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The First Sunday After Trinity

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The Desire for God (I)

The following sermon was delivered on Rogation Sunday, and many of you requested its publication. It not only concerns the life of prayer, but our future in this Parish Church. I hope you will read it carefully.

Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, He will give it you. Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive that your joy may be full.

John 16:23

Rogation Sunday is named for the Latin word rogare, which means to ask or pray. Stemming from ancient times, the tradition of the Church has been to set time aside to pray for the harvest. And surely now as we enter into the fourth year of a drought we should pray especially for rain and the crops of our farmers.

But set within the scheme of the Church Year, the harvest means not only the harvest of the fruits of the earth, but also the spiritual harvest of souls. Coming after Easter and before the Ascension of the Lord, the spiritual harvest refers to our life in the risen Christ. And so for the sake of a spiritual harvest we are told in St. James' epistle to be "doers of the word and not hearers only," and in the gospel Jesus teaches us to pray in order that our joy may be full. To be doers of the word and not hearers only means in the first place to pray.

This Rogation Sunday we are concerned with the life of prayer. Every Christian knows how precious and necessary this act of the Christian life is. In our own tradition, the life of prayer is so central to our well-being that we call the way we worship - the Book of Common Prayer. This particular Book guides our lives, from Baptism to Confirmation to the Holy Communion, to Holy Matrimony, to the Burial of the Dead. The Book of Common Prayer leads us step by step toward our home in the everlasting City of God. We do this by a way that is common to us all, nurtured, illuminated, and strengthened at each

point, by prayer.

We have inherited this life of prayer. Our inheritance comes from two spiritual masters who are the principal authors of our common prayer. They are St. Benedict and Thomas Cranmer. We should regard them not simply as forefathers in the faith, but as paradigms of grace and true pilgrims of the way.

St. Benedict is often referred to as the father of western monasticism. He lived in the sixth century, in the midst of crisis, when the barbaric invasions were razing the civilization of ancient Rome and the foundation of the Christian Church to the ground.

Confronted with increasing worldliness within and without, Benedict experienced a dramatic conversion. His response to that crisis of culture was the establishment of monasteries whose singular purpose was to pray. He intended their life to be what he

'called the Opus Dei, the work of God,

by which he meant the ordered life of prayer.

Following a tradition that reached back to the religious practice of the ancient Hebrews, and which was continued by various Christians in the East, Benedict divided the day into set hours for prayer. This would become known as the seven hours of the daily office.

For Benedict the singular intention of the monastery was to seek the face of God, as in the words of the psalmist, "My heart hath talked of thee, seek ye my face: thy face, Lord will I seek." Above all, it was the desire for God that was the energy of prayer, and the substance of the opus dei, the work of God. By following a lectio divina, a reading aloud of the Scriptures and of the church fathers, the desire for God was nurtured, illuminated, and strengthened into greater knowledge and purer love.

Through this practice of prayer, and

the reading of the Scripture aloud, it was the monk's work to meditate on the Scriptures, and through this meditation to memorize and to understand and to make the word of God his own. The key to this meditation was not prayer for everything else, but all else for the sake of prayer. In this way of prayer and meditation the Christian pilgrim was prepared for eternal life in the presence of God. It was through the habit of the daily office that Benedict

cultivated the harvest of Christianity, and he more than any other figure, Christianized Europe.

A millenium later, Thomas Cranmer faced a situation entirely different from that of Benedict. By the providence of God in that age we call the Reformation, Christian states were forming in Europe. In 1549 Cranmer composed the first Anglican Book of Common Prayer in which he artfully combined both the roots of the Catholic Tradition and the more recent insights of the Protestant Reformation.

At the center of the Prayer Book was the daily office, the opus dei of Benedict. But instead of seven hours set aside for prayer there were two, Morning and Evening. And instead of this work being the special vocation of men called into the monastic life, the practice of prayer became the duty of every citizen.

Cranmer envisaged a nation at prayer. There were many vocations that God had given his people to minister to the city of man. But the daily life of the city was to be redeemed by setting aside two hours in which every aspect of the life of the state and the church could be brought to God. And so for Cranmer, the same kind of life that Benedict had reserved for special callings now became the responsibility of every person. And while not everything was done for the sake of prayer, everything was taken up into prayer: every office and act of the state; every minister of the Church; all sorts and conditions of men. And finally thanksgiving was given to God for His good providence and His inestimable love in the redemption of the world by Christ Jesus.

To be continued...

The Rev. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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