

Plough Service at Coventry Cathedral

14th Jan 2012



A tractor and plough outside Coventry Cathedral.



Bishop John's Sermon

What a joy to have a plough in Church! We have had a tractor in this Mother Church 15 years ago to celebrate 50 years of Massey Ferguson, one of the great Coventry industries of international repute, a tractor which was destined for farming communities in Zimbabwe. Massey Ferguson in Banner Lane built on the site used until 1945 to make weapons of war – a wonderful example in this City of Peace of 'swords into ploughshares'. And now, at the beginning of the year, following an ancient tradition before the age of the tractor, we bring a plough to Church. We gather to ask God's blessing on the plough, on those who plough and all farmers and God's blessing on the farming year.

But this is not an exercise in nostalgia as if we were simply remembering a quaint medieval tradition. No, it is far more important than that. It may be unusual to see a plough in Church but it is so right. Why? First, because this is what worship is actually all about, bringing real life to God, bringing our lives and that includes our working lives to God. This is what 'the offertory' and 'offertory procession' Sunday by Sunday is all about.

Second, because it is a wonderful reminder of - and utterly in keeping with - the fact that the Word of God, the Bible, is steeped in the language of agriculture. It is rooted – most of it – in rural farming life, as the agricultural detail of the first reading so vividly testifies. The teaching of Jesus, the Good News of the Gospel, is communicated again and again in the language of shepherds and sheep, sheep and goats, sowers and seed, wheat and chaff, vines and vineyards and even, yes, ploughs and ploughing. The most precious life-giving words ever written, spoken or heard are rooted in the language of farming to be accessible to His hearers. William Tyndale, translator of Scriptures into English in the 16th century, was burnt at the stake because of his godly passion that the Scriptures should be understood even by the ploughboy. In Langland's 14th century satire on corruption in Church and society, Piers Plowman, it is the ploughboy, close to the soil, who knows Jesus best and certainly not the clergy!

As a Church we need to be re-rooted in the soil, to be earthed in God's good earth. As a sign of this I have brought two boots! The first one here still has on it the sand of the Sinai desert where I led a retreat. It is not impossible that this sand is the sand that Moses actually walked on. Moses, you will remember, in the Sinai desert encountered God in a bush which was alive and aflame with the glory of God. God says to him, 'Take off your shoes the ground on which you stand is holy ground.' (Ex.3.5) My other boot is graced with Warwickshire mud and the same applies, it is God's good earth on which we depend. 'The earth is the Lord's'. It is not yours or mine. We are the stewards.

So, it is good to have a plough with us for a third reason. It is good to have a plough among us in the city. How easily urban humanity can lose touch with the rhythms of nature in the country and with the soil on which we all depend for life and lose all knowledge of the journey from plough to plate. When I began my ordained ministry in Hillfields some thirty years ago, amidst the high-rise flats and terraced housing, a great thing happened, Coventry City Farm. Most of the children in the parish had never seen cattle or sheep or even hens. More worryingly still, this was true of most of their parents. What a difference the farm made. What a difference it makes to connect with God's creation and God's creatures and to be involved with them. It is, to use a good New Testament word, therapeutic. A wonderful example of this therapeutic value of farming is 'Care Farming' where people struggling with all sorts of difficulties – mental health, addiction, criminality amongst others- find their lives being changed and released by hands on engagement in farming.

Finally, it is good to have a plough here for a fourth reason. Why? So that we, whether we live in town or country, can become more aware of some of the issues being faced by farmers and so support them better prayerfully, pastorally and practically. The last twelve years or so has brought extraordinary and often

devastating challenges to farmers. Among them of course Foot and Mouth, blue tongue, flooding, bovine TB –a very live issue still, not to mention the huge increase in paperwork and bureaucracy demanded of all farmers and problems with the Rural Payments Agency. A quarter of British farmers, I am told, now live below the poverty line. All such burdens bring of course great stress and often a greater sense of isolation and helplessness. In the midst of all this, there is help at hand and much of this help has a Christian source and origin, not least the Addington Fund and the Farm Crisis Network (FCN) with us here today. I urge your generous support for the FCN today who provide marvellous pastoral and practical support to farmers in crisis, sometimes actually making the difference between life and death.

I have been visiting farms in Warwickshire with Barbara – and how blessed we are as a Diocese to have her, a farmer and priest, as our Rural Life officer. It's good to have clergy who know what they are talking about! I have myself in days of yore actually worked on two farms and driven tractors, with 3 ton rollers on the back and I have harrowed fields. I have never ploughed. Jesus says 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.' (Luke 9.62)

Jesus' words are for all of us whether we have ploughed or not. Saying 'Yes' to God is a continuing journey so let us not look back but 'keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.' (Heb.12.2)

A prayer from the words of Hosea:

***"Let us sow for ourselves righteousness and reap the fruit of unfailing love.
Let us break up the unploughed ground of our own lives, for it is time to seek the Lord."***

Hosea 10.12.

+John Stroyan. 14.01.12