

So we have again come round to the Rogation days. Now those of you who have been paying attention to the bulletin and weekly email update can answer this question, "From where does the name 'Rogation' come and what does it mean?" Of course everyone knows by now that the term Rogation comes from the Latin *rogare*, which means "to ask or petition." The Rogation Days are therefore days of solemn petition to God that He would bless us, and particularly provide bountiful crops and agricultural produce in our land.

Today is Rogation Sunday, which leads us into the fasting days of Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday of this week, also known as Rogationtide. On these days, fasting is instructed (see page *li* in the 1928 BCP) to prompt us to serious prayer. I would ask you this year to pray for two specific things that are mentioned in the bulletin for your reference. First, that God would heal Libby of her cancer and provide strength and encouragement for both Libby and Scott. Second, that God would grow this parish both spiritually and numerically. I ask that you pray with a focus on these two requests for a minimum of 5 minutes on each of the three Rogation days. I also ask that you fast for a portion of each of those days. We have desperate needs, and it is appropriate to bring a sense of desperation and dependency into our prayers.

You may think, "Well, this is kind of legalistic." To which I respond that that entirely depends upon you. All prayer can be made with affection and sincerity, or can be offered with wandering minds or in a spirit of legalism. I would suggest, however, that even a prayer made for the sake of discipline, in which our hearts may not be fully engaged, still forms us into a life of prayer, and is therefore better than not praying at all.

Of course in Rogationtide we also pray with a focus of receiving a plentiful harvest. This is viewed Biblically, as well as in our human experience, primarily as a gift of God. Please allow me to revisit a few portions from the Old Testament lesson and the Psalms which we read during our procession to emphasize the point. From Ezekiel 34, we read:

And I will make them and the places all around my hill a blessing, and I will send down the showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing. And the trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase, and they shall be secure in their land. And they shall know that I am the LORD, when I break the bars of their yoke, and deliver them from the hand of those who enslaved them. They shall no more be a prey to the nations, nor shall the beasts of the land devour them. They shall dwell securely, and none shall make them afraid. And I will provide for them renowned plantations so that they shall no more be consumed with hunger in the land, and no longer suffer the reproach of the nations.

In this passage, the provision of food by God is a divine blessing and an assurance that God

will bring His people into a life of freedom. The Hebrews in this passage were themselves food for the nations that had enslaved them, but God promised to return them to their land of plenty, of blessing. They would eat of the land; they would no longer be eaten by it.

Psalm 65:9-14 echos the theme:

Thou visitest the earth, and blessest it; * thou makest it very plenteous.

The river of God is full of water:

* thou preparest their corn, for so thou providest for the earth.

Thou waterest her furrows; thou sendest rain into the little valleys thereof;

* thou makest it soft with the drops of rain, and blessest the increase of it.

Thou crownest the year with thy goodness;

* and thy clouds drop fatness.

They shall drop upon the dwellings of the wilderness;

* and the little hills shall rejoice on every side.

The folds shall be full of sheep;

* the valleys also shall stand so thick with corn, that they shall laugh and sing.

Likewise, from Psalm 67:

Let the peoples praise thee, O God; * yea, let all the peoples praise thee.

Then shall the earth bring forth her increase;

* and God, even our own God, shall give us his blessing.

God shall bless us; * and all the ends of the world shall fear him.

In our Rogation prayers, we therefore plead that God would bless us with the gift of life, for if the earth does not bring forth her increase, we will perish. And of course the most necessary gift for our eternal life, is the gift of the Holy Spirit. Rogation therefore also prepares us to receive, or more precisely to commemorate the reception of, the Holy Spirit which we celebrate on Whitsunday, a couple of weeks from today. Rogationtide ends on Thursday, which is Ascension Day, forty days after the Resurrection when Christ ascended into heaven to send to us the essential gift of the Spirit of God which the Church received on Pentecost, fifty days after the Resurrection.

It is important that we not miss the fundamental presupposition upon which we base our prayers to God. The only reason that we have access to God through prayer is that we are in intimate relationship with Him. Every prayer is a reflection of this reality. God is our Father, and He therefore desires to hear both our praises and prayers. And He not only hears them, but He promises to answer them. This reality has become so ingrained in us, that we

often miss the incredible privilege that we are given through prayer. God hears us. He hears our speaking to Him audibly or silently. He hears us early in the morning, late at night before we go to bed, and even in the middle of the night when we are worried and cannot sleep.

Jesus highlights this fact in the gospel lesson today. At the time of His teaching, the resurrection, and therefore the redemption of humanity, had not yet been realized, though it was imminent, as His arrest would take place just a few hours later. The gospel begins:

VERILY, verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you. Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full. These things have I spoken unto you in proverbs: but the time cometh, when I shall no more speak unto you in proverbs, but I shall shew you plainly of the Father. At that day ye shall ask in my name: and I say not unto you, that I will pray the Father for you: for the Father himself loveth you, because ye have loved me, and have believed that I came out from God.

