

Readings for Rogation Sunday

25th 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

I certainly chose the right couple of weeks for my holiday this year – the weather was glorious and perfect for enjoying walking and all sorts of other outdoor activities. To my delight, I even saw puffins for the first time.

But what was good for me, as a holidaymaker, isn't necessarily so good for others. One day on a walk, we went round the edge of a field that was tilled to perfection, a completely level surface. We couldn't work out whether it had already been sown but the seeds had not yet germinated, or if it had not yet been sown, even though it was rather late, for the soil was so dry it was like dust.

This long period of dry warm weather has been a difficult time for farmers and horticulturalists, and even for us ordinary gardeners, as they tend to valuable but vulnerable crops or see to the needs of livestock. And the struggles of farmers in this country pale in comparison with those in some parts of the world. It's now over 40 years since Bob Geldof's Band Aid, but we continue to see devastating droughts in East Africa and other ravages of climate change across the world, even though they seem to have dropped from our news rather amidst the horrific conflicts engulfing the Holy Land, Ukraine, Sudan and elsewhere.

Rogation Sunday is a day when our readings remind us of just how much God has blessed the earth, has blessed us and cares for us, providing for all our needs, and reminds us of the futility of worry. If that seem at odds with reality as we look around the world, maybe we should turn our attention to how humanity has messed up what God created, upsetting the fine balances of creation, exploiting the earth, other creatures and other people in our over-consumption. In this part of the world, we are all complicit.

How we start to fix all this is far from straightforward, for us as individuals, as a society and as a world – ask any politician ... and then we all have our own opinions too. A recent conversation I had about the merits of electric cars started with the beneficial reduction in greenhouse gases, and continued ... ah, but what about the batteries? They use those not-so-rare rare-earth metals that are produced by hugely damaging and dirty mining, not to mention the dubious employment practices ... ah, but we forget that oil extraction is also dirty and with questionable employment practices in some places. ... Well then, the batteries make the car heavier which means more particulates are released when braking ... ah, but electric cars use more regenerative braking so use the brakes less, so lowering the particulates ... and so on. However well-intentioned, it's not always easy to make the 'right' decision. Like the weather, what's best for me may not be quite so good for someone else.

But this is not intended as an exercise in browbeating or condemning our actions or inaction. We do need to be honest about the state of the world, or as honest as we can be with the complexity we face. And honest lament about what we, collectively, have done to God's world certainly has its place. But perhaps, as people of faith, there is another place to start, or continue from.

On Rogation Sunday, people traditionally prayed for God's blessing on the earth – on the newly growing crops and the young animals, which seems entirely appropriate, at least in the northern hemisphere, in this Easter season of new life. The name for this day comes from the Latin verb *rogare* meaning 'to ask'. God wants us to ask for things in prayer. God wants us to be honest about our own needs and our own dilemmas about the right course of action. God wants us to be concerned for the needs of our neighbours and all of creation. In John's Gospel (15:16), Jesus says '... the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.' Today's Gospel tells us to '... seek first the kingdom of

God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.’ God wants us to pray, to ask, and with the right priorities – God’s priorities.

Praying for God’s blessing on our community, our nation, our world is a profound thing to do; it brings together the visible and the invisible, God and God’s creation, uniting the needs of the world with our praise of God. It also reminds us of our place in the divinely created order – to care for and nurture, not to subdue and exploit.

As you may know, when I was teaching, I was involved in a school partnership with a school in a very rural part of Malawi, and spent quite a bit of time visiting that school over a period of ten years. One thing that always struck me forcibly was that, in giving thanks to God, which was done before every meal, they always included prayer for those without food. Even in good years, food is scarce for most of the population at certain times – it’s what they call the ‘hungry season’, before the new crops are ready to harvest. The country also suffers periodic crop failure, and everyone I met would have known what food shortage felt like. Having that knowledge, even in times of abundance, they never forgot those in need.

Of course, we too pray for those in need, but maybe the world would be somewhat different if the fervour of the prayers for God’s blessing of those who are hungry were matched by the fervour of our prayers for them.

Our faith gives us a depth and urgency to our response to the world as we pray for God’s blessing on the earth and its people, especially on this Rogation Sunday, and as we then seek to follow through on our own prayers in our actions.

I’d like to conclude with a prayer of blessing:

We pray for God’s blessing on this good earth, that it may be fruitful and its resources hallowed.

We pray for God’s blessing on human labour, that our work may prosper and all may find dignity and just reward.

We pray for God’s blessing on the produce of the earth, and that we may be guided to a more sustainable future and have the willingness to share the bounty we receive.

We pray for God’s blessing on the seas and waters, that we may conserve and cherish their life-giving goodness.

We pray for God’s blessing on all who bring relief to others, that we will have hands to care and to heal, and be generous where the earth is parched and dry, where war brings want and children go hungry, where the poor cry out for bread and justice.

We pray for God’s blessing on ourselves, and all communities across God’s world, that all may know a place of belonging, security and nurture; in the name of him who gave his life and rose again for us, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(adapted from Common Worship)