Sermon for Rogation Sunday Easter 6 by Revd Emma Phillips

9th May 2021 at Hanwood and on Zoom

Readings Deuteronomy 8: 1-10, Matthew 6: 1-15

Hymns

Great is thy faithfulness; All creatures of our God and King; Jesus is Lord, Creation’s voice proclaims it

Intercessions Graham Phillips

Sermon

This last year has been hard, but it has had a few unexpected blessings – and one of them has been a renewed gratefulness that God has brought us to such beautiful countryside. I wonder if you too have felt thankful for your surroundings, while we have all been limited to staying close to home? Have you spent more time in your garden, or walked more often in the neighbourhood? We have discovered a whole lot of new walks we can do from our front door, exploring the benefice, linking the churches, and getting a better sense of the way the countryside connects. It has been joyful watching the land change with the seasons, welcoming the spring again now – though I do wish it would get a move on and warm up a bit! Echoing the author of Deuteronomy – the Lord has brought us to a good land, a land with streams in valley and hill, a land with wheat and barley and many other good things growing. We even share the Israelites in having a land with iron ore and hills for mining – though that is in our history rather than the present day. Thank God for his many blessings in planting us here!

Graham and I are of course newcomers – some of you will have lived here for generations, and have a much deeper sense of connection. I recently began to read a book of my mother’s about the role nature played in World War I, and I was fascinated to discover that many of the soldiers had joined up to fight for the land – the very soil of England. It is a fundamental motivation, to protect what is yours. Even town and city lads felt that they were defending ‘England’s green and pleasant land.’ They had a deep sense of belonging to a place, inheriting that rootedness from their ancestors. I’m not sure that this sense of belonging is anything like so common nowadays. Many people move around so much more, our communities often not geographically determined but networks of friends and family. There are not nearly so many people who stay in the county of their birth, let alone the village or even the house where they were born, as used to be the case. That makes it harder to build local communities, and it makes people less committed to looking after the physical space in which they live.

Connecting to our Old Testament reading, in which the Israelites were at a transition point, we find a very different relationship with the land. They had reached the place that God has promised them, moving from a nomadic way of life in the desert, to a settled agricultural existence. Up until this point they had been very aware of their utter dependence on God for day-to-day survival – now their relationship with him was changing, as life became more predictable, and more under their own control. In this new life, they are encouraged to remember the past, how God delivered them from slavery and guided them in the wilderness. They are encouraged to keep the commandments so that they may continue to live in dependence on God, even though life will get a lot easier. Of course, we don’t have to read much further in the Bible to discover that they strayed far from this relationship with God, not just once but again and again! But God continued to prompt them to return to him, to an awareness of his provision and their utter dependence on him.

I wonder whether the pandemic has provided us with a bit of a reset button in our relationship with the natural world, bringing us back to a place where we appreciate it again, and give thanks to God for his provision. It is only too easy to regard all that beauty as a nice backdrop, and take it for granted. But it is more than praise that God asks of us. From the first chapters of the Bible, it is clear that humans are called to a special role of stewardship. At the same time as the pandemic has raged, so our concerns about climate change have sharpened. We are failing in our core vocation if we do not care for this wonderful world in which we find ourselves.

There are plenty of things about being a member of the Church of England that I find frustrating at times, but one thing I rejoice in is the parish system. The whole of the United Kingdom is divided into church parishes, so that each church has a geographical area it is responsible for. The church is there for everyone in that area, regardless of their beliefs. So each of us is invited to minister as a representative of the church in our own street, our own village, our own benefice. We are reminded that we are spiritually connected to a specific place – we are not other worldly Christians, but very much of this place, here and now. This seems absolutely right when we consider that God chose to reveal himself to us in the person of Jesus – a real actual Jewish man, born in Bethlehem, died in Jerusalem in the year 33 AD. He was physically present, living in a specific place and time, just like us. In basing our lives on his, we too are called to serve – and to be stewards of creation – in our own place and time.

Traditionally on Rogation Sunday, parishes would have held processions when the people and minister walked the bounds of the parish. Some of this had a very practical purpose – it defended footpaths and claimed disputed boundaries. Some was historical – our own version of the processions that still happen in Catholic countries where statues of the saints are carried through the streets to defend the people from calamities (though the Reformation in this country meant that carrying statues and praying to saints was strictly forbidden!). But there is a purpose that is still relevant to us all – if we are to be spiritually responsible for the well-being of our parish, we need to know it!

This year it has not been practical to all walk together, but I want to encourage everyone to get out into the benefice over the next week and pray for it. You may want to walk along the outside edge – the website ‘A Church Near You’ has maps of each parish – or you may want to walk in part of the benefice that you know less well, maybe around a different church from the one you normally attend. Or you may prefer simply to pray in your garden – but do try to go outside, wherever you are. This is a time to give thanks for the natural world, and focus our prayers on its needs, and the needs of those who work in it and depend on it. This place is ours, ours to know and understand, ours to celebrate and ours to care for.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus teaches us to pray in the words we are now so familiar with, the Lord’s Prayer. This prayer is the foundation of all our prayers for this benefice: we begin by putting ourselves in his hands again, remembering our utter dependence on our Father in heaven – not in some spiritual realm where neither bodies or earth matter, but in the spiritual dimension of this world now, where God holds all existence in his hands, creating and nurturing. We praise God, we give him glory for who he is, ‘hallowed be your name!’ And as we do so, we recognise his hand in all we see, the imprint of his majesty in a glorious sunset, his attention to every tiny detail in the design of a spider’s web or the colours of a butterfly wing, his joy in all of creation made visible in a new lamb at play. We are invited to see the world anew through the creator’s eyes!

But of course the world around us is far from perfect, and so we go on to pray ‘Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.’ As we ask for God’s blessing on our particular place, we ask that our prayers and our actions might be aligned with God’s purposes. The whole of creation groans with anticipation as it waits for transformation – and we are commissioned to be part of that transformation! We don’t even have to be farmers or gardeners to contribute to the Kingdom of God here amongst us - there are a thousand little things we can do day by day, like doing our recycling properly, shopping for local produce and turning our heating down a little.

‘Give us today our daily bread’ is a powerful prayer in a world gone consumer mad. Did you know that the UK is one of the top countries in the world in throwing away electronic goods each year? A staggering total of 24 kilograms per person in 2019! So can we live with last year’s mobile, or can we get our dishwasher fixed rather than replaced? As we go on our prayer walk, ask God to change our wasteful use of his wonderful resources, beginning in our own lives. But pray too for those who do not have enough, including the natural world struggling with climate change.

Whatever we see as we walk, we will be reminded of human greed and destruction. The cost of our lifestyles may be largely invisible at the moment, but the news brings us constant reminders of the dire effects of extreme weather elsewhere. We know that we need forgiveness in order to turn again and walk in God’s ways, forgiveness for our own sins and the sins of our nation, and we need to forgive others in turn. Jesus’s prayer takes us on to confront evil – to acknowledge that we are facing trials, up against all the ways in which our world distorts what is good. We cannot win this battle on our own – we don’t have to.

So do not despair! God is at work, we join in with him! His will, his purposes, will be done. We are not fighting a losing battle! Our contributions matter! So get out there and pray for God’s kingdom to come, his blessings to rain down, and our stewardship to be worthy of his love. Amen