

Readings for Rogation Sunday

5th May 2024

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

Today, we keep Rogation Sunday, and the three days after it which lead up to Ascension Day are known as Rogation Days. As I am sure many of you know, one of the traditions of Rogationtide was to beat the bounds of the parish, a time in which, as one article I read said, clergy were expected to get dirt on their vestments. It is a time that calls Christians beyond the sacred space of their place of worship to reflect on the sacredness of the world around and of all creation. A time to ask God's blessing on the good earth he has given – the fields, crops and livestock, at the time when seeds are being sown and new plants starting to emerge and when new livestock are being born, and on the bounty of the seas and those who fish. Today is a day to spend some time outside if that is possible, looking out from wherever you are, appreciating the goodness of the world around and praying for God's blessing on the land, sea, creatures and people.

The keeping of Rogationtide has deep roots that pre-date Christianity. There are links to the rituals of ancient Rome and Gaul, and in Old Testament times, the practice was to pray for blessings on crops and homes at certain times of the year. In our Christian heritage, rogation days were a link between the cycle of the agricultural year and that of the church year. They connected humanity to nature as the abundant source of God's blessing but also a potential source of harm, a reminder of the fragility of life and of our need to turn to God with humility as well as confidence in God's provision. In mediaeval times, processions took place over the several days of Rogationtide, and some even featured a dragon who was eventually expelled from the area blessed during the procession, symbolising the expulsion of all that is evil.

Farmers and those who fish are more dependent than most other professions on forces outside their control. There are the vagaries of the weather – droughts, floods, hail, late frosts, excessive heat, the extremes of which are becoming more common as we feel the impact of climate change. And then there are a plethora of pests and diseases which can affect both crops and livestock.

Those of us who are gardeners will understand this to a certain extent, but most people in our society are much less connected to the land and sea. If the vegetables in our garden fail, our livelihood is not at stake, and we can easily go to the shops where, in the developed world, we are confronted with an array of produce from around the world. It is not so in many other parts of the world where subsistence farming remains the norm for most people, even if they have other jobs as well, and the failure of their crops or loss of their livestock means facing the reality of hunger.

So, given this disconnection from the land and for many in our society, what might be the implications of Rogationtide for us?

Firstly, it is a reminder of our often hidden dependence on the land and sea, and those who work there, and an opportunity to ask God's blessing on them and all the associated businesses and trades that form part of the food supply chain that we take for granted until something is missing. It is also an opportunity to extend the idea of blessing the fruits of our labours to our work in other fields, giving thanks for all those other industries and services that contribute to our way of life.

Secondly, it is a reminder that we are called to share the fruitfulness of the earth, that God's gifts are for all creation. That starts with living responsibly in our own patch. The American theologian, Wendell Berry, said: 'No

matter how much one may love the world as a whole, one can live fully in it only by living responsibly in some small part of it.' So we are called to deepen our roots here, to acknowledge that this place, this piece of land and sea, this community matters and deserves God's blessing. And one practical way we can share the abundance of fruitfulness that God has given us locally is by supporting foodbanks.

But that does not mean we can ignore the wider world. Indeed, it is vital that we don't do so. In our ever more connected world, not only do we depend on people across the world for food and other goods, but we also recognise that our actions and our choices have long-term effects on others far away. In St Mary's Ullapool, one of the organisations we have supported financially this year is Mary's Meals. They have asked us to 'Pray in May' for the recipients of those meals, and especially for the children of Tigray in Ethiopia where there is, as they put it, 'a severe hunger crisis'. It is not the only place where failure of crops due to climate change is causing hunger and starvation. And then there are the effects of war causing displacement and famine, most notably in Gaza and Sudan, but elsewhere in the world too.

Next Saturday is World Fair Trade Day and purchasing Fair Trade products is another way of sharing the fruitfulness God has given us with those in far off places who grow the out of season and exotic produce we desire.

Our thankfulness to God for a beautiful and fruitful land needs to be shown through our own part in sharing God's gifts, and cutting down unnecessary consumption, waste and pollution. As it says in the reading from Paul's first letter to Timothy: 'There is great gain in godliness combined with contentment...'. Or as Christian Aid has put it: 'Live simply, that others may simply live.'

The third implication of Rogationtide for us, is a reminder of the need for us to also be engaged in a different cultivation job: that of cultivating the fruits of the spirit in our own lives, of growing in the knowledge and love of God, of modelling our lives and attitudes more closely on those of Jesus. As it says at the end of today's Gospel: '...seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.'

As I said at the beginning, Rogationtide leads us to Ascension Day. So, today we ask heaven to come to earth and bless it in the same week that we celebrate earth ascending to heaven in the risen body of Jesus. Both remind us of the intimate connection between God and his good creation.