

Re-Beating the Bounds Rogationtide 2020

“You’re going to do something aren’t you? You’re the Church – you must be doing something?”

The woman from the council sounded desperate. They needed more volunteers she said; the Community Hub was seeing an increasing trend in need. I had never spoken to her before in my life but she called me up and clearly expected results.

In this time of Covid-19 the Church of England has both embarked (mostly) on a period of self-reflection, interior debate and, as is often its way, a quiet persistent parochial-level charge of carrying on and of doing one’s best from the clergy and laity. Amidst the work of food banks, parish calling, zoom-groups and prayer, the Church has still found time to shine a spotlight on contemporary problems. We have articles, Tweets and Facebook rants on the Bishops’ position on closing churches even unnecessarily-vitriol-spiked diatribes on why the Eucharist can most certainly *not* be celebrated at a distance through a webcam. All these things are important and have their place and yet it seems that the energy used could be better used elsewhere.

Traditionally at Rogationtide the parish boundaries were beaten, processions had, and God’s protection and blessing prayed for over our corners of creation. It is still useful as a concept because Rogationtide is about *place, limits* and *prayer*.

Place at this time can mean our homes, our home prayer spaces, our communities, our parish or our country. Now we are all probably more aware of these than usual. There are areas we cannot go and the number of places we can access has been reduced. But whether clergy or laity, we still belong to a community and a parish. How well do we know it? Do we know what is going in our own place in terms of relief and support for this pandemic? For young people? For the lonely? What are our community hubs doing? What is going up in the windows of our street?

How visible is the Church in our places? Whether we enjoyed the Archbishop of Canterbury celebrating Easter from his kitchen or not, at least by virtue of the press picking this up the wider nation was aware that it happened ... Christians were not skipping Easter this year! No matter where we find ourselves there is an imperative to live, proclaim and be comforted by the Gospel, this includes pastoral duty and potential for mission. Too often we do not know about our place or community, we have forgotten much of what the literal beating of the bounds and its purpose meant to our forebears.

We are all *limited* both by boundaries and by the current lockdown, but still we must not draw our limits too tightly. If the Church of England is not the Church *for* England in a crisis what claim do we have to that title any other time? The Revd. Alice Whalley’s recent article in The Church Times makes the precise point that it is not *that* the Church is concerned with the spiritual diet of its congregants, or the theology of all of this or that latest digital endeavour that is an issue; it is that it appears to be concerned with these things whilst *not* being overly concerned with the stuff of the Beatitudes as well. She notes the class dimensions here and pithily ends saying that she cannot ‘dream of putting a notice on their church door that says “No food here, but Morning Prayer is online.”’

The woman who works for the council who contacted me may have not had any faith, but she certainly had a view of the Church. We could pick this apart, but at a fundamental level there is

still some sense of the parish church being a force for good in our cities, villages and communities. We should make sure during this time that we don't damage what little of this reputation is left by neglecting the poor, marginalised and hungry whilst providing wonderful resources and support to our own select few. Parish by parish and person by person this will vary: what a well-resourced youth worker or pastoral volunteer can do is going to be different to what the stalwart wardens of a parish in vacancy can manage. Regardless, we (lay, ordained, older or younger) can be there in some way for those in our parish – the *full* parish around which the boundaries nominally extend.

Then there is *prayer* and the blessing and protections prayed for at Rogationtide. The processions of old served in one sense the same purpose as the church bell (perhaps before they became the source of much local drinking and revelry, and got banned in the 16th century, but perhaps even then) in that it told the people they were being prayed for. It wasn't just the people and their problems but their land, their place, their boundaries, their whole community prayed for and blessed. Are we communicating our prayer for the community now? When my own congregation tells me that they have never prayed as much as now and that they are having something of a spiritual renaissance under these troubled circumstances, I must acknowledge this as positive change for the future.

What is important is that this prayer is happening and it is to be shared. It is perhaps easier to decentralise the self from our own little universes in times of crisis and recognise our own need of prayer and of God – but we dare not underestimate the needs of those around us, even if they do not seem to have faith. Knowing that we are bothered, knowing that we remember them is part of the Christian imperative. With so many deaths and much suffering from isolation, knowing that there is someone out there caring for you can make a difference.

None of this is to say that 'now is not a time for theology' or that 'worrying about rules' or 'the right way to do things' does not matter: it does; but we must not forget our vocation as the Church of England, the Church of the people. We can re-beat those boundaries, whether with a phone call or a huge parish volunteer initiative, a prayer or a house-group, much or little – anything. It is my hope that the Church of England is found after all of this to have taken on board some of the changes these extraordinary times demand - and that might just be nudges from God. Rather than having retreated behind shrinking exclusive boundaries, it will have been found to be visible amongst its communities carrying on, parochially doing its best and never out of sight!

¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-52261378/coronavirus-the-archbishop-of-canterbury-on-his-virtual-easter-sermon> for example.

² <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2020/24-april/comment/opinion/youtube-sermons-will-not-feed-the-hungry>

³ See for example Grace Davie's notion of *vicarious religion* in her book *Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox* (2015)

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