

Fourth Sunday after Easter 2020

Each year in the autumn, we give thanks to God for the harvest. Harvest Thanksgiving is an important feast especially in country churches and farming communities. We also begin the farming season with the Rogations. Any farmer is aware that bad weather can ruin an entire crop and potentially bring him and his family to penury. We depend on the whims of nature, and of God who is the Creator of nature, for our bodily needs.

The best response we can have for nature is gratitude and a sense of wonder. We have a duty to ask God for what we need and to thank him for what we are given. At each meal, the Christian says *Grace*, which comes from *action de grâces*, thanksgiving in French. *Bless us, O Lord, and these thy gifts which we receive by thy bounty.* When we are fortunate to have enough to eat, we are brought to seek truth, goodness and beauty. Faith brings us to good works through love, compassion and empathy.

We call this fifth Sunday after Easter *Rogation Sunday* for the following week contains the three Rogation Days, the Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday before the Feast of the Ascension of our Lord. These are fasting and abstinence for that feast which crowns the Paschal Mystery.

The Rogation Days when we offer our fast and prayer had their origin here in France after an earthquake. Special litanies and processions mark our prayers for the fruits of the earth. This custom spread from Gaul to England and as far as Rome. I have vivid memories of my days at seminary when we processed through the olive fields above the Villa Martelli at Gricigliano. The Rogations continued through the Reformation times and have been retained in the Book of Common Prayer.

Today's Epistle is an attack on hypocrisy, especially the incoherence of a show of religion and sins of speech. We confess sins of thought, word and deed, for many sins are committed through careless gossip about people. The Gospel is not only to be heard but put into practice. Someone who is incoherent in this respect practices a religion

which is vain and useless. St James reminds us that religion is about works of goodness towards unfortunate people and charity.

The Gospel is a continuation of the last two Sundays, the third panel of the triptych. The theme of the Rogations exhorts us to ask God for what we need, whether they are food for the body or a higher joy and consolation. We above all need food for the soul, inspiration, spiritual understanding and knowledge. No more does Christ speak in parables but in plain words. The true God is a God of love, a Father and not a tyrant. This is a new revelation of divinity. Christ is going to his Father to a world that is beyond our experience or understanding. It is the world for which we hope and yearn through our inevitable mortality.

Now are we sure that thou knowest all things, and needest not that any man should ask thee: by this we believe that thou camest forth from God.

As God knows what we need even before we ask it, Jesus has shown that he is God, true God and true Man, united *without separation or confusion* as the Council of Chalcedon taught.

As we have always asked God to protect us from earthquakes and plagues, we ask him to keep and guard us in this time of the Covid virus which man has reduced and controlled by imposing quarantine on us all. As we pray to God for our needs, which is legitimate, we remember the words of the Litany of the Saints -

From lightning and tempest, R. deliver us, O Lord.

From the scourge of earthquake, R. deliver us, O Lord.

From plague, famine and war, R. deliver us, O Lord.

We can pray in faith for what we need, and especially we pray for faith itself, for knowledge of God and our own spirit. In this way, let us prepare for the Feast of the Ascension, that moment when we extinguish the Paschal Candle and pray for a new understanding of Christ's mission.