

Plough Sunday

Notes on the sermon for
St. Andrew's, Kirby Grindalythe on Sunday 29th January 2012

What is the best universal symbol for Peace? Most of us will immediately think of the white dove... However, in this reading we heard from the prophet Isaiah, when God is teaching his people on the Holy Mountain, God chooses a very different symbol for peace: After God has judged between nations and settled disputes Isaiah writes that the nations will beat their swords into ploughshares... This plough is God's symbol of universal peace!

When the nations turn to God they will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. They will give up warand turn to farming.

Millions of people around the world would say "Amen" to that:

Hungry people,
people displaced from land and homes by war,
people bereaved by war, disfigured, mutilated or traumatised by war.

The plough is a symbol of peace and prosperity.

Instead of spending billions of pounds on weapons, the world we could spend it on food production and eradicate hunger.

Instead of our best scientists using their brilliant minds to develop better ways of killing people they could be developing crops that could be grown when there is drought.

The plough is a symbol of peace and prosperity.

But peace is not just the absence of war.

There is not much peace for the stressed out executive who has to keep hitting targets.

There is not much peace for the young couple working long hours to pay huge mortgage debts, longing for the luxury of giving up work for long enough to bring a child into the world.

There is not much peace for the student leaving university with a debt that forces her to choose a career on the basis of remuneration rather than vocation.

There is not even much peace for the ploughman. Any romantic notion of 'time to stand and stare' is far from fact. Reality is the weather and the bills and the low prices. Reality is calculating the effects of Single Farm Payments, guessing prices in advance and deciding the optimum stocking levels. Reality is environmental hoops to be set by DEFRA....etc.

Peace is not just the absence of war. Peace is about right relationships, peace within ourselves, peace in our relationships with others, peace with our environment around and peace with our God who made us.

Here too, the plough is a symbol of peace and prosperity.

The plough takes us right back to the beginning of civilized society as we know it today. Before the plough we lived in small groups of people who were all hunter gatherers, spending all of our time travelling to where the next source of food might be. When we invented the plough we no longer had to travel because we could grow our own food in one place. We could settle and build houses. The plough meant that a few people could grow food for a lot of people which therefore meant the rest of us had time to develop other technologies, to develop literature and art, for religion to grow and so on. It was the plough that was at the start of us all developing right relationships, we learned to share with others as farmers gave their produce to the other villagers, so they in turn shared with them their new technologies, their books and their art, their churches and so on. Of course this is an idealized picture and some people used that time to develop weapons that meant they could go around the world conquering other people and taking their land. But that is why we need to stop and be reminded of what life is really all about:

Growing food is more a part of the solution than the problem.

A Plough Sunday is better than a Sword Sunday.

If I can't sleep I would rather think of children being fed than children being maimed.

Food mountains might be an embarrassment but weapons stockpiles are an obscenity.

People excuse all sorts of questionable activities at work by saying it 'puts food on the table'.

Farmers can say that with honesty, their work puts food on our tables.

On this plough Sunday, we ask God to bless the work of all our farmers this year and we also ask for God's peace in the midst of the most stressful days. We pray this for all those involved with farming and also for the rest of us: a deep peace within ourselves, peace in our relationships with others, peace with our environment around and peace with our God who made us.