



Beyond Consumerism

PLOUGH SUNDAY

SUNDAY 7 JANUARY 2024



Arthur Rank
Centre

CONFIDENT RURAL CHRISTIANS



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Introduction

Welcome to the second part in our series of worship resources specially written for the Arthur Rank Centre to complement their *Beyond Consumerism* project. During Advent, we began to consider the connection between faith and food and we explored ways of 'doing December differently'. Now, at the beginning of a new year, Plough Sunday takes us to the heart of the rural community, and to the heart of the Gospel and the growing potential of God's Kingdom.

I live just down the road from one of the farms in the village. Most of my regular walks go across their fields, so I remain constantly connected to what is happening to the land. I have noted that preparation and planting occurs after the end of the previous season, in the autumn as well as in the early spring. Winter crops of wheat, barley, oats, beans, and rape benefit from vernalization over the winter. Attention is given to the soil, the weather and the seed. Talking to local farmers, I discover that they are adopting minimum tillage to retain soil structure, being careful not to overwork the soil. Depending on how much work the soil needs, a disc-harrow may follow the plough to create a seedbed of finer tilth for better germination. Farmers are taking into account carbon reducing methods and machinery, and also considering fuel costs.

Changing times

Although the nature of farming is changing, Plough Sunday remains a great opportunity to celebrate farming and the work of farmers, and to pray for blessing on the land and the coming year's harvest.

Plough Sunday traditionally falls on the first Sunday of Epiphany, but behind this lies the older tradition of Plough Monday stretching back to Medieval times. This marked the resumption of agricultural work after the twelve days of Christmas. The plough was often kept in the church when not in use, so the farmers would gather at church to bring the plough out again. In days when work was scarce in winter, Plough Sunday was a time to give thanks for the growing potential of the land, to bless the plough, the land and the crops, to bless the ploughmen and women of the community, and to pray for a good harvest.

As we read the Gospels, we soon notice that many of Jesus' parables are about things that grow. There are numerous parables about farmers and growing seed, which can be interpreted in terms of the seeds planted into our hearts and lives. We often begin January with New Year Resolutions, so this is also a



good time to reflect on our own lives to amend our ways. We might ask ourselves the question: How do we create good soil and a healthy environment in our own lives, in our homes, and in our communities for God's Kingdom to grow? What needs to be cut through, broken up or overturned?

Plough Sunday coincides with Epiphany in the church calendar. If we have an epiphany, we have a light bulb moment. We make a new discovery or experience an illuminating realization or a fresh grasp on reality. Let us pray that as we explore faith and food in greater depth during this coming year, new seeds will germinate in our lives, leading us to a more considerate and sustainable way of life both physically and spiritually.

Venue and time

On Plough Sunday today, farmers might be invited to arrive on tractors or to bring some bits and pieces off machines – a ploughshare or harrow disc. However, be aware that the time you normally hold a service might not be the best time for the local farmer. Do your research in advance and consider appropriate alternatives. As you begin to plan, some useful questions might be:

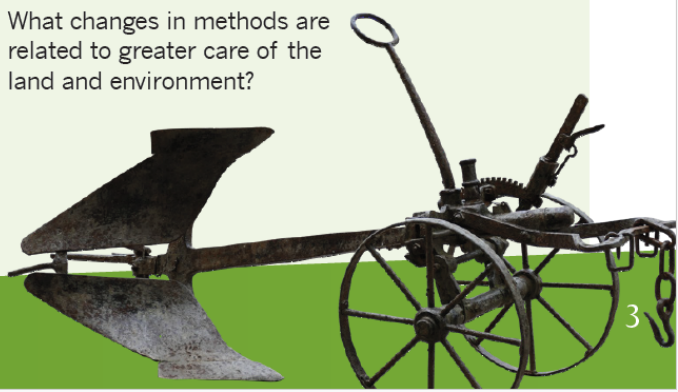
- Who do you want to come?
- Which location is most appropriate for this service?
- What time will work well for farmers?
- What will help to create the right kind of worshipful atmosphere?

A Plough Sunday service may work much better on a farm where the congregation can engage directly with the farmer and the types of contemporary machinery used to prepare the land for sowing today. We can experience the land in a more immediate way using all our senses, either worshipping out of doors or in a barn, even in January. This may be a time to wrap up warm and get creative!

