

Rogation Sunday

“Ask and ye shall receive, that your joy maybe full.”

From the 16th chapter of St. John

In the secular world of CVS and Wal-mart, the Easter season begins right after Christmas and ends Monday, the day after Easter Sunday. In the church, Easter begins on Easter Sunday and lasts for forty days thereafter. We are still in Eastertide today, and we shall be there until Thursday. Easter will officially end on Thursday, after the reading of the Gospel and the extinguishing of the Paschal candle on Ascension Day. The Paschal Candle has been burning since Easter Morning to symbolize Christ's presence with his disciples during the forty days after his resurrection.

In the Prayer Book's calendar, Easter concludes with a mini- season called “Rogationtide.” Rogationtide begins today, Rogation Sunday, and continues for the next three days leading up to the Ascension. The word “rogation” comes from the Latin word which means “to ask” as in “inter-rogation.” In today's gospel, Jesus tells us, “Ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy maybe full.”

In Rogationtide, we reaffirm one of the deepest religious impulses of mankind - the impulse to ask whatever forces may be out there to bless what we plant in the spring and make it grow so we will have a plentiful harvest in the fall and enough food to eat for the winter.

At least in the Northern Hemisphere, the connection between Easter and spring fertility celebrations is not hard to see. Jesus rose from the dead in the spring to guarantee new life; flowers come back in the spring; rabbits are fertile; and eggs represent birth. There is nothing wrong with Christians' enjoying all of those more secular-- perhaps even pagan - aspects of the Easter celebration.

Just be sure your understanding of the symbolism is working in the right direction. The resurrection of Jesus is not a symbol of the rebirth of nature in the spring. The rebirth of nature in spring is a symbol of the resurrection of Jesus. One of my favorite hymns “Welcome, Happy Morning” gets this point right as it sings: “Bloom in every meadow, leaves on every bough/Speak his sorrow ended, hail his triumph now.”

In his first letter to the Corinthians, St Paul writes, “Christ is risen from the dead, and becomes first fruits of them that sleep.” Firstfruits is an Old Testament concept. God told Israel to give him part of the spring harvest to help guarantee a good harvest later in the fall. What they gave him in the spring was called firstfruits, which makes perfect sense.

What St. Paul is trying to tell us is that there is a clear connection between the cycles of harvest and the resurrection of the dead. Offering the firstfruits in the spring led to a good harvest in the fall. The resurrection of Jesus in the spring leads to the full harvest of the dead later at the last day-in the fall so to speak.

Jesus is the firstfruits of the dead-he came out of the grave first. We are the later fruits of the dead. We shall come out of our graves when he comes back. There is a marvelous hymn that makes this point clearly: “Christ is risen, Christ the firstfruits of the holy harvest field/which will all its full abundance at his second coming yield! Then the golden ears of harvest will their heads before him wave;/Ripen by his glorious sunshine from the furrows of the grave.”

Before we say good-bye to another Easter, let's review some of the important points it teaches us. The resurrection of Jesus proves that God is stronger than death. Since the devil's biggest hold over us comes through making us fear death, the resurrection breaks his hold.

Jesus' resurrection is a preview of our own resurrections. We shall rise from our graves in new bodies as he did; we shall be restored to our family and friends as he was.

Since death entered the world through the sin of man, Jesus' victory over death, is also a victory over sin and its consequences. While we await the end, we participate directly in the resurrection through having our sins forgiven in the church. Jesus structured his church around shepherd-bishops, to have his power to forgive as they are obliged to proclaim his resurrection.

As St. Paul sums it up, "Christ is risen from the dead and become the firstfruits of them that slept. For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive."