

Beating the Bounds on Rogation Sunday, 5th May 2024

Rogation

Rogation is an ancient church festival to seek blessing for a community and its sustenance. The word rogation comes from the Latin verb rogare, meaning “to ask”, which reflects the beseeching of God for protection from calamities.

Rogation invites people to ask for blessing – for a particular place; for all its inhabitants; for every endeavour to promote the common good. It is totally inclusive – joining everyone in seeking sustenance and a commitment to play their part in its provision.

As the Book of Common Prayer puts it: “Rogation Days are the three days preceding Ascension Day, especially devoted to asking for God’s blessing on agriculture and industry.”

“Beating the Bounds” on Rogation Sunday

The tradition involves the incumbent walking the boundaries of the parish – which is called “beating the bounds” – praying the Great Litany as well as psalms and asking for God’s blessing for well-being of the community.

In former times when maps were rare, it was usual to make a formal perambulation of the parish boundaries. Knowledge of the limits of each parish needed to be handed down so that such matters as liability to contribute to the repair of the church or the right to be buried within the churchyard were not disputed. The priest of the parish with the churchwardens and the parochial officials headed a crowd of boys who beat the parish boundary markers with green boughs, usually birch or willow. The object of taking boys along was supposed to ensure that witnesses to the boundaries should survive as long as possible.

Beating the Bounds in times past

At Turnworth in Dorset the parish register records the perambulation for 1747 thus: “On Ascension Day after morning prayer, was made a public Perambulation of the bounds of the parish of Turnworth by me Richd. Cobbe, Vicar, Wm. Northover, Churchwarden, Henry Sillers and Richard Mullen, Overseers and others with 4 boys; beginning at the Church



Hatch and cutting a great T on the most principal parts of the bounds. Whipping the boys by way of remembrance and stopping their cry with some half-pence; we returned to church again, which Perambulation and Processioning had not been made for five years last past.”

Bequests were sometimes made in connection with bounds-beating. For example, at Leighton Buzzard on Rogation Monday, in accordance with the will of Edward Wilkes, a London merchant who died in 1646, the trustees of his almshouses accompanied the boys. The will was read and beer and plum rolls distributed. A remarkable feature of the bequest was that while the will is read one of the boys has to stand on his head.