Sermon for Plough Sunday Revd Emma Phillips

Intro

Plough Sunday is the time to celebrate the long hours of tilling and preparing before the seed can be sown.  It is a celebration of digging and the labour of winter feeding of cattle.  We celebrate too the beginning of the lambing season. Beyond that it is the time to celebrate the mystery of land and soil itself and all that keeps it in good heart.  It is the festival of human labour.

In early and Medieval times the communal plough was often kept in church.  At the end of the Christmas season when there was no work, and therefore no wages nor free meals, the ploughmen would take the plough round the farmers and landowners to beg for silver.  This custom is known to have got out of hand sometimes, for threats to plough up gardens were made if money was not forthcoming!

Plough Sunday was a Victorian innovation, but it is a good time to remember the farming cycle and it reminds us to break up our fallow ground.  In earlier times there were Plough Monday celebrations, marking return to work after the Christmas season.  Typical festivities were Morris dancing, a Feast of Fools, Mab and his wife and perhaps a man dressed as a bear. I’m afraid our celebration today will be much more tame! But in this time of climate emergency, we have that much more need to turn to God in thankfulness for the fruits of each season and the work of our farmers, as they stand in the front line.

Talk

Our readings today tell us unambiguously that God cares for us. He has promised in the story of Noah to preserve the rhythm of the seasons, providing food for us. Jesus reassures us that we are more precious to God than the most beautiful wildflower, even though it is more glorious than the clothes of the richest person possible. We might believe that in the peace and holiness of church, but how well do we hang onto that sense of care and provision in our everyday life?

Plough Sunday, at the beginning of a new year, is an excellent time to remember that we have an everyday faith, not just a Sunday best faith. We are thinking in our service about the tools of the farming trade, but we could include the tools of every job – computers and books, saws and fishing nets, money and telephones, even cups of tea for having better conversations. All of these are blessed by God in our day to day living, sharing his love and witnessing to his kingdom of justice and mercy.

But living in a rural community as we do, Plough Sunday is an excellent opportunity to pay attention to our farmers in particular, to listen to them, and find out what their challenges are. How many of you are from farming families? Would any of you be willing to tell us what you will be doing this time tomorrow – just to have a snap shot of your working lives? What are you looking forward to this week? What’s going to be hard work? Is there anything that we should be especially praying about?

I will take these thoughts and needs into our prayers this morning, and I encourage each person here to hold up our farmers in prayer particularly this week. Look out at the fields around you, pay attention to all the work that goes on, and bring it before God. We know that our food does not materialise on supermarket shelves all by itself – but we can be amazingly blind sometimes! Is God encouraging you to find out more, to buy locally, or to grow your own? As a farmer, are you in need of specific support that our church community could help with? Faith is not an airy-fairy thing but a practical, hands on way to live – and we all need each other to make it real.

So right now, we are going to make that visible as we take symbols of farming life and pray for blessings on them, and the people that use them.

Rev’d Emma Phillips