

St Saviour, Walthamstow, 9/5/12, 9am - Rogation Sunday

Today is Rogation Sunday. We get the word rogation from the Latin “rogare”, meaning “to ask”. Traditionally what the people asked for on this day was a blessing on the crops. For the church, Rogation Sunday came to serve another purpose, the marking of the parish boundaries by walking the boundary and beating it with sticks. Today begins a series of rogation days, all placed before Ascension Day on Thursday. The reason why people thought it good to ask for special blessings on these days before Ascension was because we read in scripture, in Ephesians 4v8: “When He ascended on high he led a host of captives and gave gifts to his people.”

George Herbert, the seventeenth century poet and country parson, commended the beating of bounds for four reasons: “1, A Blessing of God for the fruits of the field. 2, Justice in the preservation of bounds. 3, Charity in loving, walking and neighbourly accompanying one another with reconciling of differences at the time if there be any. And 4, Mercie, in relieving the poor by a liberal distribution of largesse, which at the time is or ought to be used.” Well times have changed! We no longer distribute alms around the parish, although people often come into church asking for food. However, many churches in the area, during this month, have been collecting alms for Christian Aid. We have no fields of crops for which to seek God’s blessing, although there is much food grown here, not least on the four allotment sites in our parish). The parish boundary is uncontested, so there are no disputes to resolve. And if we were to walk around beating young boys to impress the parish boundary upon them, as was the ancient custom, we would find ourselves in court for a serious breach of child protection!

What then, is the point of us marking Rogation Sunday today? Well, I am not a poet, but allow this 21st century urban parson to suggest four reasons why Rogation Sunday is important within our contemporary situation.

First, Rogation Sunday draws our attention, quite properly, to our local situation. We live in world where the local is often undermined: it is the global that matters. And yet, the global only exists through the local. There are no general places in the world, only particular places that make up our world. The Church of England maintains a parish system, whereby every single square inch of this country falls within an Anglican ecclesiastical parish. This means that there is no part of this country that is not the concern of some church community somewhere and isn’t prayed for and served by that community. Now there are some practical applications to this when it comes to people accessing services from the Church of England and an obligation for folk to form a relationship with their parish church if they are seeking Anglican baptism or marriage; likewise there is the provision of funeral services for all who live within the parish boundary,

regardless of whether they go to church. For us, as a community seeking to reach out, the parish boundary means there are limits to our responsibility in terms of how many people to whom we seek to communicate, hence making it possible for us to deliver occasional parish newsletters to every home within the parish. This is the Church of England taking the local seriously, not to the exclusion of the global – we pray about global issues all the time and we are, of course, a community of people from around the world – but as part of our concern for the local and the global. It used to be said “think global, act local” – but now some say “think global and local, act global and local” as we realise how connected local and global issues are and how much need there is for action that takes both into consideration. This is why I am delighted that we are engaging in CitySafe, a campaign to work with others on safety issues within our local community, and pleased that we are engaging in our ways to take the needs of our local community seriously. Rogation Sunday is part of the dynamic by which the Church of England takes both the global and the local seriously.

Second, Rogation Sunday proclaims something of God’s, and hence our, concern for all things. What a shallow faith we would hold if we felt God was only concerned with what goes on here in Church. No, God is concerned with every aspect of life and no less with all what goes on this parish of St Saviour. Concerned with all of it’s 9000 or so people, 15% over 60, 22% under 16; a parish where statistics tells us 50% are white, 26% Asian, 18% Black , where 47% profess to be Christian, 25% identify as Muslim, and 14% say they have no religion. God is concerned with the schools in the parish, not only our church school, but Barncroft, Kelmscott, South Grove, and Low Hall Nursery. Concerned is concerned with Kelmscott Leisure Centre, Queens Rd Community Centre, the Adult Disability Centre across the road, the Commongate Hotel, St James Station, numerous businesses, shops, takeaways, gyms and cafes, all those who use Walthamstow Marches for leisure. God is concerned with those who worship in Lighthouse Methodist Church, South Grove Presbyterian Church and the various church groups who meet in community centres and in the factory units of the Argyll Road Estate. God is concerned with those living in their own homes and concerned with those living in social housing, concerned with refugee people living in the parish, concerned with the folk in the old peoples homes and care homes homes, concerned with violence on the streets and concerned with violence behind closed doors. All these things are concerns of people living in this parish, all are God’s concerns and part of our job on Rogation Sunday and throughout the year is to seek to hold all these things together with God in our prayers.

Third, I want to suggest that Rogation Sunday is important not only because it makes us attentive to the local and because it helps us be aware of God's concern for all things, but also because praying for our local community actually does make a difference. A familiar scripture are those words "ask and it will be given, seek and you will find". It sounds simple doesn't it? And yet, our experience tells us that it isn't that simple. In days gone by, and in some places still, the people would pray for a blessing upon the crops, and yet we know that the crops would not always be successful. We may pray for local businesses today and see some of them go under next year. We may pray for an end to violent attacks and yet there might be another one next week. So what is the point of all this prayer? Surely, we don't always ask and then receive what we want? Well, there are two keys to understanding this. One is that God does not will bad things for us. We live in a fallen world, a world where bad things happen, a world with the free-will to chose to rebel against God. The other is that prayer is not about presenting a wish list to God for all the things we think he should give us, much as a child might give a list to Father Christmas. No prayer is essentially about holding every situation together with God, proclaiming that there is no situation to which God cannot speak. Our specific prayers for things we believe to be God's will, peace in the community and so on, are appropriate. But prayer is not a magic wand. Prayer is as much about us being involved with God in seeking to transform society as it is about praying for it in church on Sunday. We will receive what God wants for us, but it may involve us in acting and not just praying. And we may discover that what we receive from God is not quite the thing we think he should give us. Prayer changes things when it brings us into active co-operation with God to bring about change. Prayer changes us because it focuses our attention and it changes others as we give them the hope that change is really possible.

So Rogation Sunday draws our attention to the local, it proclaims God's concern for all things, it encourages to pray and make a difference to our community and

Finally, I do want to repeat one of George Herbert's reasons for engaging in Rogation Sunday. Things have changed a lot since the seventeenth century, but this simple thing is very true. It is something I expect those of us who beat the bounds to experience today here in urban Walthamstow just as much as George Herbert's country parishioners experienced it nearly 400 years ago: Charity in loving, walking and neighbourly accompanying one another! Walking together really does help us to develop bonds of friendship and love. I look forward to walking with some of you after our mass on this Rogation Sunday! If you can't come, please pray for us as we walk, neighbourly accompanying one another, and pray for this Parish of Walthamstow St Saviour. SS/13/05/2012