

Today is Rogation Sunday, and it is a time when we are concerned with asking and thanking God for our parish. The first Rogationtide processions were set up by Bishop Mamertus of Vienne in 470 to thank God for deliverance from earthquakes and volcanic eruptions in the Auvergne. In the Middle Ages throughout Europe, Rogationtide was the most important religious observance, second only to Easter. In his wonderful book – which I keep recommending to you, *The Stripping of the Altars* – Professor Eamonn Duffy quotes from someone who was actually present at what they did in Long Melford in the 13th century... a typical scene:

There was a bonfire and tubs of ale, and bread was given to the poor...and they had the like drinkings and some long pies of mutton and pease cods set upon boards. And at all these bonfires, some of the friends and more civil poor neighbours were called in and sat at the board with my grandfather...

They did something similar in the City of London itself. John Stow tells us:

These were bonfires, as well of uniting amongst neighbours that were before at controversie were there by the labour of others reconciled and were made of bitter enemies loving friends. The rich made many bequests to neighbours to make merry withal...

So there were processions and prayers and junketings for days on end. The Protestant Reformers opposed them - with their usual deadly misunderstanding and leaden imagination concerning ritual and ceremony. William Tyndale complained: *As if they should preach the gospels to the corn in the fields in Rogation week, that it should the better grow!*

Well, there are fools, damn fools and literalists. The Reformers' mistake was to think that what they saw going on in the fields was a species of sympathetic magic. But those holy, ale-soaked picnics were much more about something we would now describe as *holistic* – a better word is *incarnated*. The spiritual and moral identity of the community was expressed through a ceremonialisation of the work of the country, which was farming and growing. Farmers are not stupid. They're not New Age freaks operating by incantation, star sign and moonshine. If they get their practical science wrong, they starve. It was the Reformers, not the Rogationists, who were superstitious. Wittgenstein's brilliant put down of Frazer's *Golden Bough* applies equally to the silly literal-mindedness of the Reformers: *Dr Frazer tells us that the primitive people dance to bring on the rain. Doesn't he think that they would see that it rains eventually whether they dance or not?*

The same sort of refined prejudice against agricultural ritual persists in the part of Yorkshire I come from where harvest festivals are derided as so called *folk religion*. I've heard precious High Church curates mocking the Methodist preacher, surrounded by his carrots and plums: *Did you hear him going on? "Lord, we would thank thee for little apples...thou that seest fit to give unto us rhubarb and pumpkins..."* These are the same delicate Anglo-Catholic Manichees who are so disembodied that they wouldn't be seen, alive and twitching, within a hundred paces of a good-sized vegetable marrow.

The Rogationtide junketings, taking the Blessed Sacrament out into the fields with the ale and pies, proclaimed many truths, theological, moral and social. They were vital to the life of the

community. First, they declared the unity of the spiritual and natural world. Secondly, they provided the opportunity for reconciliation among people who'd been at odds. Thirdly, in the beating of the bounds, they set out clear boundaries between neighbours and competitors. Fourthly, they encouraged local charity. By threatening to get rid of these rituals as superstitious, the Reformers and iconoclasts really threatened the existence of local communities themselves. That's why the Reformation in rural England turned violent – not over some sub-scholastic preference for a particular shade of the doctrine of Transubstantiation. The rooted country-folk were not willing to have their settled way of life abolished by some abstracted townie or metropolitan-chic. Does any of this strike us as familiar?

It was a battle between ideology and actual practice, between wholehearted, world-affirming Christian materialism on the one hand and a theoretical Puritanism on the other. Coleridge said *men are mostly right in what they affirm and wrong in what they deny*. Puritanism is all denial and it gets things in the wrong order. You heard the story about the Puritan Elder, come to answer questions from his congregation. A young man stood up and asked,

What is the view on dancing?

Answer: Dancing is unnatural and not allowed.

What about sex?

Yes, sex is quite permissible between the married couple.

Question: What about kinky sex?

What d'you mean by kinky?

I meant standing up.

Certainly not – it might lead to dancing!

Rogationtide is a celebration of material-spiritual reality. It is not just some relic from the Middle Ages of no earthly use to us today. I would say it is more needed than ever. For the local world of the parish Rogationists is always under threat from the distant abstractions and the artificially-imposed systems of the centralising bureaucrat, never more so than today. If you listen to the BBC you will notice that these days *parochial* is used only to denigrate. Chesterton warned the centralising bureaucrats:

*They have given us into the hand of new unhappy lords;
Lords without anger and honour, who dare not carry their swords.
They fight by shuffling papers; they have bright, dead alien eyes;
They look at our labour and laughter as a tired man looks at flies.*

The bureaucrat wishes to impose a universal system of rights whose pernicious result is the breakdown of community and personal relationships by the onslaught of constant litigation. Any doctrine of universal rights is a prescription to *sue thy neighbour*. Whereas true community is built on the solidarity of shared interests, a covenant or social contract underwritten by shared ceremonies.

The ancient ceremony of the beating of the bounds exists to remind us of what's ours and what belongs to someone else. It is about landmarks. And in our Prayer Book we have the warning, *Cursed is he that removeth his neighbour's landmark*. These landmarks are social and moral and

spiritual as well as physical. They delineate public and private space and they warn alike the busy-bodying Puritan of old and the politically-correct, nannying politician of today that they ought not to poke their noses into what's not their business. That poem of Chesterton's is the very spirit of Rogationtide:

*It may be we are meant to mark with our riot and our rest
God's scorn for all men governing. It may be beer is best.
But we are the people of England; and we have not spoken yet.
Smile at us, pay us, pass us. But do not quite forget.*