From experience, local farmers are really pleased to be asked about farming one-to-one but may be less comfortable standing up at the front of church and talking to a whole congregation. Meeting them on their own turf will find them more relaxed and might help to overcome some reticence. A service on the farm gives a new sense of ownership. It also appeals to all ages and enables us to investigate first-hand the large tractors and types of ploughs, harrows and seed drills in use today.

Some good questions to ask farmers might be:

- What is the purpose of ploughing?
- How has ploughing changed during your lifetime?
- When are the best times to plough?
- How long do you spend preparing the soil for sowing?
- What changes in methods are related to greater care of the land and environment?



Flexibility and *imagination*

On Plough Sunday, an idealized rural past can easily collide with current agricultural practice and the challenges facing the farming community today. It is important to keep this festival earthed in the present. A fully worked service follows. This might be best presented as a special one-off service, drawing all the church congregations in the area together on a farm or in a church. Alternatively, it could be used on any Sunday in January if villages only have one service per month and want their own service.

The resource contains challenges to lifestyle with 'A New Year *Grow Your Own* Food Challenge', which can become a family or school project for the next few months and beyond. Ten New Year Resolutions connect faith, food, fair trade, good stewardship of the environment and sustainability.

The reimagining of Plough Sunday broadens our connections with everyday life and work. January can be a depressing month for some, so make this bigger than a single service to give a new focus and sense of purpose and to allow local stories to be told. These remind us that God is there with us everyday, and our everyday lives matter to God.

The Methodist Covenant Service is often celebrated on the first Sunday of the year. This lies at the heart of Methodist devotion and discipleship and their dedication to working for social justice. A reworking of the Methodist Covenant Prayer is included in the form of a New Year Pledge at the end of the Plough Sunday Service. We celebrate what God has done for us and give our lives and choices afresh to God.



Use social media

A large proportion of the population now has smartphones with ready access to camera and video options. Encourage members of the church to get more involved by becoming more observant during January. Where have local farmers got to in this year's annual round of soil preparation and sowing? Who is at work out on the land? What is already growing? We can take photographs and video of what we see and post them on social media channels like Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram as well as sharing them on a display board at church.

Ten New Year *Resolutions*

"Scenario: you wake up and jump in the shower. The water is hot and the house warm. You eat breakfast: coffee made with water boiled in the kettle, and cereal with milk kept cool in the fridge. You throw out the foil trays from last night's takeaway before jumping in the car and setting off for work.

You've done nothing unusual, but already your lifestyle choices – yes, choices – have had an impact on people and the environment across the world."

Taken from 'L is for Lifestyle' by Ruth Valerio. Ruth is a true pioneer, applying faith to environmental issues. You can find out more from her website:

<https://ruthvalerio.net/publications/l-is-for-lifestyle/>

What small changes could you make to your lifestyle and to your church life, which would make a difference to our farmers and food producers, to our environment



and the welfare of animals, and work towards fair trade and fairer distribution of food across the world? How could you become a more eco-friendly church during this coming year?

Ten suggestions to get you started:

1. Aim to eat simpler and eat fresh
2. Cut down on highly processed foods
3. Rediscover the enjoyment in food preparation
4. Buy locally sourced produce
5. Buy animal friendly and fairly traded goods
6. Experiment with some vegetarian options
7. Explore and support organically grown produce
8. Recycle as much as possible at home and at church
9. Reduce your use of plastics at home and at church
10. Determine to reduce your carbon footprint

'A New Year Grow Your Own Food Challenge' for home and school

Worship is more than attending church for an hour on a Sunday. Worship is about a 24/7 lifestyle. St Paul writes: "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God - this is your true and proper worship." (Romans 12. 1) We are called to worship God in the way in which we live our lives Monday to Saturday too.

When we first moved into The Rectory, we reclaimed an overgrown border for a vegetable garden. After the arduous task of removing unwanted stones and deep plant roots, the soil was rotavated and then dug again by hand. It is regularly fertilized with homemade compost, enriched with leaf mould and hen manure. Since then, this area of the garden has produced regular crops of fruit and vegetables. Initial food shortages at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic inspired me to plant with more care with the idea of sharing my produce more widely amongst family, friends and neighbours.

