

Sermon for Morning Prayer: Rogation Sunday
Fifth after Easter
Morning Prayer A

First Lesson: Ezekiel 34:25ff

Second Lesson: Luke 11:1-13

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Text: Ezekiel 34:25ff and Psalms 65, and 118

Before there was Thanksgiving Day, there were Rogation Days. On those days Christians would gather at the church and march in procession through the fields and around the parish boundaries reciting prayers and chanting psalms. They would acknowledge their dependence on God for all the necessities of life and thank him for providing them. They would also ask his blessing on their crops and on their lives in general.

I don't know why the custom became associated with Ascension Day but I think it may just be that Spring planting in Western Europe, where the custom began, occurs about forty days after Easter, the same time as Ascension Day.

In the American Church the theme of the Rogation Days has been largely taken up into Thanksgiving Day, which is peculiar to the United States. Thanksgiving Day is a civil holiday for which the church provides a set of propers suitable to the observance. The date is set by civil authority in the Fall, at harvest time rather than at planting time, so it conflicts with another religious observance, namely football season.

There is also an attempt to preempt the Rogation Days with another secular observance, namely “Earth Day”. Now please don’t get me wrong. Such issues as pollution and conservation of natural resources and carbon footprints, and the need to share God’s bounty, are certainly important matters. But the rationale for Earth Day is essentially secular and perhaps even pagan rather than Christian. It harks back to the old nature worship that was associated with the goddess whom some have called “Gaia” and most of us call “Mother Earth”. Nevertheless our duty as stewards of God’s creation requires us to pay attention to these issues and the Rogation Days remind us of that.

There are parishes in America that still process around the property on Rogation Sunday, singing and chanting, not to nature itself but to nature’s God. In some rural parishes such observances may even end up with a picnic. We’re not a rural parish but perhaps we should try to think like one today.

The passage that was read from Ezekiel promises prosperous plantations, abundant rainfall, bumper crops, an end to hunger, and, above all, peace and prosperity. It talks about relief from the wild beasts that roam the land and make people afraid. Most interpreters understand that to refer to roving bands of outlaws that prey upon the people. The passage also mentions the inability of the nation to prevent foreigners from violating its borders and taking advantage of its resources. In other words, the passage has something to say about some of the very issues that are out there in this election year.

But what the passage says is that peace and prosperity, a healthful environment, secure borders, and an end to criminal activity are not just a political platform. They are the will of God for us and that is why this passage is a message of genuine hope.

The psalmist says, “It is better to trust in the Lord than to put any confidence in man.” Politicians lie and overestimate their abilities but the promises of God are secure. God’s will can be

temporarily frustrated by the sinful behaviors of men, but ultimately cannot be defeated, as Easter clearly demonstrates. SO the psalmist adds, “It is better to trust in the Lord than to put any confidence in princes.”

Ezekiel lived in a time of national disaster. He was a prophet of the exile, living in Babylon after the overthrow of Israel as a nation. He was bluntly outspoken against the sins that had brought the nation to the sad state that it was in but he also offered hope that God would not be angry forever and that he would ultimately bring about a restoration of the idyllic state that existed before human arrogance and strong-headed wilfulness made a mess of it all.

The Pope brought a similar message to America on his recent visit. He too spoke of anger, injustice, violence, and alienation from God. He decried the wanton disregard for the value and dignity of human life by terrorist attacks, by abortions, and by sexual abuses perpetrated by his own clergy. But like Ezekiel the Pope also brought a message of hope, hope that is not based on any political party or candidate but on the fact that God loves us and that his will for us will ultimately prevail.

I have no doubt that our country is suffering mightily from the loss of its moral compass. I have no doubt that the recovery of that moral compass is critical for recovery from the problems we have created for ourselves. I also know that God’s will for us and for all men and all nations is to live together in peace with our neighbors, with the world of nature, and most of all with him.

The God who made all things did not make the world or us for destruction. He made us and He made the world and He can and He will renew what He has created.

That does not mean that we have no role to play in bringing about this state of universal harmony. We need to be workers

together with God to undo the damage our arrogance and rebelliousness have caused. But we work and we pray and we sacrifice with confidence that our cause is also God's cause and for that reason will succeed in the end. As the psalmist says again, "Thou shalt show us wonderful things in thy righteousness, O God of our salvation; thou that art the hope of all the ends of the earth."

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Charlottesville, Virginia

April 27, 2008