

UNDERSTANDING ROGATION SUNDAY

**“Send us thy Blessing from Heaven . . .
that both our hearts and mouths may be continually
filled with thy praises”**



In the old tradition of the *Ecclesia Anglicana* and of the Catholic Church in the west, the Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday before the Feast of the Ascension are called Rogation Days. These days of fasting and abstinence are preparation for the feast of the Ascension. The Rogation Days are much neglected in today's church, but if we are to have a Harvest Festival (Great Britain) or a Thanksgiving Day (USA), it makes good sense to observe the Rogations Days, as these days are the days upon which special supplication for fruitful seasons and a good harvest are made to God. Furthermore, the spiritual disciplines of fasting and prayer that are meant to characterize the 3 Rogation Days is a means by which we prepare for our celebration of Christ's glorious ascension, which we will observe on Holy Thursday (the 40th day after his mighty resurrection).

The origin of these Rogation Days seems to be an order by Mamertus, the Bishop of Vienne in about AD 470. After an earthquake he instructed that special litanies be offered for God's care and protection, asking for provision by heaven of the fruit of the earth. The custom spread through Gaul, to England and to Rome. In England the custom was required by Canon 16 of the Council of Clovesho in 747.

The Rogation Days survived the Reformation in England and thus in 1559 we find Queen Elizabeth requiring by Royal Injunction the restoration of a perambulation of the parish boundaries/fields to pray for a good harvest. Likewise, in 1562 the official [Second] Book of Homilies included “An Homily for the Days of Rogation Week”, which was divided into three parts in keeping with the 3 Rogation Days.¹

The Rogation Days were typically kept by the clergy and people processing around the parish boundaries, while saying or singing prayers. It is from these Rogation Day prayers, as they are found in the Sarum Missal, that Cranmer formulated the Litany (1545), which was his first work of liturgical reform.² After this it became the custom that in any parish in which the Rogation Day procession was not being observed, the Litany was sung in the church instead.

Rogation Sunday and the Rogation Days that follow remind us that the members of the Church militant on earth need to be fed both by the fruit of the earth [thus the need for supplication in Rogation and thanksgiving at Harvest] and by the gifts, graces, virtues and characteristics of the Lord Jesus Christ, who ascends into heaven to be our exalted Prophet, Priest and King. The week containing Holy Thursday and the three Rogation Days is thus very important.



1 The homily is followed by *"An exhortation to be spoken to such parishes where they use their perambulation in Rogation Week for the oversight and limits of their town"*, written by Archbishop Parker.

2 Peter Blake, 182.

The Collect for the Rogation Days.

In 1661, Bishop Cosin proposed that a Collect, Epistle (James 5:13-18) and Gospel (St. Luke 11:1-10) be appointed for the 3 Rogation Days before Ascension Day but nothing came of this and thus there are no Propers for the Rogation Days in the 1662 BCP. The Collect that he wrote provides an insight into how this period of intercession and abstinence was viewed by the faithful at that time: “*Almighty God, Lord of heaven and earth, in whom we live, move and have our being, who does good unto all men, making thy sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sending rain on the just and the unjust; favourably behold us thy people, who do call upon thy name, and send us thy blessing from heaven, in giving us fruitful seasons, and filling our hearts with food and gladness; that both our hearts and mouths may be continually filled with thy praises, giving thanks to thee in thy holy Church, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*”³

In the American 1928 BCP, a Collect that is based upon that of Cosin’s is appointed for the Rogation Days (pg. 261), as well as an Epistle (Ezekiel 34:25ff.) and a Gospel (Luke 11:5ff.). There are also two Collects “For Fruitful Seasons,” provided to be used on Rogation Sunday and the Rogation Days, in the section of this Prayer Book called “Prayers and Thanksgivings” (pgs 39-40).

In addition to the 3 Rogation Days we are here discussing (sometimes called the Minor Rogation Days), there used to be a Major Rogation Day, which was kept on April 25th.

Commentary on the Collect for Rogation Sunday (the 5th Sunday after Easter)

Today’s Gospel text contains the Lord’s promise that whatever we ask in his name, he will give us. This “is particularly appropriate when considered in connection both with the gifts of Pentecost and with the Days of Asking which follow this Sunday. It also distinctly announces the approaching Ascension – ‘I leave the world and go to the Father.’”⁴

O Lord, from whom all good things do come. The Collect begins with a remembrance before God that, as last Sunday’s Epistle taught us,

3 John Cosin, *Collection of Private Devotions* (1627).

4 Neil & W, 279.

“every good and perfect gift is from above.” Seven days ago we began our focused meditation upon God as the source of all that is good, and today we pray in light of that reality.

Grant to us thy humble servants. We approach God not as those who have a right to make demands of him, but rather as his *humble servants*. We are bold to ask him to *grant* us our requests because of the effective mediatorial work of Christ on our behalf.

That by thy holy inspiration we may think those things that be good. Originally the word here was “right”, but it was changed to *good* so as to bring the Petition into closer harmony with the Doctrinal portion of the prayer.

In numerous places, the Scriptures describe the spiritual life as being an inner battle. Consider, for instance:

2 Corinthians 10:3-5 *For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.*

James 4:1 *What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?*

1 Peter 2:11 *Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.*

Ephesians 6:10-13 *Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.*

St. Peter writes about this battle and indicates that the life of the mind is one of the arenas in which this spiritual war is taking place - *Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking* (1 Peter 4:1a). In keeping with this Biblical precedent, today we pray for *the mind of Christ* (1 Corinthians 2:16), so that we might think on whatsoever things are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, of good report, virtuous and praiseworthy, just as God commands us to do (Philippians 4:8).

And by thy merciful guiding may perform the same. The original Latin read: “with thee as pilot.”⁵ The Lord God who is our Creator and Sustainer provides us in the created order with “all good things” for our bodily and material needs. In the ministries of holy, mother Church the Lord provides us with “all good things” for our eternal salvation in a right relation with him. In the light of such plenteous provision for body and soul, it is the vocation of his creatures who are his adopted children to think and to do what pleases him. By the presence and inspiration of his Holy Spirit, and through the growth of the word of God in their hearts, baptized, faithful Christians are enabled to think not only that which is right but also that which is good. Further, by the merciful guidance of the same Spirit they are also able to perform good works, as faith works by love, to glorify their heavenly Father.

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5 This is similar to Trinity II in which to “govern” means to “pilot.” Stephens-Hodge, 114.