There is something deeply satisfying about home growing. We can discover more about the importance of soil quality and the role of water, frost (cold) and sun (warmth). It can be organic and environmentally friendly. The produce is genuinely fresh with no carbon footprint, topped off with the enjoyment of eating the results of your own labour.



You could:

- Sow simple herb pots on the kitchen window-sill
- Sow salad leaves and tomatoes in a window box or hanging basket
- Sow carrots and peppers in patio pots

For those with more space:

- Repurpose a plot in the garden for fruit and vegetables.

Encourage the local school to set aside a growing plot for the children if they don't already have one.

Perhaps consider applying for a 'church allotment' to put your pledges into action and to share produce with those in particular need.



Plough Pudding

As this resource is part of a project all about food, why not try out a 'Plough Pudding'? This is a boiled suet pudding, originating from Norfolk and traditionally eaten on Plough Monday. It is made with sausage meat, bacon, and onion seasoned with sage and a little brown sugar, encased in a soft suet dough. You can find a recipe at: www.foodsofengland.co.uk/norfolkploughpudding.htm

Perhaps you could get creative and invent a vegetarian or vegan option?

As you prepare and as you eat, savour each stage and give thanks to God for the provision of food.

A SIMPLE SERVICE *for Plough Sunday*



Encourage those in the congregation including the children and young people to bring a hand trowel and fork and a packet of seeds to consider alongside bigger agricultural implements.

You will also need a small container of soil and a small container of seed.

Voice 1, 2 and 3 can remain the same throughout the service, or they can be shared out among the congregation more widely.

OPENING RESPONSES

The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it.
The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it.

There is a time to sow and a time to reap.
The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it.

The Lord gives seed for planting and food to eat.
The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it.

HYMN/SONG

INTRODUCTION TO THE SERVICE

giving a brief background to this agricultural festival.

PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING

The whole earth reveals the glory of God.
Creator God, we bring you thanks and praise.

For wild moorland and lofty mountain top,
Creator God, we bring you thanks and praise.

For gentle meadow and wild hedgerow,
Creator God, we bring you thanks and praise.

For dense woodland and open field,
Creator God, we bring you thanks and praise.

For grazing livestock and growing crops,
Creator God, we bring you thanks and praise.

For rain and frost, sun and warmth,
Creator God, we bring you thanks and praise.

For those who tend the earth and work the land,
Creator God, we bring you thanks and praise.

Amen.





OPTIONAL INTERVIEW

with a local farmer or food producer

BIBLE READING: WISDOM FROM THE PROPHETS

Voice 1: Isaiah 28. 23 – 26, 29

Listen and hear my voice; pay attention and hear what I say. When a farmer ploughs for planting, does he plough continually? Does he keep on breaking up and working the soil? When he has levelled the surface, does he not sow caraway and scatter cumin? Does he not plant wheat in its place, barley in its plot, and spelt in its field? His God instructs him and teaches him the right way... All this also comes from the Lord Almighty, wonderful in counsel and magnificent in wisdom.

Voice 2: Isaiah 55. 6 - 11

Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Voice 3: Hosea 10. 12

Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love; break up your fallow ground; for it is time to seek the Lord, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you.

HYMN/SONG

PRAYERS OF CONFESSION FOR THE MISUSE OF THE LAND

Lord God, our maker and our redeemer,
this is your world and we are your people:
come among us and save us.

When we are blind to the beauty of the natural world:
In your mercy,
Lord, forgive us.

When we take for granted the mystery of new life and growth:
In your mercy,
Lord, forgive us.

When we are ungrateful for the rain, frost and sun:
In your mercy,
Lord, forgive us.

When we are careless with our animals and pets:
In your mercy,
Lord, forgive us.

When we exploit the labour of others:
In your mercy,
Lord, forgive us.

When we have wilfully misused your gifts of creation:
In your mercy,
Lord, forgive us.

May the God of love forgive us,
help us to amend our ways,
and strengthen us to do his will,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

BIBLE READING: PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM

Voice 1: Mark 4. 2 – 8

Jesus taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: “Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times.”

Voice 2: Mark 4. 26 - 29

Jesus also said: “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”

Voice 3: Mark 4. 30 - 32

Again Jesus said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.”

