

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The Fifth Sunday after Easter,
commonly called Rogation Sunday¹

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-seventh Verse of the fourteenth Chapter of Second Esdras.³

“... Then went I forth, as he commanded, and gathered all the people together, and said, Hear these words, O Israel. Our fathers at the beginning were strangers in Egypt, from whence they were delivered: And received the law of life, which they kept not, which ye also have transgressed after them. Then was the land, even the land of Sion, parted among you by lot: but your fathers, and ye yourselves, have done unrighteousness, and have not kept the ways which the Highest commanded you. And forasmuch as he is a righteous judge, he took from you in time the thing that he had given you. And now are ye here, and your brethren among you. Therefore if so be that ye will subdue your own understanding, and reform your hearts, ye shall be kept alive and after death ye shall obtain mercy. For after death shall the judgment come, when we shall live again: and then shall the names of the righteous be manifest, and the works of the ungodly shall be declared.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fourth Chapter of the Acts of the Apostles.⁴

“And as they spake unto the people, the priests, and the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees, came upon them, Being grieved that they taught the people, and preached through Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they laid hands on them, and put them in hold unto the next day: for it was now eventide. Howbeit many of them which heard the word believed; and the number of the men was about five thousand.

“And it came to pass on the morrow, that their rulers, and elders, and scribes, And Annas [ANN-uss] the high priest, and Caiaphas [KYE-uh-fuss], and John, and Alexander, and as many as were of the kindred

of the high priest, were gathered together at Jerusalem. And when they had set them in the midst, they asked, By what power, or by what name, have ye done this? Then Peter, filled with the Holy Ghost, said unto them, Ye rulers of the people, and elders of Israel, If we this day be examined of the good deed done to the impotent man, by what means he is made whole; Be it known unto you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom ye crucified, whom God raised from the dead, even by him doth this man stand here before you whole. This is the stone which was set at nought of you builders, which is become the head of the corner. Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.

“Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they marvelled; and they took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus....

“... And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the twelfth chapter of the Gospel according to St. John: “[U]nless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”⁵ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

Everyone is grateful for the rebirth of nature in the Spring. We may exclaim, “God, I like your style.” This is the time of planting. The seed is sown, and the Church asks God to bless the lands and multiply the harvests of the world. We pray and work for a rich harvest of our crops, herds, flocks, fish, mines, oil wells, businesses, industries and finances.

We ask God to fill us with good things, so that they will spill over to the poor and needy, so that they too can give thanks. The word “rogation” in Rogation Sunday has to do with asking, as in the word, “interrogation.” “Ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full,” that our land may be fruitful.

The Old Testament was first in ecology, of understanding that everything belongs to God, and that man is the steward of creation. But too often today, ecology is a science looking for a spirituality. Will that spirituality be gnostic [NOSS-tick] and new age? Or will it be Christian?

The pseudo-science of the new age people debunks and enslaves man, it prioritizes spotted owls over men. It refuses to accept man’s headship over creation, and it calls the earth our mother. The earth is not our mother. It is our sister. Mary is our Mother, and the earth is our sister.

Rogation has its roots in the Jewish Festival of Weeks, or first-fruits, to commemorate the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai, seven weeks, or fifty days, after Passover in Egypt. Pentecost for the Jews is fifty days after Passover, the day when God gives the Law, just as for us Pentecost is fifty days after our Passover. Our Pentecost is the day when the Father sends the Holy Spirit, in Jesus’ Name.

The Law is fulfilled in the Spirit. In the Jewish Festival of Weeks, the first-fruits of the barley harvest were offered to God. Now the term “first-fruits” implies latter-fruits, the big harvest to be gathered in the Autumn. The corollary to Rogation Day is Thanksgiving Day in November. The corollary to our asking for the Holy Spirit now, just before Pentecost, is All Saints’ Day in November, the harvest of saints raised up by the Holy Spirit.

God wants us to be fruitful. He told Adam and Eve to till the soil and be the stewards of creation, and be fruitful and multiply. Not everyone today is called to till the soil. Not everyone is called to have children, although most are, and the short-shrift that children get today, both

the born and the unborn, is lamentable. It is grievous to God, whose divine Providence gives the lie to myth-making about overpopulation.

Everyone is called to bear the fruit of good works. In Baptism, the seed of the Word is planted in our hearts by the Holy Ghost. In Holy Communion, and in our prayer and study of the Bible, the seed of Christ's life in us is nourished and strengthened.

Our vocation is the same as Mary's: to receive the Holy Spirit and to conceive and bear Christ in our lives, as someone once said, "to offer Christ another dwelling place among men, a bridgehead from which He can establish Himself and from which He can reach out to others, a tabernacle in which He may be enshrined."

Men have the same vocation as St. Joseph in relation to Mary, to make sure that she is protected and provided for, and to be her priest, the one who offers the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving for her. For men and women both, Christ-in-us, by the Holy Ghost, brings forth the fruit of good works and love. All our goodness, all our fruitfulness, all our prayer, comes from our Lord, dwelling in our minds and hearts.

One of the most amazing paradoxes of the New Testament is that the most fruitful condition of all is death: "[U]nless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." Compare this thought with St. Paul's words to the Corinthians:

"You foolish man! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body which is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain.... There are celestial bodies and there are terrestrial bodies; but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another.... So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. Thus it is written, 'The first

man Adam became a living being'; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual which is first but the physical, and then the spiritual."⁶

By His Resurrection, Jesus made death, the ultimate tragedy of tragedies, into the means of ultimate victory. Jesus was sown in death and raised in life. He is the firstfruits of them that sleep in death. We are the latter fruits.

