

The Sixth Sunday of Easter 14th May 2023

Rogation Sunday



For the beauty of the earth,
for the beauty of the skies,
for the love which from our birth
over and around us lies,
Lord of all, to thee we raise
this our sacrifice of praise.

Alleluia! Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

HYMN

1. Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!
Unnumbered blessings give my spirit voice;
tender to me the promise of his word;
in God my Saviour shall my heart rejoice.

2. Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his Name!
Make known his might, the deeds his arm has
done;
his mercy sure, from age to age to same;
his holy Name--the Lord, the Mighty One.

3. Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his might!
Powers and dominions lay their glory by.
Proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight,
the hungry fed, the humble lifted high.

4. Tell out, my soul, the glories of his word!
Firm is his promise, and his mercy sure.
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord
to children's children and for evermore!

We come before you our God and Sustainer,
remembering that you are our Creator and the source of all being.
Out of your love the universe was born.
From primordial darkness you put in place all that is needed for growth
and saw that it was good.
You have put this world into our hands:
may we recognise your Spirit within it,
disturbing and challenging us to care for creation,
for the weak and the deprived.
Lord we remember that we are called by you to nourish the earth
and its diversity of life,
to share the gifts you have given, with one another
and with the poor of the world. Amen

Let us ask God to have mercy on our tired land,
and to prosper the work of our soiled hands.
Let us ask God to forgive our delusion of self-sufficiency
so that we may praise him for his provision and goodness.

Lord, you give us this good earth,
yet we take your generous gifts for granted.
Lord, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

Lord, you give us this good earth, but we squander its rich resources.
Christ, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.

Lord, you give us this good earth, but we fail to share your bounty with all of your children.
Lord, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

May the God of love and power + forgive us and free us from our sins,
heal and strengthen us by his Spirit, and raise us to new life in Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Collect

God our redeemer,
you have delivered us from the power of darkness
and brought us into the kingdom of your Son:
grant, that as by his death he has recalled us to life,
so by his continual presence in us he may raise us to eternal joy;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen

A Reading from the Old Testament
Genesis 8.20 - 9.17



²⁰ Then Noah built an altar to the LORD, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. ²¹ And when the LORD smelled the pleasing odour, the LORD said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.

²² As long as the earth endures,
seedtime and harvest, cold and heat,

summer and winter, day and night,
shall not cease."

⁸ Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹ "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, ¹⁰ and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. ¹¹ I establish

my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

¹² God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: ¹³ I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴ When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵ I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.

This is the Word of the Lord
Thanks be to God

A Reading from the New Testament
Acts 17. 22-31

¹⁶ While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸ Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, “What does this babbler want to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.” (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) ¹⁹ So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? ²⁰ It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.” ²¹ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

²² Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³ For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶ From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷ so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸ For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’

²⁹ Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. ³⁰ While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

A Reading from the New Testament
1 Peter 3. 7-end

³ Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? ¹⁴ But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, ¹⁵ but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; ¹⁶ yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. ¹⁷ For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God’s will, than to suffer for doing evil.

¹⁸ For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹ in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, ²⁰ who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. ²¹ And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

This is the Word of the Lord
Thanks be to God

HYMN

1. For the beauty of the earth,
For the beauty of the skies,
For the love which from our birth
Over and around us lies,
Lord of all, to thee we raise
This our grateful hymn of praise.

2. For the beauty of each hour
Of the day and of the night,
Hill and vale, and tree and flower,
Sun and moon and stars of light,
Lord of all, to thee we raise
This our grateful hymn of praise

3. For the joy of human love,
Brother, sister, parent, child,
Friends on earth, and friends above,
Pleasures pure and undefiled,
Lord of all, to thee we raise
This our grateful hymn of praise.

4. For each perfect gift of thine,
To our race so freely given,
Graces human and divine,
Flowers of earth and buds of heaven,
Lord of all, to thee we raise
This our grateful hymn of praise.

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to John
Glory to you O Lord

¹⁵ “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. ¹⁷ This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in^[h] you.

¹⁸ “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹ In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰ On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹ They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.” ²² Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, “Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?” ²³ Jesus answered him, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. ²⁴ Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.

Reflection

The Areopagus in is a prominent rock outcropping located northwest of the Acropolis in Athens, I stood there several years ago and wished the stones could speak; it was a strange feeling.

Paul had walked around that city and seen the numerous shrines to different gods and one dedicated ‘to the unknown god’. I guess the Athenians wanted to back every horse just in case.



Like a good preacher Paul enters their philosophical framework to find a take-off point for his message. *“I see you are very religious”* (good start, always make your congregation feel that you are on their side), *“I see you have a shrine to the Unknown God; I am here to tell you who that is.”* (excellent! Grab their attention with a surprising statement!).

Paul proclaims the unknown God as known. His message of God who made the world, gave life to mortals, enabling them to search for and find God, was a startling idea. The Greeks were used to gods too caught up in their own affairs to be interested in them.

But it seems that God is very interested in us. We pick up the story of Noah once the flood is abated and life begins again. Peter’s reference to Noah is to show us God’s concern for humankind; he ‘waited patiently for Noah to build the Ark in which eight persons, were saved through water’. In Biblical numerology, eight always prefigures a new beginning. With these eight, life would begin again, and the rainbow sets a reminder in the sky for God of the covenant should human sin move God again to destruction.

