

A Sermon for Rogation Sunday Mattins, 9 May 2021

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Jesus said, 'Do you love me?' ... Jesus said 'Follow me.'

Ps 104:24-32, Ezekiel 47. 1-12, John 21. 1-19

What did you think of yesterday's wet and windy weather? One of the Cathedral clergy posted on Facebook how delighted she was at the good soaking which our community garden, Erw Dewi, Dewi's Acre, received. She's just been planting gooseberries, blueberries, strawberries, and far more besides. However, another colleague, out on the Brecon Beacons, posted 'Wetter than a wet thing at a fish market in Sodding Wetbury.' I suspect he might not be so appreciative of these words from the prophet Isaiah:

The Lord will give rain for the seed with which you sow the ground, and grain, the produce of the ground, which will be rich and plenteous. On that day your cattle will graze in broad pastures; and the oxen and donkeys that till the ground will eat silage, which has been winnowed with shovel and fork. On every lofty mountain and every high hill there will be brooks running with water ... (Is 30:23-25a)

I'm sure that there was more than enough running water on the Beacons yesterday!

Depending on who we are, and what our lives are about, our definition of what constitutes good weather can be very, very different. This shapes the context within which we understand today, Rogation Sunday – named from the Latin verb, to ask. Historically, we've asked for God's gift of 'good' weather, in seedtime and in harvest, so we may reap the bounty of land and sea.

The words of the Venite, the set verses of Psalm 104, and our anthem, MacMillan's setting of Psalm 96, so gloriously sung by the choir, variously underline how all creation, us included, depends on our Creator God, and should live in response to him. But in recent centuries, industrialisation and urbanisation severed the direct link between weather and well-being for an increasing proportion of the population. And who needs to appease a weather-God when you can control the climate of your house, your office, your factory, and get whatever food you fancy from the shops, in season and out of season?

Anthropologists call this 'disenchantment', a leading factor in laying aside the apparent superstitions of religion, in favour of a rationalist, scientific (or scientistic) approach to life. This relegates the deity to being merely a god of the increasingly small gaps left by growing understanding of how the world works. Yet this is to misunderstand completely the God of our faith. It is to misunderstand the nature of faith and science; and the relationship between them; and what it is to be human; and humanity's place within creation.

These misunderstandings are put under the spotlight both by global warming and by the pandemic. There is no escaping the fact that we remain dependent on our planet for food, water, ultimate well-being. We can't make the weather do what we want; but we are certainly responsible for destabilising the climate. And whether it is viruses jumping between species we have forced into unnatural proximity, or stimulating antibiotic-resistant superbugs, our engagement with the living world similarly produces unforeseen, and uncontrollable, consequences.

And so we look for answers. But too often we look in the wrong place, for the wrong sort of answers – answers that are rooted in precisely what is provoking these problems. Let me say at once that I'm in favour of 'more science', but only so provided there is realisation that, whether it is moving to insect-based protein in our diets, or electric cars, or ever better vaccines, this is just tackling the symptoms, not the causes. Trashing the planet and moving to Mars will not provide sustainable solutions for our human predicament.

To tackle the true causes and find real solutions we must return to Rogation Sunday. The diagnostics of our calamity, which faith provides, run through the Bible from the very first. It's the problem of human hubris, there in Genesis from eating inappropriately the fruit of the tree of knowledge, to the tower of Babel's attempt to reach the heavens. Made in God's image, we deduce from this that we can be our own gods, and forge our own way.

But we are not gods. We are creatures. We must rediscover genuine faith, which is not rooted in superstition, but in clear recognition of our need to live in humble partnership with the rest of creation. We must also acknowledge that we cannot transcend our finite nature, or mortal condition. And this is terrifying, or would be if we had to face it alone.

But we are not alone. God in Jesus Christ has shared in both finitude and mortality, and in love has laid down his life for us upon the cross, and in his resurrection has transcended death for us. Now he invites us to base our lives in this redeeming love. 'Do you love me?' This is where we need to look, to find the answers we need on Rogation Sunday – God's redemption for the human condition. Jesus offers the invitation: 'will you live in this love with me, and with others?' If we live within that love, knowing our creatureliness, knowing humility, then science, and politics and economics and everything else that human beings get up to, finds its right context, and can be shaped for good, for life.

What we've got wrong is to misunderstand being created in God's image as an invitation to emulate Jesus' miraculous catch of fish – to set up ever better sonar and gps and nets so we can denude oceans of life; small gods of destruction indeed. Instead, this miraculous catch stands along those other accounts in John's gospel of what he calls signs: signs that Jesus IS the Christ, the Messiah, is truly God, who has control over all of creation, and who expresses that control through generosity, through abundance, through newness of life, through redeeming love.

To be made in the image of God is to find on the right wavelength with God, so we have the capacity to recognise, and accept, and receive, and share for ourselves and with others, in this Christ-shaped, Christ-formed generosity, this abundance, this newness of life, this redeeming love. For Peter could not feed the sheep himself. He and his fishermen colleagues, drawing on the skills of years of experience, caught precisely nothing. Jesus alone resources them. Jesus calls ‘Come and have breakfast!’ (some of the loveliest words of Scripture!) and Jesus feeds them with bread and fish, as he feeds us all with bread and wine, his body and blood – indeed, some think early Eucharists may sometimes have included fish. When we accept being fed by Christ, we can feed his sheep – we can care for his creation, and enjoy its abundance together.

So where will we stand? The prophet Ezekiel painted a picture of life-giving water flowing up from beneath the altar – Jesus talked of himself as the water of life. We also think of the Spirit as being limitless, holy, life welling up for us. It is Ascension Day on Thursday, followed by the ten days to Pentecost, a fortnight today, during which we are especially called to ponder and to pray for God’s kingdom to come in our world, and his renewing Spirit to fall on us afresh. Will we stand alongside that living water – being like the tree of Psalm 1, the image of the one rooted in God’s ways, who, like our reading, bears the leaves that don’t wither, fruit that doesn’t fail – fruit to feed the world, leaves for its healing?

Rogation Sunday isn’t only for rural communities – it’s deeper truths are for us all to revisit and learn for our own times, whoever we are, whatever our life. It is more than discovering that to spend time in nature heals the soul. And I’m optimistic. From the pandemic to Cop-26, we’re hearing the wake-up calls that we must save our planet to save ourselves, by doing things differently, by seeing things differently: seeing as God sees, letting his redeeming love flow in us. Will you do this?

Jesus said ‘Do you love me?’ Jesus said ‘Follow me.’ May he give us grace to do so. I wish you a blessed Rogation Sunday.