Up to this point, if the disciples had worries or concerns, they would go to Jesus, and Jesus, being one with God, would present them to the Father. But Christ now says that this situation is not permanent, for since the disciples are in fellowship with Christ, since they are reborn into the family of God, then they themselves have direct access to God. We now pray to God the Father in Christ's name, and in faith believe that, "He will give it you." Of course this does not imply that God is a vending machine – He doesn't give us riches or pleasures or other things that undermine our growth in holiness. God is not a genie. We are to ask for those things that will forward our faith, the godliness and health of others, and advance the Kingdom of God. Jesus is our connection to God, and He assures us that God hears us when we pray and will answer "as may be most expedient" for us.

Now it is also important to understand that prayer does not relieve us of the responsibility to work or to take action. We don't merely say a prayer and then go take a nap. God works in and through us and in and through our brothers and sisters around us. Asking presumes action on our part, and we see this both in our collect and in the Epistle lesson from St. James. In today's collect, we prayed, "Grant to us thy humble servants, that by thy holy inspiration we may think those things that are good, and by thy merciful guiding may perform the same." The phrase, "by thy holy inspiration," refers most directly to the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We are "In-spirited." We are temples of the Holy Ghost, and God the Holy Spirit works to shape our hearts and our to form our characters so that we could and we would consider what good actions we should take. And then we pray that we would act upon those good thoughts and intentions by the guiding of the same Holy

Spirit. Again, this connection to the divine, to God the Father by the Son in the Holy Spirit, is the spiritual power in our lives, encouraging us to act upon those things about which we pray.

In the Epistle, St. James is straightforward in his admonition, prompting us to action in this way:

BE ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: for he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed.

James then continues with some very concrete examples of just how we are to be obedient hearers of the word. First – bridle, or control, your tongue as a rider directs and controls a restless stallion. Second – visit the needy, the widow and orphans are the particular example given to us. Third – keep yourselves unspotted from the world; in other words, live rightly and justly in the world by the grace of God.

Through these, our obedient actions, we begin to image God in our lives. God, as the Creator of all that is, both seen and unseen, made us in His image, and so we are to create alongside Him. God created out of nothing, but we create out of the materials that He has given us in the world. We are to bring order and beauty to those things over which we have dominion. Some of us may have quite a bit of control over many things. Others of us may have a smaller world, but each of us can act in a way that makes this world better. You can make a difference in the world. Perhaps this is better said as you will make a difference in the world, for if you do not work to bring about a more beautiful world, be assured that you are likely making it worse. There is little in our lives that is truly neutral.

So where is the intersection between prayer and work? Does God make things happen or do we? The answer is both. If God simply answered prayers, then how would we image Him through our creative efforts? God puts the idea into our hearts, we bring it before Him in prayer, we consider the idea, and then we begin to realize the idea through our actions. Many times, our efforts require years of practice, and yet the final results are more dependent upon God than they are upon us. What do I mean by this? Well again we have grown so accustomed to the miracle of Creation, the miracle of our being, that we forget that everything is contingent upon God's grace. The very molecules of the cosmos are held together by the active will of God. This is a mystery that defies scientific analysis. Our consciences likewise confound those who want to reduce the human soul to a very complex computer program. So God's active attention creates the conditions that enable our creativity as human beings.

God sets the context for us to image, to reflect, His character and His action.

Nowhere is this seen more than with agriculture. Allison and I have enjoyed learning to garden. We must prepare the soil, put the seed in the ground, water it, weed it, tend it, try to destroy those pesky earwigs, before the earth will yield its increase. There is quite a bit of work that is involved, but ultimately, the mystery of how a seed sprouts, and then breaks through the soil, and then grows, and then gives us food, is all up to God. We moderns have become increasingly sophisticated in coaxing more and more produce out of the ground, but we cannot create new vegetables out of nothing. We modify what already is, some would argue. We do not imagine entirely new orders of vegetables.

Yet the mystery of the harvest is the mystery of life. We cannot create life. We cannot dictate the fundamental details of growth. We need to be amazed and humbled by these mysteries even as we learn more and more and gain skill. All life is dependent: it all requires food and nourishment from outside of itself. These processes are ultimately out of our control.

This is why Rogation days are important even to us modern humans. They instill in us humility, gratefulness, and awe at the gifts of God in this life, in preparation for the gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, which promises us life in the world to come. Yet at the same time, our Rogation prayers encourage us to take action, to roll up our sleeves and to work with joy creating good in this world and bringing others to the church to experience the life that we have in Jesus Christ. This truly is a great secret to having a contented and joyful life: be productive in the world and be generous to all with the fruit of our labor. All things come of thee, O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee.

AMEN.