

## God Speed the Plough

**PREACHER : Canon Ralph Godsall**

Sunday, January 15<sup>th</sup> 2006  
Evensong ~ Plough Sunday

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In a few minutes' time the Dean will be blessing a plough. An odd thing to do, you might think, at cathedral evensong on the Second Sunday of Epiphany. What strange piece of ecclesiastical irrelevance is this?

The origins of Plough Sunday go back a long way, at least into medieval times. On the first Sunday after Epiphany, the parish ploughs, bedecked with ribbons, would be dragged to church to be blessed, as the ploughing season began. On Plough Monday the teams would drag the ploughs round the village, seeking contributions for an 'ale' or night of revelling at the tavern – and woe betide the cottage garden or vegetable plot of any householder who failed to stump up! Plough Tuesday would be spent, more often than not, in recovering. And then the work would begin in earnest.

So in blessing this plough today, we are responding to an instinct deeply felt in less sophisticated times, and still not entirely extinct, to ask God's blessing upon a piece of human endeavour. It is the opportunity to pray for the farms and farmers of our county and of our country. And of course we need to ask God's blessing too on those who farm the hungry lands of our world, and those who harvest its seas – not least those whose livelihoods in Sri Lanka and other parts of SE Asia were lost and their boats destroyed a year ago in the tsunami.

But what is a blessing? In the supermarket recently I noticed a bread wrapper urging 'Give your family the blessing of bran'. We use the word to express good fortune, good health, abundant favour. It can be a greeting, a wish or a farewell. It expresses all that we want for other people, and for ourselves, and all that we hope for from God.

Our Jewish ancestors in faith felt the same way. One of the most characteristic prayers in the Jewish liturgy is the Amidah, or Eighteen Benedictions. In the Bible, a blessing is a word charged with power, through which God himself, or one who represents him, causes to descend upon people, animals and things, health and prosperity and the joy of life. To bless is to see life not as a purely natural phenomenon, but as the gift of God – vulnerable to the workings of the natural world and the sinfulness of human beings, and therefore needing to be hallowed and placed within the sphere of God's grace and mercy. When someone gives a blessing, as the Dean will twice at this service, he does not draw from within himself, but from the overflowing bounty of God.

All of God's involvement with his people is characterised by blessing. One of the most touching scenes in the gospels shows Jesus welcoming the children, putting his arms around them and blessing them. As he ascends into heaven he raises his hands and blesses his disciples. And he blesses food before he takes it and breaks it, and gives it to be eaten.

So a blessing is our praise and thanksgiving. It is our hope and our prayer. It is God's grace and glory poured out to us. And as all the Epiphany signs and symbols remind us, that grace and that glory are never stinted. Just as when Jesus turned the water into wine at the wedding in Cana, and produced about 150 gallons of very good wine, so at the fish picnic on the shore of Lake Galilee his distribution of the five loaves and two fishes produced twelve great baskets of surplus.

But notice too how these blessings are not some kind of magical protection – from thirst or hunger or pain – but rather take the form of immensely practical responses to human need. God’s blessings have been poured out in the past year in all the coastal lands of the Indian Ocean, in compassion and caring and innumerable acts of mercy. In Sri Lanka, for example, sworn enemies have co-operated and helped one another in ways undreamt of a year ago.

In her novel ‘Death comes to the Archbishop’ Willa Cather has her central character say this:

“Where there is great love there are always miracles....

....The miracles of the Church seem to me to rest not so much upon faces or voices or healing power coming suddenly near to us from afar, but upon our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there for us always.”

Blessings are signs of God’s love. They direct our attention to his active presence in and around us. St Ambrose put it well when he wrote:

“You may not be rich. You may not be able to bequeath any great possessions to your children. But one thing you can give them – the heritage of your blessing. And it is better to be blessed than to be rich.”

As we ask God’s blessing today on the plough, on the work of farms and farmers and all who work to alleviate the world’s hunger, we should do so with confidence and with faith. For when our eyes are open to God and the things of God, and our hearts are open to those in need, God never hesitates to pour out his blessings upon us and those for whom we pray. And for that today on this Plough Sunday, thanks be to God.