, Rogation Sunday was kept on the Fifth Sunday after Easter, and the following Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday were Rogation days, days of fasting and prayer leading up to Ascension Day, which is on Thursday. One source I looked at said that these days originated in France in the 5th Century, when a Bishop introduced days of fasting and prayer to ward off disaster. Another source suggests that Rogation developed from a Roman custom of invoking divine favour to protect crops. In Britain, a tradition evolved of asking God's blessing on fields at the time of planting, and clergy went around their parish doing so, which in turn led to Rogation processions. A friend described Rogation to me as 'the other end of harvest' - the beginning of the growing season and a time of new birth – of lambs, calves and chicks.

The name 'Rogation' comes from the Latin verb *rogare*, meaning 'to ask' because we 'ask' for God's blessing. Having such days of fasting and prayer during the season of Easter, a feast season, seems a little odd. However, these days remind us that our lives and seasons are all in God's hands.

Until relatively recently, the success or failure of crops was of immediate concern to many more people than it is now in our society. Then, failed crops meant hunger, starvation or even death, And this is still the case for subsistence farmers in many parts of the world. Through my teaching career, I have a connection with a rural community in Malawi. There, even in good years, they speak of the 'hungry season' – that time of year when the stored crops from the last harvest are all but used up and the new season's crops are not yet ready. In good years, the 'hungry season' lasts about two months. It is longer in bad years.

The Revised Common Lectionary that we now use for our Sunday readings doesn't provide for Rogation Sunday although our church calendar still has Rogation days on the Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday before Ascension Day. The understanding of Rogation has been expanded to include fishing, industry and commerce, and the wellbeing of local communities, as well as agriculture – perhaps reflecting our broader patterns of consumption in modern life – and it also encompasses responsible stewardship of creation.

Today, in this country, we are not dependent on what we grow or produce ourselves in order to survive. Of course, we still depend on farming and fishing, but we source food from all over the country, and indeed the world. It is easy to lose sight of where food comes from when we don't have to think beyond the supermarket. So, Rogation provides an opportunity, particularly in rural communities, to remember the work of the crofters, farmers and fishers amongst us, and all those whose labours provide our food and other necessities of life. This seems especially poignant this year, after a year of pandemic in which we have been reminded of our dependence on each other. Farmers and food producers, amongst many others, are key workers who need and deserve our support. It has also been a year in which many people have rediscovered their gardens, and the joys and disappointments of growing their own produce.

Rogation days, as days of fasting and prayer, are also an opportunity to remind ourselves of our ultimate dependence on God and of our responsibility to be good stewards of creation. The reading from Deuteronomy is full of God's promises to his people. Promises of a good land with flowing streams; with wheat, barley, vines, figs, pomegranates, olives and honey; with supplies of iron and copper. They would lack nothing. But the promise came with warnings: that amidst the plenty, the people should not forget God and fail to keep God's commandments, or think too highly of themselves.

The reading from the first letter to Timothy reminds us of the importance of contentment with what we have, that, in modern parlance, we can't take it with us. There is a warning here too, that greed is at the root of many of our problems.

God's provision also reflected in today's Gospel. As God cares for created world, so God will care for us. Our task is to strive for God's kingdom – to live our lives as God would have us do and, as the reading from Deuteronomy said, to keep God's commandments.

On the face of it, it all seems very comforting – and it is, and it should be! But, as with much of Scripture, we need to be careful about our interpretation. There are caveats. Historically such texts have been used by rich people to put down poor people– be content, that's what God gave you. We must be clear that being assured of God's provision for his people is no justification whatsoever for not doing something about poverty. To put not too fine a point on it, most poverty is the result of greed, of some people having more than their fair share. To follow God's commandments means playing our part in addressing that discrepancy. We are, after all, Christ's hands and feet in the world.

We also need to be careful not to leap to conclusions or judgments of ourselves or others. We don't have to look far in history or geography to find places where the land does not look good – where there are droughts and famines. Or in our own lives where there sometimes seems plenty that we are perfectly justified in worrying about. To take these texts literally and suggest that this is a result of lack of faith or trust in God, or a failure to keep God's commandments, is overly simplistic, unhelpful and unloving. All such issues are complex, often with multiple underlying causes. Failure to keep God's commandments as good stewards of his creation is a collective failure across time and place, not an individual one.

So this brings us back to the meaning of Rogation. A time of fasting and prayer – so a penitential time. A time in which to remember God's promises, to seek forgiveness for past mistakes, and to ask God's blessing on our farmers and fishers, our businesses, public services and communities, and especially on those who are struggling.

As in Lent, fasting may mean devoting more time to something purposeful rather than giving up something we probably have too much of anyway. Therefore, this week I leave you with a challenge for these next few Rogation days: to go on your own procession around your local community (walking, motorised, or in your imagination), praying for local people, businesses and other enterprises. With the newsletter, I have enclosed a resource from the Arthur Rank Centre – a Christian organisation focussing on rural communities. It suggests short readings and prayers for different places. Use it as a starter and add to it – I've already noticed there is no shop included in the places suggested to pray at, yet village shops are often at heart of rural communities.