

Reflection on Sunday 21 May 2023

by Forbes Mutch, Lay Leader of Worship

Beating the Bounds

When I was growing up, I used to spend every summer staying on my grandmother's farm, close to the Suffolk/Cambridge border. She lived in a village called Borough Green, just down the road from Six Mile Bottom which, as a seven-year-old, I found hilarious.

The farm was worked by my two uncles, and I helped them with odd jobs and, frankly, they wouldn't have been able to complete the harvest every year without my assistance.

One day on the farm, I discovered a rusty old bicycle. It was too big for me; it had an inconvenient hard metal rod called a crossbar, the brakes didn't work, and the combination of these factors caused me endless injury and bruising in delicate parts of my anatomy as I tried to master balancing, steering and forward motion all at the same time. As a bike, it was perfect. I loved it.

Learning how to ride a bike was (and probably still is) a sort of rite of passage for a seven-year-old boy. And, once I'd done that, it gave me a new-found freedom and I started discovering more of my grandmother's village.

Her farm was very old; the farmhouse was built originally in around 1460, the deeds were kept in Pembroke College, Cambridge, and it had a prominent position in the village, next to the *Black Bull* public house and across the green from the church, the rectory and the now-derelict manor house. The village was home to about 400 people, as it had been, more or less, for hundreds of years. There was a lot of history there, a lot of tradition.

I developed a cycle circuit around the village – down the Back Lane, riding fast past the old cottage where a widow lived (obviously a witch), pull up outside the corner shop; sneak round the back, take a couple of empty lemonade bottles out of the crate there, go in the front of the shop and claim the refund from Mrs Tuppence behind the counter. I didn't know what her real name was, but she would unsuspectingly (or perhaps she turned a kindly blind eye) give me a penny for each bottle. One penny would buy four Blackjacks, those disgusting aniseed-flavoured sweets that turned your tongue and mouth a sort of purple colour. On I'd go, avoiding Wickes Farm, where there was a fierce black dog, and I'd end up down the road near to The Moat, an isolated wood, rumoured to be once the site of a medieval castle, obviously now haunted. I'd finish back at Pembroke Farm in time for tea, satisfied that my world was complete, and everything was in order.

Fast forward 60 years.

As you know, last week we celebrated Ascension Day on Thursday and have continued to reference the Ascension today. It's an important highlight in the year. What some of you may not know is that the three days (Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday) before Ascension Day are known in the Christian calendar as the Minor Rogation Days. These are days of prayer and fasting. The so-called *major* rogation is held on 25 April; the *minor* rogations come later. The word *rogation* comes from the Latin verb *rogare*, meaning 'to ask', which reflects the beseeching of God for the appeasement of his anger, for protection from calamities and for plentiful growth of this year's crops.

As rural life developed in post-Roman Britain, as we entered the Middle Ages, Rogation Week also became the time to Beat the Bounds of the Parish. This is where the priest of the parish would lead a perambulation of churchwardens and other parochial officials, plus a crowd of choir boys, around the boundary of the parish, beating the boundary markers with green branches, usually birch or willow. Sometimes the choir boys were beaten as well to make them remember where the parish boundaries were. It was a sort of stock taking of the local territory and, at the same time, an opportunity to pray for abundance in the farming community.

The fasting helped to focus the mind on the ways of God (and also because the spring crops had not started growing, winter larders were bare).

Reading about Rogation Days and Beating the Bounds, got me thinking about our modern lives. Life is so much busier for us than it was for people in Medieval times, where the top

priorities were to know your place, make sure your family had enough to eat and to avoid illness and the plague. Basically, the priority of life for most people then was to simply stay alive.

These days, I don't have to tell you, life is a little bit more complicated for ordinary people living in the developed world, so much so that I would be here all morning if I started listing those complications or asking for your suggestions. Work, healthcare, education, the house, utilities, transport, technology, politics, the environment, holidays, shopping, fashion, pets, visiting family, making coffee for the congregation after church... life is complicated, isn't it? And we all suffer from information overload.

Sometimes, I wish I could get back on my rusty old bike and beat the bounds of my life... taking the time to perambulate leisurely from station to station, checking in with God that all is well – here and there – and calmly asking for his protection and reassurance, rather than rushing around in a panic, only praying with sincerity during the latest crisis, not anticipating the next crisis but being reactionary the whole time.

OK, in the cycle of life, you do have to be reactionary sometimes – you are going to come down with a thump on the crossbar occasionally; the brakes are going to fail, a big black dog will bark at you and the odd ghost will come out of the woods to haunt you. But you are never alone when that happens.

I agree with Brian Morykon, Director of Communications at the American Christian think tank Renovare. He says: *I'm thankful that the Gospels are not simply a list of the sayings of Jesus. It could have been that way, a sort of Proverbs Volume 2, Jesus Edition. Instead, the Gospel writers present the words of Jesus within the life of Jesus – a flesh-and-blood life lived in a broken world during tumultuous times...* So, Christ's focus during his time in this world was on doing what the Father asked him to do. Then he breathed on us. Now we are Christ's body here on earth.

Following Christ's example, we each have work that God gives us to do. And following Christ's example, that work is best done when we withdraw in prayer; when we take the time to beat the bounds of our lives, giving our attention to the quiet voice of God and working out the important priorities within the boundaries of our lives. I leave you with a prayer:

Lord,
My world is on fire.
It rains from time to time,
But still flames in my life rage,
Sometimes hotter
Sometimes higher.



Help me to feel your peace,
Help me to see everything in my life
In its true perspective,
Within its boundary,
With everything fitting neatly
together
As a jigsaw completed by you.
Amen