

You can hardly have missed the fact that today is Plough Sunday – traditionally the Sunday after Epiphany. Why now? Well because back in the days when church and farming were closely linked this was when ploughing the fields started turn the soil so that the frost of January and February could break it down ready for sowing in March.

It is a Sunday set aside not only to bless the plough and the ploughmen, but also to give thanks for those who look after the land and the countryside, as well as producing food for everyone else. Because make no mistake – here we are in the middle of beautiful countryside, but that is one massive factory – a food factory!!

Sowing then took place in the Spring, so ploughing did not start until after the Christmas festivities. Opportunity was also taken to pray for a successful harvest. One only has to read Thomas Hardy's 'The Mayor of Casterbridge' to appreciate the horrors of torrential rain and winds when the harvest is ripe. The heavy corn heads are laid low which is bad enough, but even worse is when the sun comes out again – the grain sprouts green again still in the head, making it useless for bread making. In 'The Mayor' we learn about steeply rising prices and inedible bread made from 'growed' grain, leaving the poor to starve.

In addition to wheat, barley was needed to feed the pig everyone had at the bottom of the garden and to

make beer; oats were needed to feed the horses that were the powerhouse of any farm. A bad harvest could not spell starvation and death. In those days no farmer would miss attendance at church on Plough Sunday!

Today in farming we are still reliant on the weather and God's goodness although, in our world market, we can import food in from round the world if our harvests fail or need supplementing (or even if they don't!) so long as you don't mind about the ozone layer and food miles, or the poor farmer here trying to make a living.

In those days each parish had its own person who celebrated the farming festivals – Plough Sunday, Rogation, Lammas, Harvest. Potatoes were planted

on Good Friday (hopefully before or after church attendance) so that they could be harvested Whit Monday – another festival that seems to have disappeared. Apples were no good until they had been 'christened' by rain on St Swithin's Day. At Candlemas Day, it's time to sow beans in the day. Peas and other beans needed to be sown early in March when the feast days of St David, St Chad and St Benedict. If they weren't in the ground by St Benedict on March 21st people were advised not to bother at all as they would be no good.

Those of you who are Keats's fans will remember that on the Eve of St Mark young country girls should go to bed and dream of their future husband. St

Marks day is 25th April for those who fancy trying this out!

Add to this that the four quarter days were Lady Day, Midsummer's Day, Michaelmas and Christmas Day when farming rent is still always due and when tenancies still change hands and you can begin to see how intertwined church and farming life has always been.

So, what of farming today? Those farms who do not practice "min till", with minimal cultivation will have the eight furrow reversible monster ploughs in the fields as soon as the combines have left. No time for the wildlife to feed on the seeds that have fallen to the ground. Having that, I did see one of those "animals" just outside Milborne Port this last week

being pulled by a top of the range, £330k Fendt tractor. On the farms with 1000 cow "super herds", the cows are milked three times a day to obtain the maximum amount of milk, even though it means that a cow is unlikely to last more than 5 years with the stress (or the dairyman either for that matter!) Even so, according to DEFRA's own figures, 1 farmer leaves the industry every month.

Herds are sold, farmhands are redundant, while the supermarkets tanker in milk from the continent and sell it for less than it costs to produce. Farming is the highest career likely to lead to suicide. Farming still keeps to the old traditions founded in faith, but fewer and fewer farmers are seen in church week by week.

24/7 working is seen as the norm to make ends meet, with no time for church going!

But this is not God's way, he provides in abundance and for those who work with him rather than against him, it is always of good quality. Surely this is really the truth of this account, the miracle itself is of interest, but the main point is the sheer abundance of God's grace to us, which never fails. He knows what we need and provides it, even if we are sometimes surprised by an unexpected gift.

But back to the plough. The poet John Masefield in his narrative poem 'The Everlasting Marcy' sees the ploughman as a source of inspiration and salvation. The central figure – Saul Kane – that's a name to think about – has been a hell-raiser all his life - his

conversion comes as he watches Callow the ploughman serenely ploughing the field behind his horses and he realises that working **with** God's creation, **not** against it is the only way to heaven's gate, the end result of harvest producing the bread and wine for the Communion. He describes his revelation in terms of a field being ploughed, sown and reaped.

O Christ who holds the open gate,

O Christ who drives the furrow straight,

O Christ, the plough, O Christ, the laughter

Of holy white birds flying after,

Lo, all my heart's field red and torn,

And Thou wilt bring the young green corn,

The young green corn divinely springing,

The young green corn forever singing;

And when the field is fresh and fair

Thy blessed feet shall glitter there,

And we will walk the weeded field,

And tell the holden harvests' yield,

The corn that makes the holy bread

By which the soul of man is fed,

The holy bread, the food unpriced,

Thy everlasting mercy, Christ.

Whether we are farming folk or not, perhaps we should all take this opportunity to thank God for his abundance and for all those who work the land to maintain the countryside as we know it and to produce food for us all. And next time you pick up a bag of beans from Kenya or potatoes from Egypt or

Israel, fairly traded or not, spare a thought for those who have to follow the seasons **in this country** to make a living.

I know that many of us here enjoy the countryside, walking or driving through it in all kinds of weather.

Perhaps today is the day to stop and think about, or to praise God for, those who are responsible for maintaining this green and pleasant land so that we can all enjoy it.

So let us pray a short prayer for them:

Thank you, Lord, for all those whose lives are tied to farming, for their 24-hour day commitment to their life as they work with God and the abundance of his creation.

Amen