

Sermon Notes for Easter V

“ask, and ye shall receive” (Gospel)

The Prayer Book says “Rogation Sunday” which is a lazy description. Strictly, the three days after the Sunday are the “Lesser Rogations” in which the Western Church adopted the habit of praying for the crops. This is entirely legitimate; it is in the discretion which Christ gave to his Church to devise appropriate responses to human need. The 1928 Prayer Book added prayers for industry and fishing. These were more appropriate then than now, but such adaptation must be appropriate. However, the initial impulse was to pray for matters in which we were comparatively powerless; if there is something wrong with industry, that is a human failing rather than a vulnerability to the forces of nature; similarly, if we have overfished, we must pay the price while (if) fish stocks recover. So we are to pray. We should never get so fascinated by technical issues that we fail to discharge the actual duty. The Church has the right to expect this of us at this season, because the Gospel makes it clear that this is part of our life as Christians; the Church proposes specific topics at specific times, such as the crops in the next three days, but that merely modifies our duty.

But is it sense? I happily acknowledge that I am summarising arguments in Charles Gore's “Prayer and the Lord's Prayer”. This is a late nineteenth century work, but no new issue has arisen. “Scientific” issues were already known. Is it possible for God to regard so much? Yes for that is the nature of God. We are told that “the hairs of your head are numbered”. It is of the perfection of the creator God that He can give total attention both to the broad sweep of change in the universe and to every last interaction within that change, which we understand, if at all, only at the statistical level. Otherwise, we are noting that what there is, of necessity is blind and purposeless; that nothing matters. We believe that God gives meaning and purpose to creation.

But is there anything other than regularity? This is an interesting puzzle. We think we observe some regularity in the universe (though some of it only at a statistical level). We do not know as a matter of scientific fact that regularity is universal. Even if it is, we do not yet know all the regularities (or what proportion of them we do know) and we may never do so. Science, indeed, has to assume regularity (otherwise why would anything be repeatable) but is not able to demonstrate it. This matters, because if the universe were entirely mechanical then prayer were pointless. But if all its easily detected regularities are actually reflections of the stable purpose of God (which is rarely served by random events or even by “miracles”) then we may have much more to discover, and that much more clearly purposive. In any case, we do not carry out intercessory prayer in order to persuade, much less force, God to make changes. That may be the verbal form – it is the price of necessary brevity in public prayer – but our private prayer can and indeed must be more careful. “Ask and ye shall receive” is the principle; but the modifier comes soon afterwards: “in my name”. We do not comply by sticking “through Christ our Lord” or some such collect ending on our wishes. We comply by conforming ourselves and our wishes to Christ.

Now as regards the prayer for the crops, we and all men need food; enough and not too much. So this must be a prayer that can be offered. But not as if prayer for God to exercise his providence in the natural order were enough. “In the sweat of thy brow thou shalt eat bread.” At one level, food comes from God's providence; at another, from those who work the land skilfully and with effort; at another, from all the human organisation, not least subsidies, which makes farming a practical business. If we are to be given our daily bread, all these must work together – and it is a collective not individual solution. If God wants our cooperation with his will in prayer, so also in these other matters.

It is sometimes taught that there are higher forms of prayer than intercession. Certainly there are other forms; and there are higher forms of prayer than the mere recital of wants which we persuade ourselves are needs. But it might be said that all prayer is opening ourselves to God and his purposes, as they have been shown to us in Christ (for the pattern) and in the world (as setting at any rate some of the agenda of needs). No wise mystic avoids the humbler forms of prayer. To do so would be to pretend not to be human.

So we pray “give us this day our daily bread” because we are human and need it, because both need and solution are collective, but also because God would have us so place ourselves with others but before or all else with his generous purposes for us.