We shall be raised, just as He was, after we are sown in death. After we are sown, planted, like a big seed, into the ground, we will be harvested, and clothed with our resurrection bodies. We will celebrate this harvest of saints on November 1, on All Saints' Day. Our parents gave us mortal bodies at the beginning; God will give us immortal bodies at the end. Living in heaven with our resurrection bodies is going to be exciting. The Christian can look forward to heaven with excitement.

The devil's biggest hold over us is the fear of death. He wants us to be afraid of sickness, of getting old. He wants us to fear the unknown aspect of death. He wants us to pretend that death isn't really going to come to us. Jesus' Resurrection breaks the devil's hold over us. We know what death is because we have looked at Jesus. He was planted—we shall be planted. He came up again—we shall sprout forth again. There's nothing to worry about. We were born again in Baptism to a living hope through the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance which is imperishable. We were born again to a shatter-proof life.

The baptismal life in which this begins is a direct turning to face the most profound moment of truth in your life, the truth about yourself and the Truth who is Christ. He sends the Holy Spirit, the seed of God, who forms Christ in us, and brings us into the love of the Father. Now we can bring others to the love of God, and steer clear of the illusions that lead to nothingness.

The Christian faith works. There is the story, told in thousands of versions through the ages, of a woman taking care of an invalid daugh-

ter, for years and years, taking care, patiently, lovingly. One day her brother comes for a visit. He is once again a Christian after years of disillusionment with the Mormons. Observing the long years of loving care and sacrifice, and the slow improvement and blossoming of both the mother and the daughter, he says, “You know, the Christian faith really works.” That’s because it is really true.

Be it known by the sworn testimony of an eyewitness, that life in Christ is for real! It’s all true. No wonder we must have bells to ring. It’s all true. This Bible, our Creed, the Liturgy, it’s all true! The Word really was made flesh! Emmanuel, God with us! He really did rise from the dead! Jesus really did overcome sin and death! Man did not lose his last chance. God’s final effort to save us did not fail. Jesus is victorious. He takes the worst darkness of our lives and uses even that as the way to the dawn.

We really are saved! The Holy Spirit does really descend! He does give us new birth in Baptism. He engrafts the Word into our hearts. He really does help us grow and bear fruit. In Him, Jesus is really present in Holy Communion under the forms of bread and wine. We are being prepared right now for a destiny in love beyond anything we can imagine. And we have all this in God’s Family, our holy Mother, the Church. It’s all true! Let the bells ring! Let the earth bless the Lord; praise Him and magnify Him forever!

Christ is risen! “And the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures,” we say in the Nicene Creed. The Creed cries out to be sung. Saying it hardly does it justice. He rose again. I have overcome! If the grain of wheat dies, it bears much fruit! All this should be sung, proclaimed!

This is a triumphal proclamation, a love song, in response to God’s love song, the love song of Christ and the Church, “I have overcome the world.” Fr. Alexander Schmemmann⁷ used to say, “How can we contain the meaning of Easter? It is the most enormous fact in our lives as Christians. If we really receive its message, we are shattered by its meaning.”

In the Canon of the Mass, the unchanging, fixed great prayer of thanksgiving and consecration, on page 81⁸ at the top, we proclaim Jesus' mighty Resurrection, and His glorious Ascension. These realities are explosive in power, majesty and beauty, in our midst, as though the place in which we are gathered is shaken and we are all filled with the Holy Ghost and speak the Word of God with boldness.

The roof can be lifted off its rafters at any moment. Vincent Van Gogh created in his paintings a sense of this vibrancy running through creation-in-the-presence-of- God. His figures vibrate and pulsate. The mountains clap their hands. Oceans leap like a deer. The morning star sings together with men. The whole cosmos is dizzy with joy. Christ is risen and life is given! Jesus made the ultimate tragedy the means of ultimate victory. Death, our planting in the ground, is in Christ the most fruitful condition of all, the passage to life.

So our Lord must never be for us an optional added extra. He is Lord of all! He is our very life! In Him we have boldness of approach to the Father, and boldness of testimony and boldness to bring others to His love. He is Lord of all! So our message is not a philosophical speculation, nor is it a tentative suggestion, nor are we here to make a modest contribution to religious thought.

Christ is the very life of man! He is our very life! "Ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full, with all the overflowing, exuberant fullness that David prophesied in Psalm 65, with clouds that drop fatness, of little hills rejoicing on every side, of folds full of sheep, of valleys so thick with corn that they laugh and sing. Ask, that your joy may be full, that Christ, dwelling in your hearts by faith, ye may be filled with all the fullness of God.

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¹ This sermon was originally written for Holy Communion on Rogation Sunday, 2012.

² *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxiv (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

³ II *Esdras* 14:27-35 (KJV).

⁴ Acts 4: 1-13, 33 (KJV).

⁵ St. John 12:24 (RSV).

⁶ I Corinthians 15:36-37, 40, 42-46 (RSV).

⁷ (1921-1983), sometime Dean of St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary and a leading 20th-Century Russian Orthodox theologian.

⁸ *The Order for the Administration of the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 81 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁹ Bishop Ordinary, the Diocese of the Holy Cross; Rector, the Cathedral Church of the Epiphany, Columbia, SC.