

Dear Friend

When I begin to think about writing a Monday email, I usually turn first to the Lectionary which gives us the readings for the day and also any interesting feasts or festivals of that day.

Today it tells me that it is a Rogation Day, which are days of prayer and fasting in Western Christianity. In many places, they are observed with processions and the Litany of the Saints. The so-called *major* rogation is held on 25 April and the *minor* rogations are held on Monday to Wednesday preceding Ascension Thursdays, which of course is this week. The word *rogation* comes from the Latin verb *rogare*, meaning "to ask", which reflects the beseeching of God for the appeasement of his anger and for protection from calamities.

Christian beginnings

Tradition says that the Christian major rogation replaced a pagan Roman procession known as Robigalia, at which a dog was sacrificed to propitiate Robigus, the deity of agricultural disease. The practitioners observing Robigalia asked Robigus for protection of their crops from wheat rust. The minor Rogation days were introduced around AD 470 by the bishop of Vienne and eventually adopted elsewhere.

The faithful typically observed the Rogation days by fasting and abstinence in preparation to celebrate the Ascension, and farmers often had their crops blessed by a priest at this time. Violet vestments are worn at the rogation litany and its associated Mass, regardless of what colour is worn at the ordinary liturgies of the day.

A common feature of Rogation days in former times was the ceremony of beating the bounds, in which a procession of parishioners, led by the minister, churchwarden, and choir, would proceed around the boundary of their parish and pray for its protection in the forthcoming year. This was also known in the northern parts of England as 'Gang-day' or 'gan week', after the old English name for going or walking. This was also a feature of the original Roman festival, when revellers would walk to a grove five miles from the city to perform their rites.

In the British Isles

The Rogation Day ceremonies are thought to have arrived in the British Isles in the 7th century.

The oldest known Sarum text regarding Rogation Days is dated from around 1173 to 1220. In it, celebrations in the south of England are described, in which processions were led by members of the congregation carrying banners which represented various biblical characters. At the head of the procession was the dragon, representing Pontius Pilate, which would be followed by a lion, representing Christ. After this there would be images of saints carried by the rest of the congregation.

Sarum texts from the 13th and 15th centuries show that the dragon was eventually moved to the rear of the procession on the vigil of the Ascension, with the lion taking the place at the front. Illustrations of the procession from the early 16th century show that the arrangements had been changed yet again, this time also showing bearers of reliquaries and incense.

During the reign of King Henry VIII, Rogation processions were used as a way to assist crop yields, with a notable number of the celebrations taking place in 1543 when there were prolonged rains.

During the reign of King Edward VI, the Crown having taken much of the Church's holdings within the country, liturgical ceremonies were not officially condoned or recognized as an official part of worship. However, in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, the celebrations were explicitly mentioned in the royal reformation, allowing them to resume as public processions.

Rogation processions continued in the post-Reformation Church of England and priests were encouraged to bring their congregations together for inter-parish processions, to remind congregations to be thankful for their harvests. Psalms 103 and 104 were sung. However, there were concerns about the lack of piety at such events! I'll leave it to your imagination to decide what might have gone on sometimes.

To go back to the original meaning of these days, today we can think about harvests. Some crops are ready for bringing in and some are just being planted. One thing we do know of course is that Ukraine is a breadbasket for many countries and produces large amounts of sunflower oil. Although there has been a good harvest, it's now impossible for the produce to be exported. Planting the next crop will probably not go ahead as the farmers are currently defending their country. We need to continue to hold Ukraine in our prayers not only to stop the war, death and destruction we see in the news, but also to remember the important farming role that country holds in feeding the world.

So let us pray today's Collect together:

Almighty God,
whose will it is that the earth and the sea
should bear fruit in due season:
bless the labours of those who work on land and sea,
grant us a good harvest
and the grace always to rejoice in your fatherly care;
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