

Sermon for Rogation. 9th May 2021

Our 2nd reading is taken from St. Paul's letter to the Philippians, chapter 4, verses 4-7.

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

This is the day the Lord has made. Let us be glad and rejoice in it. The Lord is near, his Spirit is with us. Amen

My Auntie has just turned 98 this week! I love hearing about when she was in the Land Army during WWII.

One of my favourite stories that she has shared with me is when she helped the farmers, when they had gathered together from their own nearby farms, to lead all their cows to be mixed together into one field. Then when it was time to separate them to go back to their own farms again, it never failed to amuse the farmers, as my Auntie stood there shouting "come on, come on, come on".

All 'her' cows used to follow her voice and follow her back home. They obviously trusted her, knowing she took care of them at the other end of their journey and daily. It had also become instinctive that she could and should be followed. The other cows certainly weren't focussed on hearing her or following her.

She told me that whilst she milked them, she used to sing to them. She always had a big smile on her face when she told me. So that image will always make me smile too. Yet there was a war on.

We know about the casualties, loss and suffering of the war. We also know that there was hopeful joy in community, unity, of peace, in taking care of one another, getting through it together. Hopes of

an end to suffering. Stories of self-sacrifice and putting others first. During even more severe restrictions, and loss, than we are struggling with during this pandemic. An example of joy and anxiety existing together.

My Auntie recognised all she had to rejoice and be thankful about, alongside the anxieties and uncertainties of life at war. She was brought up in Bradford and was disappointed at not being able to have any pets or see many animals and not having such easy access to the Dales.

Jesus connects and reconnects people's focus back to God in this way. It is why we still read the bible, share with one another how it is, or even times when we feel it isn't, steering our focus, in our faith today.

You may not think that today's readings from Acts about the Holy Spirit and from Philippians which I have just read are particularly suitable for our rogation service.

Paul wrote from prison to divided and conflicted Christians who were so unfocussed on God, instead choosing to spend far more time bickering about traditions, laws and how things should rigidly now be done, and insisting on getting their own way in all of that, on their own anxieties, than they were on focussing on their faith and trust in God, known through Jesus and what a spiritual gift of incomparable peace they had been gifted with in the first place.

Our earthly culture is geared up to always suggest that we can control the circumstances in our life, and if things turn out as we expected or wanted, we find happiness and are joyful about that. That is not really giving us solutions to our feelings of unrest and unhappiness when things in life are uncertain, unexpected, or uncontrollable. When we still feel something is missing inside, even if we have so much material stuff that should equate to us always feeling happy, just as the sales adverts promise us that we should be.

Rogation Sunday then is the perfect time to be refocussed towards just what has been gifted to us, what we are to remain rooted in, firmly attached to, in our Christian faith. To remember just why we do feel more aware of being spiritual beings when we are in nature, in times of quiet, on our walks, or in our gardens focussing and observing.

Peace

How often do we lay awake at night, feeling alone in worry, focussing on going over all that is making us anxious in our lives, like jobs, finances, health, our children, grandchildren, the constant negative news, the pandemic, etc etc. A long list of things that we could all spend all night tossing and turning over?

Paul is telling us not to do that, and what we are to do instead.

He tells us to 'rejoice'. He shouldn't have much to rejoice about being in prison, yet he rejoices in God being near to him still, through Jesus, because he focuses upon how faith has over time transformed him from being an oppressor of others into being a servant focussing on helping and guiding others.

God's Spirit is available to all who focus to seek it; receive it; continue remaining firmly rooted to it; even when doing so becomes challenging, because then it also seeks to steer our focus away from a concentration on our own earthly anxieties, from ourselves and our own problems, but towards giving to others.

That is when the spirit of gentleness should be clearly and obviously seen by everyone around us, just 1 of the fruits of the spirit that Bryony talked about in her sermon last week.

We come together today to continue our journey of focus in knowing Jesus, the one who firmly attaches us to God, the prince of peace, the real and active example of God's incomparable peace. The one who is connected to God who is always *for* us,

even when life's uncertain, changeable circumstances can seem to be so *against* us.

We know we don't always achieve gentleness to all around us which means we haven't quite got there in our focus on the God of peace, which is actually standing guard upon our very hearts and minds through Jesus.

Right up there, top of our 'to do' list, first and foremost, to know God's peace, to staying connected in it, to keeping it near, to gifting it to others, in all aspects of our lives, to prevent ourselves from retreating from the challenges involved in following it - is through prayer.

When we focus on prayer, talking to God firstly rather than after hours of forgetting him in all that we do; the more we take all our requests, big or small to God in prayer, in petition, leaving nothing out, saying sorry for our lack of trust in him over our lives; not forgetting to concentrate on what we also have to be thankful for too; then the more we do recognise and can rejoice in the near to us God, face-to-face, in conversation with, in a relationship with, through Jesus.

Our service today began with prayer; coming together in unity before God, asking; petitioning; confessing; not forgetting thanksgiving prayers. This rogation service is full of prayers, thanksgivings, and specific requests to God. Just as Paul advises us to do to bring ourselves back to the peace of God. Then we say the Lord's Prayer together which, if you read the words, are challenging as they confirm what we are to expect to achieve, what it is we are asking God for.

Prayer remains a constant, wherever we are. Instant access to God's nearness and incomparable peace.

Let us not forget that Jesus often went to pray alone. (Mark 1:35; Matt. 26:39). We are not to fear silence. We are not to presume

that it should be filled with the noise that our society so often tells us it needs to be. Silence doesn't mean loneliness, not when it is focussed on being time spent with God. We are not to worry about not having the right words to say in prayer, to approach God with.

The truth is, during lengthy silent prayer, all our anxieties and more of ourselves is revealed. Even things we have brushed under the rug, attempting to just live with it inside ourselves, even if we know they are impinging on our joys in life. God already knows all about what worries us, but he longs for us to bring them to him first, struggling through them, with him, so he can help us refocus again on building our faith and trust. When we do, he can finally be heard beyond our noise, beyond our barriers. Heard even though anxiety and rejoicing exist together in our world. God's peace can finally take strong and permanent root in our hearts and minds again.

Amen