

Sermon – 26th May 2019 – Rogation Sunday

Picture the situation. Rose and I have been asked to attend a function in Plymouth. Now, we don't know Plymouth very well, so we set the destination in our ageing Sat Nav – but as we get closer to Plymouth, the disembodied voice tells us that we are currently in the middle of a field, and that we should turn around when possible.

Undeterred, I grab our old paper road atlas, and head off in what appears to be the right direction, but when we get to where I think we should be going, nothing looks like how I expected it to. There is a man, obviously local, walking his dog – so Rose says “Why don't you ask him if he knows where we have to go?” Obvious, really – but no – I drive a little further down the road, look at the map again, and take a turning into a dead end.

Four wrong turns later, and we eventually see the man walking his dog again – who is clearly aware of our plight, and smiling to himself. Rose winds down her window, asks the man if he knows where we have to go. He directs us around the corner, and we are there in two minutes. Simple! But by this time, we are late, frustrated and grumpy – and our hosts were wondering where we had got to.

So why do we do this to ourselves? Is it just me, or is it a man thing? Is there something about asking for help that makes me feel inadequate? Is it my pride that stops me asking, in the mistaken belief that I can manage perfectly well on my own? And in the meantime, it's not only me that suffers because of my pride, but everyone else involved in the situation.

From your pew sheets, you will see that today is the sixth Sunday of Easter. Five weeks ago, we celebrated the amazing events of Easter Day. And on Thursday this week, we remember the Ascension of Jesus. But this afternoon we are here to celebrate something else – today is Rogation Sunday, and the next three days are also known as Rogation Days.

As you probably know, the word rogation comes from the Latin, meaning “to ask.” Rogation days are days of asking, or days of prayer, and our Bible readings today remind us of our need for prayer, and the way God blesses us in response. Rogation was adopted into the Christian calendar about 1500 years ago, and from that time, farmers would ask their local priest to pray for God's blessing to protect their crops and livestock. Traditionally the priest, in his robes, and accompanied by all the villagers, went around

the boundaries of the parish. At various points, boys would be beaten, so that they would remember the bounds of the parish that they lived in – and the practice became known as 'beating the bounds'.

In those days, when there were no detailed maps as we have today, the boundaries were defined by physical features – boundary posts, trees, hedges and ditches – and it was important that the knowledge of these boundaries was passed down from one generation to the next. There was a security of knowing where the boundaries were – these defined the local community, to which people were expected to show loyalty and responsibility.

If we think back to Old Testament times, the land, and its boundaries, had a special significance for the Jewish people. It goes back to the covenant between God and Abraham, in which God promised that Abraham would have many descendants, and that they would inherit the land of Canaan – the 'Promised Land' – if they remained faithful to him. We heard echoes of this in our reading from Ezekiel. And that 'special relationship' between the Jewish people and the land of Israel goes on to this day, although it unfortunately shows itself in ways that God had never intended, in the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine.

It is important for each of us to know where we come from. It's one of those essential questions you always ask when you meet someone new, and want to find out something about them – "*what is your name?*", "*what do you do?*", "*where do you come from?*". And we usually retain a loyalty to that particular place – I was born in Norfolk, and spent all of my childhood living just outside the 'fine city' of Norwich. I haven't lived there for almost forty years. I haven't been back there for over five years. But Norwich still has a special place in my heart – and I still keenly follow the exploits of the local football team – *the Canaries* – who actually finished top of the Championship this year!

But the importance of place, and our relationship with the earth, goes deeper than just being about the place we were born. This is part of our heritage as the children of God. As human beings, we are rooted in the soil.

Now, I've got three words here, that all begin with the letters H U M. The first word is Humus – which is a Latin word meaning 'soil' or 'earth'. The second word is 'human' – so that's all of us. The word is derived from the word 'humus', so that means we are literally 'people of the earth'. Remember the words of the creation story in Genesis:

“Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being”.

And if we think back to the beginning of our Easter journey, we might recall the sobering words from the Ash Wednesday service – *“Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return”.*

There’s something really special about the smell of freshly-dug soil – the earth. And if we are to stay close to God, and understand how he wants us to live as part of his creation, then we need to retain our connection to the soil, and respect that relationship that we have with the land.

Do you remember when Pope John Paul II was alive – he would go on many tours to all parts of the world, and whenever he arrived at a new destination, after he had come down the steps of the plane, he would always kneel down and kiss the ground. Now, that may have just been his way of giving thanks that his flight had arrived safely – but I think it was more about showing respect and reverence for the earth, from which we all come, and on which we all depend.

For most of human history, faith in God was inseparable from agriculture. The very word agriculture refers to the culture that is centred on the cycles of planting and harvesting. But the industrial revolution and automation in farming has separated much of society from the land and its cycles – and our lives are diminished by this separation. And as we become more remote from the land, we lose that sense of creation as a gift, and of our dependency upon the giver.

Before modern methods of irrigation and pest control, prayers for rain and protection of the crops from blight were prayers for the ability to eat, and to live. Drought and famine were catastrophic and life-threatening, as they still are in many parts of the world. But now, in the developed world, a drought in one part of the world simply means we buy our food somewhere else. Our modern outlook views this freedom from dependency upon God through nature as a good thing. The technology that frees us from living hand to mouth also gives us a sense of freedom from having to depend upon God. We have science, technology and modern medicine to protect us. But these things can also become idols, that we trust and depend on too much, instead of trusting in God.

Which brings us back to our third word, which is also derived from the Latin word humus: and that is humility. Humility literally means something that is close to the ground. And if we are going to stay close to God, and receive all the good things he wants to give us, we do need to be humble. We have to recognise that we can't do it all for ourselves, and that we do need to ask God (or passing strangers) for help.

Rogation Sunday challenges us to reconsider the place of prayer in our lives. Human ingenuity may help us with efficiency and productivity; but for a good harvest, we still need to place our trust in God, the giver of all good gifts, and remember to ask him for what we need.

Or as the apostle Paul put it:

"Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand".

Amen.