Peter mentions Noah in connection with Christ’s proclamation to the spirits in prison. This is a concept better understood in the Orthodox Church than in the Western Church despite its inclusion in our creeds and hymns. After Jesus was ‘put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit’ he entered the underworld, the place of the dead, not a place of punishment. There he proclaimed the kingdom to the ‘spirits in prison’.

The icon of the Resurrection depicts this moment. Christ bursts through in glory. The gates of death, unable to withstand him, lie broken at his feet. He grasps Adam and Eve and pulls them out of death to be followed by the others. He grasps their wrists, not their hands, for they, like us, are helpless to help themselves.

St John of Damascus wrote: ‘When he had freed those who were bound from the beginning of time, Christ returned from among the dead having opened for us the way of resurrection’.

I remember some years ago, I made a decision to stop being afraid. That may sound odd, even impracticable. What I meant, was to actively come against the feelings of anxious foreboding, the nameless dread, the ‘what ifs’ and fears of the future. Perhaps it was just connected to that time of my life. But I have noticed a difference in myself in the years since – a sort of defiance against the dragging down of joy.

This sense of standing against fear prompted me to ask the iconographer John Coleman to write the icon of the Resurrection as a leaving gift from my last parish.

Icons act as ‘windows into heaven’, they are a focus for prayer. We can stand before them wordless, and we are ‘read’ by them. Time spent before them reveals us to ourselves often in ways words cannot. The iconic image restores us, grounds us without words.

Our society is full of fear and a sense of being powerless. The media stokes the fire with its endless documentaries of ‘awfulness’ in one form or another whilst at the same time presenting a life-style to



which most of us cannot aspire. Add social media into the mix and we can feel as if we are drowning – trying to keep our heads above the water to gasp a breath.

Jim Forest in his book *Praying with Icons* (Orbis, 1997 p.88) writes:

‘The icon of Christ’s descent into hell can be linked with an ongoing prayer not to live a fear-centred life. We live in what is often a terrifying world. Being fearful seems to be a reasonable state to be in – fear of violent crime, fear of job loss, fear of failure, fear of illness, fear for the well-being of people we love, fear of war, and finally fear of death. We can easily get ourselves into a paralysing state of fear that is truly hellish. This icon reminds us that Christ can enter not just some other hell but the hell we happen to be in, grab us by the hands, and lift us out of our tombs.’

Christ’s journey among the dead, between his death and resurrection is a part of the whole celebration of Easter. This is the Cosmic Christ, outside of time or space, yet not a ‘god unknown’ but forever incarnate, never ceasing to be fully one with us.

Rogation Sunday reminds us of our essential connection with the earth. From its components we emerge, by it we are sustained and to it we shall return, ‘dust to dust’. The triumph of Easter is that all of this ‘good creation’ finds resurrection in Christ, those who lived before us, those yet to be, nothing is outside. Christ passes through death and returns with all powers subjected to him. A truth that is glorious and empowering.

Intercessions

Let us pray to God, who alone makes us dwell in safety:

Upon the rich earth send a blessing, O Lord.
Let the earth be fruitful and its
resources be hallowed.
Lord, graciously hear us.

Upon human labour send a blessing, O Lord. Prosper the
work of our hands; may all find dignity and just reward in
their work; free the exploited and oppressed.
Lord, graciously hear us.

Upon the produce of the earth send a blessing, O Lord.
Guide into a sustainable future, and give us the will to share
the fruits of the world.
Lord, graciously hear us.

Upon the seas and waters send a blessing, O Lord.
Teach us to cherish the water of the earth, and to
conserve the seas, lakes and rivers.
Lord, graciously hear us.

Upon aid agencies send a blessing, O Lord. Where the
earth is parched and the well has run dry; where war
brings want, and children go hungry; where the poor cry
out for bread and for justice, give hands to care and heal,
and compel us to be generous.
Lord, graciously hear us.

We commend ourselves, and all for whom we pray, to the mercy and protection of God. Merciful Father,

Accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us
not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory,
for ever and ever. Amen.

God the Father, who created the world, give you grace to
be wise stewards of his creation.
Amen.

God the Son, who redeemed the world, inspire you to go out
as labourers into his harvest.
Amen.

God the Holy Spirit, whose breath fills the whole of
creation, help you to bear his fruits of love, joy and peace.
Amen.

And the blessing of God Almighty, + the Father,
the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be upon us, and
remain with us always.
Amen.

HYMN

1 Now thank we all our God
with heart and hands and
voices,
who wondrous things has done,
in whom his world rejoices;
who from our mothers' arms
has blessed us on our way
with countless gifts of love,
and still is ours today.

2 O may this bounteous God
through all our life be near us,
with ever joyful hearts
and blessed peace to cheer us,
to keep us in his grace,
and guide us when perplexed,
and free us from all ills
in this world and the next.

3 All praise and thanks to God
the Father now be given,
the Son, and him who reigns
With them in highest heaven
the one eternal God,
whom heaven and earth adore;
for thus it was, is now,
and shall be evermore.