

Hear the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to John.

Jesus said to his disciples: 'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.'

This is the gospel of the Lord.

Well, we can all breathe a sigh of relief! The Tour de Yorkshire has been and gone – although today's stage will bring the whole caravan just over yonder, beyond Leyburn. Yesterday's 'Market Towns' stage included the climb up Sutton Bank – which I attempted two weeks ago on my way to visit Helmsley. The professionals made it look almost easy; I had to swallow my pride and push. My soft southern legs (and gears) are not up to a sustained 25% gradient (yet!).

In fact, for me the whole of this week has been a bit of a steep 'learning curve'. Starting in a new post means there is a lot to take in, and one thing showing a distinct upward trend is the number emails arriving in my inbox.

I even had an email from Bishop Helen-Anne! It was actually a circular to her clergy, entitled 'Bishop's notes'. She was telling us what she'll be up to in the next couple of weeks, she enclosed the Diocesan Prayer Diary for May, and she offered some reflections on today's gospel reading.

Perhaps I was a little surprised that these reflections from someone who is passionate about rural life did not mention the special significance of today. You see, the Sunday before Ascension Day is kept in many parishes as 'Rogation Sunday'. In the past, this was when we would have asked for God's blessing on the newly sown crops – often involving a procession around the parish boundary: 'beating the bounds'.

Nowadays, Rogation Sunday and the three following days is when special prayers are said to ask for God's blessing on *all* kinds of human labour, as well as the life of the

local community – in urban and rural parishes alike. ‘Beating the bounds’ still takes place in many parishes – although this may take the form of a ‘prayer walk’ (which is a great way to pray for our neighbours, at any time of year).

Here in Richmond where so much work has been put in to preparing for the events of this Bank Holiday Weekend, and where there is a wide diversity of local industry and commerce, it would seem very appropriate to be seeking God’s blessing on the world of work. It is also timely to be praying for local communities, given that the local government elections have just taken place.

Maybe next year we’ll try ‘beating the bounds’, but for this year, especially in these few days before Ascension Day, I would commend prayers asking for God’s blessing on the work and the life of your local community and the individuals within it – especially the most vulnerable. Try it, in the comfort of your home or by going out for a prayer walk.

In our gospel reading appointed for this day we heard Jesus say, ‘...the Father will give you whatever you *ask* him in my name.’ This follows last week’s gospel reading, in which Jesus says, ‘...ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.’ That theme of asking gives rise to the name Rogation Sunday: the word ‘rogation’ is derived from the Latin *rogare*, which simply means ‘to ask’.

So over the next few days, what are you going to ask for; in Jesus’ name? Perhaps this thought from Bishop Helen-Anne will help you see how you could be an agent of God’s blessing on those around you. She writes, ‘Today’s Gospel follows on directly from last Sunday where we were presented with the image of Jesus as the vine. The theme of love is prominent... The word used (in the Greek) is *agape*, and it is interesting that this word occurs only once in Matthew and Luke, but 8 times in John. As one commentator points out, ‘it is a strong, unbreakable family commitment, generous and unselfish. If I love my brother in this sense, I may not get on too well with him, but I will never let him down’.

To love in this way is costly, but it illustrates something of what Jesus was getting at when he says, ‘ask in my name’. It also describes what it is to belong to a community founded on mutual loving service.

Now remember that I said that these days of rogation precede Ascension Day. And Ascension Day itself, being the fortieth day of Easter, always falls on a Thursday. In many churches a special service is held to mark this ‘major festival’ in the life of the Church – although in many other churches the celebration is transferred to the following Sunday. That is what we will be doing next Sunday – although in 2019 we might try marking the day itself.

I won’t pre-empt next Sunday’s sermon, but I will mention ‘Thy Kingdom Come’ which begins on Ascension Day. For the period of ten days through to Pentecost, we

are invited not just to pray for the coming of God's kingdom here on earth but to consider how God can use us to help answer our prayer.

So in line with my sermon last week, about 'branching out', each of us is invited to pray by name for five people who we would love to come to know for themselves the God of love. Of course, we will continue to do this beyond the Thy Kingdom Come period, but during those ten days we might make a special effort to pray for them – perhaps by lighting a candle for them here in church. Also, with Christian Aid Week falling within that period this year, everyone involved in house-to-house visits will have the perfect opportunity to do a 'Thy Kingdom Come' prayer walk!

You will already know about the planned Thy Kingdom Come 'prayer walks' between the churches of our Deanery, with Bishop Helen-Anne joining the walk on Ascension Day itself. All are welcome to join any of these walks, for the whole route or just part of the way. I hope to join the walks from Marske to Richmond on Tuesday the 15th, and from Easby to Richmond on Saturday the 19th. I understand there will be steep climbs on both days, but that is only to be expected. After all, the main lesson I have learnt in my first week here is that in Richmond the only way is up...

I conclude by saying a prayer sung for me by our Choir as my walk with you began, a prayer we can all be saying for our local community in Rogationtide and during the Thy Kingdom Come period:

‘May the road *rise up* to meet you,
may the wind be ever at your back,
may the sun shine warm upon your face,
and the rain fall soft upon your fields,
and until we meet again,
may God hold you,
ever in the palm of his hand.’

Amen.