

Rogation Sermon

We open ourselves to God:

Eternal God, we open our hearts to you:

Breathe on what is hardened that we may love again.

Incarnate Christ, we open our minds to you:

Touch what is blinded, that we may see all life anew.

Transforming Spirit, we open our wills to you:

Free what is bound, that we may move upwards and outwards.

Living Trinity:

We open ourselves to you.

Come in, we pray, that we may live.

You may have come today wondering what Rogation Sunday's about? The word comes from the Latin *rogare* 'to ask'. The Christian observance of Rogation was taken over from the Greek and Roman practice of an annual procession , invoking the favour of the gods to protect crops against **mildew**. Many of you gardeners will be familiar with this disease, though maybe you've not tried this remedy – modern fungicides are cheap and effective! From this evolved the tradition of local churches, processing around the fields to bless the land. This was often combined with 'the beating of the bounds' – a custom from a time when it was important to know and mark the parish boundaries. Food and wine was supplied by the Church or wealthy people within the parish. George Herbert, the 17th.c. poet and country parson, describes in his words the *advantages of Rogation* as:

- *God's **blessing** for the fruits of the field;*
- ***Justice** in the preservation of bounds;*
- ***Charity** in loving walking and neighbourly accompanying one another, with reconciling differences at that time, if there be any;*
- ***Mercy** in releasing the poor by liberal distribution of alms.*

We're hoping that those who walk with us to Elmsted after the service today will experience God's blessing in a similar way – enjoy the beauty of the natural world and good company.

Some of you may remember Rogation services in our benefice parishes but the practice has mostly died out. With the increasing urbanisation of society we've become more disconnected from rural practices and traditions. Only a very small proportion of the population are now employed in agriculture and there is generally less reliance on locally produced food and resources.

So you may be wondering what relevance this is to you and the church today? Is Rogation any more than an antiquated custom? We're fortunate in living in the North Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Designated not just on account of its visual beauty but also of its special wildlife value, historical buildings and cultural heritage. These characteristics are interwoven and dependent on one another.

The rare orchids and butterflies on the chalk downland are dependent on the grass which has been grazed by sheep over the past centuries, keeping the invasive scrub at bay. Timber for houses has been sourced from local woodlands, requiring an ongoing process of coppicing to supply the oak standards for beams and other wood products for weaving and fencing. The result of regular coppicing of ancient woodlands is a rich diversity of flora and fauna associated with the mosaic of clearings. You may've been especially aware of the beauty of the woods this beautiful spring - full of nodding anemones, creamy yellow primroses, translucent bluebells and majestic lady orchids. Hedgerows planted in the enclosure movement or earlier to contain animals and associated field boundary strips, are valuable habitats for birds and wildlife corridors.

Buildings such as Wye College have contributed to a strong sense of place, playing a key role in environmental teaching and research, impacting not just locally but worldwide. Hopefully we can work together with the authorities to find a special new use which honours

its monastic and environmental heritage. Our land and communities today are the result of decisions and practices of the generations who've lived and worked in this area. Truly we've inherited a green and pleasant land. And now we're entrusted to cherish and nurture it for the future.

I've always been interested in the study of 'ecology'. It literally means the study of the *oikos* - the 'household' or 'community' of nature – what it's like, how it works, its patterns and processes, its self-sustaining inter-relationships. We've the potential to sensitively maintain this complex web of relationships in equilibrium. And also as we've begun to recognise - the ability to degrade and destroy it by irresponsible or mindless activity. The term *sustainable development* is used in a wide context today. At its most basic level it's been described as ***meeting present needs in a way which does not compromise the needs of future generations***. So what has our Christian faith to do with these issues? Everything, if we seriously believe in our relationship with God and his creation.

Our first reading from Genesis describes how, after the great flood, God made a universal and everlasting covenant with Noah and his descendants, concerning the **whole** of creation. It included a declaration of the sanctity of **both** human and animal life, and a divine promise never to destroy the earth again. God gave the rainbow as a sign of this promise. An acknowledgement that we are made to be co-creators and sustainers of the natural world **alongside** God – to exercise his rule of care and compassion over all living things.

But God relates to the material created world not just as its creator and sustainer, but also as the one who is **connected directly** with it through his incarnation. God **in** Christ entered the experience of weakness and suffering in the human flesh of a baby. And through his death and resurrection, Christ brings salvation and healing to the **whole** of his created world by making peace through the blood of his cross.

In the reading we heard from Acts, Paul questions the citizens of Athens about their altar dedicated to 'an unknown god'. How can their eyes be **closed** to the one **true** Creator God

who made heaven and earth and 'in whom we live and move and have our being?' Is it just that they didn't have enough evidence to tell **whether** God existed or not, and what if anything he wanted from them? In his commentary on the book of Acts, NT Wright (former bishop of Durham), describes Paul as recognising in the Athenians an attitude of humility, openness and readiness for a new understanding. A kind of open or humble agnosticism, as opposed to a closed agnosticism - a shoulder-shrugging couldn't care less attitude. Paul responds by telling them that up until then God had overlooked the times of human ignorance, but now the good news is that God has **made** himself **known** in his Son Jesus Christ, who he has raised from the dead.

Through Christ a new relationship or covenant has been established between God and all creation. And the seal or sign of this is something more intimate than a rainbow. It's the presence of God, the Holy Spirit within us. In our gospel reading, shortly before his death, Jesus tells his disciples that in awhile they will not see him but that he will send an advocate to be with them. This promise was fulfilled after Jesus death, resurrection and ascension, when the Holy Spirit came with power to the disciples who were locked together in a room, fearful of the Jewish authorities. The event transformed their lives – filled them with a new boldness, hope and life. It was the birth of the Christian Church. And by the indwelling of God's Holy Spirit **we also** are born again into a new and everlasting relationship with God. We become the people he **made** us to be – his glory.

So, don't put up with an agnostic attitude of *merely existing* but ***live like you mean it!*** Through **Jesus Christ** the way is open for **all** creation to be restored. Open your eyes to God's glory **in** and **around** you! There is the hope of a new heaven and a new earth! And it's already bursting through in resurrection power!