OPTIONAL TALK

This could come before or after the Blessing of the Plough, Soil and Seed, whichever suits your situation best. Alternatively, a brief comment on the readings might lead into:



OPTIONAL DISCUSSION IN SMALL GROUPS

The Bible uses farming imagery to explore spiritual truths:

- What is happening in the fields around you? What have you discovered, perhaps for the first time?
- What insights can you draw from the Old Testament prophets?
- How does the breaking up of the ground and the preparation of the soil relate to your spiritual life and wellbeing?
- The parables of growing seed are often very familiar. Look again at the details. What have you not noticed before?
- In the Parables of the Kingdom, the farmer generously sows the seed, but then he waits patiently for God to give the growth. What does this tell you about the growth of God’s Kingdom in your neighbourhood?



THE BLESSING OF PLOUGH, SOIL AND SEED

VOICE 1:

The Plough is a sign of all our labour in the countryside and the machinery used out on the land. It speaks of the farmer's work and the careful preparation of the soil. Trowel and fork are signs of our labour at home and our shared care for the environment. Our tools remind us to prepare our hearts and minds to serve God during the coming year.

*The service leader lays a hand on the plough.
The congregation take their trowels and forks.*

Leader:

Blessed are you, Lord of all creation:
you have provided us with fertile land
and tools and machines to cultivate it.
Bless the fields and the farmers in good weather and bad,
that the ground will yield a good crop.
Bless the tools of our labour, large and small,
and prosper the work of our hands.

God bless the plough.
God bless the plough.

VOICE 2:

The soil is a sign of the potential within surrounding fields. The land is carefully prepared and nourished, sometimes broken up, sometimes carefully turned over, sometimes finely sifted, sometimes left fallow to restore the natural nutrients. We are reminded of areas in our own lives that need to be sifted, reworked and restored.

*The service leader takes a handful of soil.
If outside, the congregation take a handful of soil.*

Leader:

Blessed are you, Lord of all creation:
you have given soil and water, light and warmth
to bring about the miracle of new growth.



Bless the land and nourish it,
that the soil will be healthy and fertile.
Bless our stewardship of the land
that the hungry may be filled.

God bless the soil.
God bless the soil.

VOICE 3:

The seed is a sign of new life. The seed falls into the ground, hidden from sight until the first shoots appear. The stalks will grow tall and strengthen, buffeted by weather fair and foul, gradually maturing to produce a rich harvest. So too, the seed of God's Word is sown in our hearts in faith to bring about a rich harvest of righteousness and blessing.

*The service leader takes a handful of seed.
The congregation takes hold of their packets of seeds.*

Leader:

Blessed are you, Lord of all creation:
you have given seed to the sower
with the hope of a good harvest and the hungry fed.
Bless the seed and watch over it,
that the harvest may be plentiful.
Bless the seed of your Word, planted in our hearts,
that our lives may be a blessing to others.

God bless the seed.
God bless the seed.



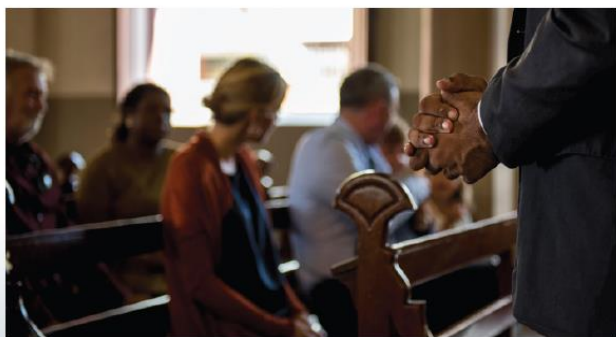
OPTIONAL HYMN/SONG

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

Suggested themes for prayer might be:

- *Farms and farmers in the local area*
- *Farmers and families on the edge as production costs soar*
- *All those involved in the food supply chain*
- *War and its wider impact on food provision for other countries*
- *Wise care of the land to preserve and maintain it for the coming generations*

THE LORD'S PRAYER



A NEW YEAR PLEDGE

Creator God,
the world around me is not mine but yours.
May we treat the land according to your will.
Put me to stand alongside the farmers,
put me to play my part to support the food
producers,
put me to understand better the challenge of climate
change.
Help me get involved for you,
and acknowledge my indifference,
Help me champion the cause,
and confess my apathy.
Let me be satisfied,
let me be hungry,
let me have plenty,
let me have nothing:
I freely and wholeheartedly pursue your ways
of respect, justice and responsibility.
And now, glorious and blessed God,
Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer,
you have placed me in the world you have formed.
So be it.
And this pledge now made on earth, let it be
approved in heaven.

