

I have overcome the World

Preached on Rogation Sunday
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
May 9, 2021
Text: John 16: 23-33

Today is Rogation Sunday, from the Latin verb *rogare*, meaning “to ask.” It is based on Our Lord’s statement at the beginning of today’s Gospel: “Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you.” Sometimes we forget that the English word “pray” has its roots in an older usage that simply means “ask.” When you hear in Shakespeare someone saying, “pray tell” or “prithee,” this means “please tell” and “I ask you,” respectively. Today begins a mini-season of the Church Year called “Rogationtide,” a season that only lasts for four days, the period from Rogation Sunday until the Feast of the Ascension, which begins Wednesday night. Rogationtide is a period that has traditionally been set aside for prayer, especially prayer for God’s provision through the coming year. This is often marked by vesting the church in violet Monday through Wednesday, signifying “days of solemn supplication,” as our Prayer Book puts it—not quite fasting, but still solemn and prayerful in their nature. The special Collect, Epistle, and Gospel for these days begin on page 261 in your prayer book, and we would all benefit by including them in our devotions through Wednesday.

Other than the special readings, the Rogation Days were traditionally a time that marked the beginning of Spring, especially with prayers for the planting to be fruitful. In England, it also became a time to revisit the parish boundaries, which developed into a custom called “beating the bounds” when the people would process around the parish boundaries with readings, the litany, and psalms. An English parish is more than the church’s property; it is the geographic area that the parish serves. In this tradition, boundary disputes would be resolved and issues of justice were emphasized. These customs are naturally rural or agricultural in their nature, a reminder that the Prayer Book’s tradition is essentially an earthy, incarnational religion. Even though most of us do not derive our living from the land, it is a good reminder of our intimate connection to the Earth.

The Gospel readings from the last three Sundays have all been from John 16, part of Jesus’ discussion with the Apostles at the Last Supper. All three of those Gospel passages have been preparatory. Two weeks ago we read the passage that immediately precedes this one, in which Jesus was preparing them for the sorrows that would come because of his suffering and death, and also preparing them for the joys that would come because of his resurrection. Last week we had the first part of John 16, in which Jesus tells them that when he goes to the Father he will send the Comforter. This, of course, is a preparation for Pentecost, which is coming soon. Today he tells them that when he goes to the Father, they will be able to pray to the Father in Jesus’s name. In all three readings we have this expectation that Jesus is going to the Father.

We need to recognize that Jesus' return to the Father was not simply spiritual and immaterial. Just as Jesus' resurrection was a bodily resurrection, Jesus' ascension was a bodily ascension. That is, just as he physically rose from the dead (remember St. Thomas doubting until he touched our Lord's wounds?), so too did his physical body rise up to heaven. This means that one of us—a human being—is sitting “at the right hand of the Father” as we confess in the Creed. The incarnation never ended. God the Son, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, is perfect man, and will be so forever and ever, world without end.

This helps us to see why we pray “in Jesus's name.” “In Jesus's name” is not a magical formula that obligates God to answer our prayers. It's not simply a liturgy we all use in extemporaneous prayer. No, it means that we are praying with Jesus' authority. We are praying as co-heirs with Christ, who have been united to him through the Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist. In our Gospel, Jesus said that the Father himself loves us, because we have loved Jesus and believed that he came from God. In other words, our trust in Jesus is the basis for our access to the Father. You may recall that our Catechism teaches that faith is necessary to receive the benefits of Baptism and the Eucharist, that is, our new life and communion in and with Christ. And you may recall from Article X-XI that we cannot drum up that faith by ourselves, but we need God's grace to have it in the first place. Even our faith, our trust in Christ, is a gift from God.

So, what does praying “in Jesus' name” look like? Well, first, it needs to be consistent with his will as revealed in the Scriptures and attested by his saints. We can't pray for something that indulges our sin and expect God to honor that prayer. We can't pray damnation on our brother and expect God to honor that prayer. We can't pray for God to enable us in foolishness and expect God to honor that prayer. Indeed, we will only be able to pray better successfully as we know God better. And this isn't a simple intellectual perception of God's nature (as if such were possible for us). We don't first come to know him in our sinful state and then decide to obey. We obey first, and by doing so, come to know his goodness, even if inadequately. That way we will truly learn what is good and beautiful and true (as St. Paul says). In our Collect for this morning, it is by being humble servants that our right thinking and right action are enabled by God's grace:

O Lord, from whom all good things do come; Grant to us thy humble servants, that by thy holy inspiration we may think those things that are good, and by thy merciful guiding may perform the same; through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Second, it means praying from a position of trust in Jesus. We pray well as we increase in knowledge of his goodness. We pray with conviction because of what he's done for us. We know we can trust him because he died and rose again for us while we were yet sinners, while we were yet enemies of God. We know we can trust him because he's promised us eternal life and given us his pledge of it in the Word and Sacraments. This means that it is certainly appropriate to pray for all things, not just the “big ones” we

believe might merit God's attention. Certainly we should pray for people around the world suffering from war, natural disasters, and COVID. But we should also pray for our own health. We should pray for our protection when travelling. Given the season in which we find ourselves, we should also pray for favorable weather and for farmers. We should pray for our children and for God to lead us in how we may be a blessing to them. We should pray for the salvation and repentance of our friends and family and even enemies. We should not be so proud or falsely humble that we avoid praying for these things, as if we know the limits of God's concern.

To this end, we have an excellent collection of stand-alone prayers in the Book of Common Prayer. Just after Morning and Evening Prayer is a section of prayers and thanksgivings. In the back of the BCP is a section of "Family Prayers" that have even more of this sort of thing. We could easily spend hours in intercession just going through those sections of the Prayer Book and applying them to people and situations in our lives.

Finally, we should pray that we may have peace. Jesus concludes our Gospel reading (and the chapter) with verse 33:

"I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."

Some of you have gone through or are going through really tough times. Some of you know tribulation quite intimately. Some of you are in mourning. Some of you have good reasons to be anxious. Some of you feel overwhelmed with all the stuff going on in the world right now. When we pray "in Jesus' name," he gives us his peace. From the world's perspective that often makes no sense. After all, those situations don't usually disappear just because we prayed. But when we pray Jesus reassures us that he has indeed overcome the world. He reminds us of the long view. He helps us to be longsuffering; not just putting on a happy face, but realizing that Jesus is indeed in control, even when all the evidence of our lives seems to be telling a different story. We can all recall when we brought our anguish to his throne and Jesus gave us his peace despite the tribulations of our life. And when life seems so hard that we can't see his peace, those memories help us get out of bed in the morning. They help us get back on our knees in prayer.

Ultimately, that's the lesson for Rogation Sunday: we can go to God in prayer in Jesus' name, for Jesus' sake, because Jesus has given us access to the Throne of Grace by his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. We have confidence that our Heavenly Father is good and wise and loves us. So if God is for us; what can the world do to us? Be of good cheer, Christ has overcome the world.

In the Name...