

Sermon - Rogation Sunday 2024
Sixth Sunday of Easter
5/5/24

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today in the Church on this sixth Sunday of Easter, we celebrate a day known as Rogation Sunday. The word “rogation” comes from the Latin *rogatio* (asking) or *rogare* (the verb for “to ask”). It is perhaps a lesser known Sunday than Easter Sunday, but it is an ancient commemoration.

In the latter half of the fifth century, the city of Vienne in Gaul was plagued by a series of calamities: famine, fire, riots, and crop failure. The bishop of the city was a man called Mamertus, and he brought the sorrows of his people before God in prayer. Despite the waves of misfortune, Bishop Mamertus encouraged his people to continue to rely on God. He read the holy texts of the Old Testament in particular, recalling the suffering of the people of Israel and the lamentations of the prophets. It is only God who can save us, he insisted. Only God can deliver us. And – even in the midst of trial – only God is worthy of our continued thanks and praise.

Bishop Mamertus gathered together a group of Christians from the whole of his region of Gaul. They fasted. They prayed. They confessed their sins. And they petitioned God with their entire hearts to deliver them from the destruction that seemed to bear no logic or meet no end. These days of prayer extended from the morning of the Monday to the evening of the Wednesday before the Feast of Christ’s Ascension on the Thursday forty days after Easter. Three whole days of fasting, prayer, and petition. And on that holy Ascension Day where we remember Christ’s entry into the glory of heaven, it is said that the fires ceased. The riots calmed. And the seeds began to sprout in the lands of Vienne once more.

Ever since those heady days of the late 470s, the practice of Rogation Days spread throughout the region and beyond. It wasn't long before parishes began to honor the Rogation on the Sunday preceding the Ascension so that the workers of the land themselves – the farmers and the laborers and those who cared for animals – could all join in the festivities themselves. It became tradition for parish priests to follow the example of Bishop Mamertus in leading a procession around the boundaries of the town or property. This is called “the beating of the bounds” – a procession around the town to pray for protection in the coming year. The priest, the senior warden, and the choir lead parishioners around the borders of the community, singing, swinging incense, and saying prayers at each landmark, asking for God's blessing on the land and for protection against calamity. This tradition is still thriving in many churches throughout the United Kingdom and the United States today.

The tradition of the Rogation days continued to thrive in the Church through the Middle Ages and even on past the Reformation. In fact, the Rogation procession was one of the favorite celebrations of Queen Elizabeth I (though it is said that she was wary of the tendency of some farmers to use the day as an excuse to drink ale at church). Somewhere along the line, parishioners began to bring branches from their land to church for the priest to bless. These branches were then arranged in the sign of the Cross and planted in the fields and gardens as a blessing upon all that would grow there. Over the centuries, this tradition evolved, and priests began to bless small wooden crosses that people would take from the church and place in their own fields and gardens. In places where fields and gardens are less common, people take these crosses and place them in flower pots or window boxes – or even alongside a painting of something in nature that they admire. In just a few minutes, we will bless wooden crosses this morning, and you are invited to take one or two to place in your own gardens, fields, flower pots,

or window boxes. Or perhaps wherever you would like to remind yourself of God's abundance and the promise of new growth.

One of the reasons why I particularly love Rogation Sunday is that it reminds us of the wild breadth and totality of the Christian life. As followers of Jesus, we are welcomed into nothing less than the whole free and boundless heart of God. Our faith is not an hour on Sunday morning or just a nice hobby or a club where we get to spend time with likeminded people. Our faith demands the whole of our life, from our prayers to the Cross to the soil to the bread and wine we share that is the fullness of the Body of the Incarnate Christ. God chose to be with us on earth, in the dirt. God chose to come among us as living flesh. In Jesus, we see God healing with mud and spit, extending rough hands that knew labor, embracing children, and knowing hunger, grief, and joy. Jesus knew rains and harvests, knew what it was to be dependent upon land and labor. Jesus knows what it is to share in abundance in the company of others, and he knows what it is "rogare" – to ask God for protection, deliverance, and blessing.

And so on this Rogation Sunday, we are invited into a renewal of our dependance on Christ. We are invited to turn every portion of our hearts and our harvests over to his grace. We are called to recognize that there is no part of us he does not care for, no part of our lives that we can keep separate from the beauty of his love. We are reminded that he no longer calls us servants, but friends – meant to bear good fruit that will last forever. Amen.