(A re-working of the Methodist Covenant Prayer)

HYMN/SONG

BLESSING

God of Creation,
who provides seed for the sower
and food for the hungry,
go with you/us to watch over you/us and protect you/us,
and in due time to bring forth
a harvest of righteousness and plenty:
and the blessing of God Almighty,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit
be among you/us now and always.
Amen





MUSIC SUGGESTIONS

The hymns, songs and short chants that follow can be used with organ, piano, sung unaccompanied or played on mp3.

'Above the moon earth rises', Thomas H. Troeger, Tune: Salley Gardens, reflecting on making good choices about how we use and care for the land, AM 531

'All creatures of our God and King', William H Draper, based on St Francis of Assisi. This feels very different when sung outside. AM 532, StF 99, CH4 147, HON 6, MP 7, SoF 645

'As the seeds are planted' (Let the earth find rest), Chris Juby, Resound Worship, part of a new set of environmentally aware hymns. Downloads available from www.doxecology.org/resources

'Behold, I make all things new', John L. Bell, from Come All You People, Wild Goose Publications, a short chant which works well unaccompanied. AM 328

'Giving it all to you', Geraldine Latty, 2000, simple and poignant, StF 551

'God in such love for us', Fred Pratt Green, CH4 240, StF 727, MP 832,

'God's will for creation', from the Gaelic Text, Carmina Gadelica, CH4 136

'God, the maker of heavens', Sam Hargreaves, Tune: Converse ('What a friend we have in Jesus'), Resound Worship, downloads available from www.doxecology.org/resources

'God, whose farm is all creation', John Arlott, StF 122, CH4 226, HON 221

'Great is Thy faithfulness', Thomas O. Chisholm, AM 650, StF 51, CH4 153, HON 238, MP 200, SoF 147

'Here am I, Lord', Keith Duke, 2003, Northumbria Community from Celtic Daily Prayer, works well unaccompanied SATB, but Singing the Faith offers an attractive optional flowing piano accompaniment, StF 552

'I, the Lord of sea and sky', Daniel L. Schutte, AM 494, StF 663, CH4 251, HON 324, MP 857, SoF 830

'Jesus, be the centre', Michael Frye, 1999, StF 447, HON 334, MP 1076, SoF 1377

'Lord, bring the day to pass', Ian Masson Fraser, raised questions about ecology and care of the land before it was fashionable to do so, CH4 238

'Lord, your hands have formed this world', Ramon and Sario Oliano, translated by James Minchin and Delebert Rice, (Traditional Philippino melody) works well unaccompanied, CH4 140

'Ploughing Theme', John Williams, from the film Warhorse

'The earth is the Lord's', Graham Kendrick, based on Psalm 24, MP 642

'The world is made by your creative hand', Tom Gordon, described as a hymn for COP 26, <https://www.ionabooks.com/product/a-wake-up-call-pdf-download/>

'Think of a world without any flowers', Doreen E. Newport, popular in primary schools, AM 552, StF 92, CH4 155, HON 662

'Touch the earth lightly', Shirley Erena Murray, Tune: Tenderness, a hymn encouraging respect for the land and the environment, using major/minor to good effect, AM 553i, StF 729, CH4 243

'We plough the fields and scatter', Matthias Claudius, translated Jane Montgomery Campbell, AM 290, StF 130, CH4 229, HON 705, MP 732, SoF 585

Hymn numbers, unless otherwise stated, are taken from the following hymnbooks:

Ancient and Modern: Hymns and Songs for Refreshing Worship, (AM)

Singing the Faith (StF)

Hymns Old and New: One Church, One Faith, One Lord (HON)

Church Hymnal 4th Edition (CH4)

Mission Praise (MP)

Songs of Fellowship (SoF)

Resource written by Revd Helen Bent, a Worship Consultant and Trainer working with Praxis and Associate Priest in Walgrave Benefice, Peterborough Diocese



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