

## **May 19**

This week we observe the “rogation days”. In our Anglican tradition, this has developed from its fundamentally rural/farming origin formerly observed earlier in the year into a modern opportunity to appreciate our human material creativity.

Two important words in that last sentence are ‘appreciate’ and ‘human material creativity’ (okay, three words literally, but you know what I mean—a word to the wise is sufficient, eh?).

Appreciate is a word we use in several ways: we understand something fully, we are grateful for what assists that understanding; we recognize the worth and value of something; we have full regard for someone.

In that broad sense, appreciating our human material creativity involves recognizing and celebrating human ingenuity and resourcefulness in creating, sustaining, and improving our lives as individuals in our civic and economic circumstances, as well as fostering and expanding our individual situations (health, relationships, fine arts, etc).

So, rogation days have developed from rural observances of boundary markings and blessing the land into an occasion for assessing our common material life and allowing that to seep into a general consideration of life together in society at large.

In the old times, rogation Sunday featured a procession around the boundaries of a community. The priest “beat the bounds” like a cop on the “beat”—her primary area of responsibility—offering up psalms and prayers on behalf of the accompanying congregation and blessing boundary markers. This did/does three things: it declares the reality of things, it evaluated the state of things, it directs and defines and commits to improving things in the time ahead.

It is not difficult to imagine an 18th century scene of this sort. Priest walks about the little land holdings and farms blessing everything for the planting, people take note of common needs (walls/fences, etc), a larger-than-my-plot view gets enriched (Psalm 16:6, “the lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage”. But move this forward to our time. How do we “sing the Lord’s song in this strange time and place” (to paraphrase psalm 137:4)?

First of all, it says we are here (this is our ‘footprint’ on the earth) and we (still) have boundaries—we are we and you are you, this is mine and that is yours; insiders/outsiders; members/others; natives/aliens (you can tell from how I have arranged the little progression of terms that it is frighteningly easy to move from self definition to categorization that can readily become pejorative; a good, useful, necessary distinction running into nativist anxiety). The continuing tension or the heartbeat/thrum of energy here is captured in Robert Frost’s poem, “Mending wall”. We all read this poem in school long ago. If you haven’t read it lately (google will summon it up if you type

“Mending wall”-Frost) there you will find what I’m groping to say beautifully expressed whimsically, regretfully, resignedly, ruefully, appreciatively.

Secondly, we evaluate how things stand. What is going on well enough, what needs to be repaired, rebuilt, better tended, improved, surpassed, transformed. This is a much more involved process now with intricate inter-weavings of businesses and enterprises and so forth, but the idea is not much changed. Nothing is static in this world, repair and retooling are to be expected, improvement striven for, transformation grappled with as opportunity and challenge. Sometimes the homeliest objects can help us get a grip on this process. A thoroughly fascinating (and brief) article by T. Hugh Crawford in The Atlantic back in 2015 captures this, “Where have all the axes gone?”. After an overview of our American “relationship” with the axe until the real peak of the urban migration after WWII, the author suggests that our relationship with a necessary technology now (cell phones) reflects our previous regard for our axes. Much the same purpose is served now as then—shaping our environment—and our dependence on and appreciation for and accommodation to both our tools and our setting are similar.

Thirdly, where do we go from here? What are we trying to do? What is to be continued and what let go and what added to keep faith with who we are, what we have received, what we yearn for and strive to be. Churchill’s observation is useful here. After the destruction of the Commons Chamber in Parliament by the incendiary bombs Hitler sent during the blitz in WWII, the work to rebuild was approved by Churchill on the condition that the rectangular “oppositional” shape be maintained (rather than ‘horseshoe’ or theatre style) because, he said, the building itself had fostered the two-party system. He put it memorably, “we shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us”.

All of this has a whiff of academic overview to it, too much generalization and even abstraction.

So let’s affirm our three themes of rogation days with regard to current events, especially healthcare right now.

- 1) the reality of things is that the practice of medicine itself here in the USA requires trained specialists and a lot of equipment;
- 2) the resources we have are sometimes limited for many reasons, resources (including people) are not evenly and readily distributed with the result that race and wealth heavily affect this, to this the structure of health care finance contributes;
- 3) the best, widest-reaching, available, affordable healthcare for everyone is now fixed deep in our American dream and the struggle for it haunts our nightmares; to achieve the dream is possible, but it is not inevitable—but we can say it will mean anyone can readily get anything and everything available for treatments and costs are not beyond our means as a nation.

Friends, as so often happens, these rambles through the church readings, calendar, and seasons take us into current events and issues. I take this as an encouraging sign of the Church's continuing relevance to the practice of our faith in our Risen Lord.