

Chichester Cathedral
A Sermon preached on Plough Sunday, 29th January, 2012
by The Revd Dr Mark Betson, Rural Officer, Diocese of Chichester

It is a real privilege to be asked to come and preach here on this Plough Sunday service at Chichester Cathedral and I come to you today wearing a couple of the hats. Those of Rural Officer for the Diocese of Chichester and as Chairman of the Sussex group of Farm Crisis Network.

Forgive any autobiography in what I say but I promise it does relate to the message that I am taking from the readings we have heard. Both from Ecclesiasticus and from St Matthews Gospel.

The countryside and farming in particular have been in my blood from an early age. I don't think I was given much choice in this after my mother had taught me to read on the classic Ladybird book 'On the Farm'. She also taught me with one called 'Old Farm, New Farm', which looking back now was essentially all about a farmer coming in to a failing farm enterprise and turning it around by a some hard work and common sense into a successful business. However to the child's eye it was full of the wonderful ways in which farmers can work on the land.

I did not, however, come from a farming background as my father was a train driver by profession. Fellow lovers of trains I speak to, who are commonly fascinated by this fact, are also often shocked by the revelation that while he was growing up - yes, all he ever wanted to be was a train driver - but not one of steam engines. He wanted to drive diesels and electric trains. Why? Because they were new, they were modern, they were the future.

The reason why I mention these personal facts comes from the message I wanted to bring out from what we have heard in Matthew's Gospel this afternoon. The reading is Jesus famous parable of the sower. It has been pointed out by one commentator on the passage that the sower in the story is in fact a terrible farmer. I mean what farmer wastes seeds by tossing them on to the path or rocky or weed ridden ground? However I leave that one aside as I don't think it was told by Jesus as an example of farming practice. In fact we know this as Jesus goes on to explain to his disciples that the seeds are analogies for the 'words of the kingdom' and the soil is the fertile nature of each and everyone's heart. I'll read again the story:

A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

The message from the passage is one of the growth of faith in people's hearts, of how that faith may struggle given different issues which can affect us. The link with what I said above is one of a message of hope, particularly hope for the future.

Ever since the time of those books I mentioned at the beginning I have always been excited about the future of the countryside and of farming. My dad was looking forward to the future of the trains he loved.

The word of the kingdom is one of hope for the future. It is faith in the possibility of life yielding thirty, sixty, a hundredfold more than it yields now.

That hope in the future though does not always take root and even if it does there are many things which can come along to make it wither or to choke it off. These things are all too present in farming today which can make it very difficult for those who work the land to remain hopeful about the future.

There are many issues that put any optimism in farming under threat today: volatility in prices, both in buying what is needed and in selling what is produced, issues of increased and changing regulation with consequent form filling and changes in practice, the consequences of disease such as bovine tuberculosis - to name just a few. Add to these the constant issues surrounding family stress, personal illness and the sheer hard work that has always been needed to work the land. It may be surprising that there is much hope at all for those who are farming today.

However who has not seen the dawn rise in the countryside, or who has successfully raised and harvested a crop, or who has seen new life in a new born calf or lamb and has not known some optimism? I have said earlier that I have been excited about the future of the countryside and of farming and I am glad to say that I still am – and that is why I am in front of you today.

Despite everything we will always need food on our tables. To simply do that in enough quantity to feed everyone we will always need farmers. As we have seen the world population grow, and with it its appetite, the real issue of having enough to eat has become an ever more pressing issue in decision makers minds. We have also seen how the value of the countryside around us has increased. Not just in financial terms but in people's perception. True, this causes conflicts over how the land is managed, where for example issues around protecting wildlife and keeping a farm viable are argued over. But if the countryside was not so valuable it would not be argued over with such intensity in the first place. So what those who work the land do is of real importance to this country.

Despite all the issues facing farmers there are still many stories of how they are by their ingenuity, common sense and hard work, not just making a living in the countryside but thriving. Sometimes these stories have involved the individuals having to make a leap of faith at some point – be that a change of direction in the business, a decision to move into farming from outside (where they may have had a more comfortable job) or even a decision to retire. That leap of faith requires hope in something beyond the current situation they find themselves in and that is the faith nurtured in the seeds Jesus speaks of in the parable of the sower.

Having this optimism in the future of the countryside and of farming makes me also privileged to help in the work of Farm Crisis Network. FCN provides pastoral and practical support to farming people during periods of anxiety and stress with problems relating to both the farm household and the farm business. FCN shares with the organisations that have come together today, the National Farmers Union and the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution a passion to support farming families in need.

However sowing seeds of hope is not limited to these organisations. We each have the potential to bring hope into the lives of our rural communities and the farming community in particular. We can support our communities, our people, through our actions, how we shop for example, and through our prayers, responding to the issues they are facing.

I am struck by the end of the reading we also heard this afternoon from the book of Ecclesiasticus, where the writer refers to them ‘who handle the plough, and who glories in the shaft of a goad, who drives oxen and is occupied with their work, and whose talk is about bulls.’ He says of them and others who work with their hands:

*[they] are skilful in their own work.
Without them no city can be inhabited,
and wherever they live, they will not go hungry.
Yet they are not sought out for the council of the people,
nor do they attain eminence in the public assembly.
They do not sit in the judge’s seat,
nor do they understand the decisions of the courts;
they cannot expound discipline or judgement,
and they are not found among the rulers.
But they maintain the fabric of the world,
and their concern is for the exercise of their trade.*

It seems the farmers at the time of this writer, about 2,200 years ago, often faced the same issues as members of the farming community today face. Farmers today also maintain the fabric of our world, they put the food on our plates and look after the countryside we love, and also are concerned for the exercise of their trade. They too are often not the decision makers and the ones in power but without them no city could be inhabited.

So on this Plough Sunday the message I would like us all to take away in listening to these scriptures is one of hope for the future. The Christian message is one of hope told through the person of Jesus Christ. Our faith is built on having hope for future. Jesus knows that this faith is not an easy one to keep – as he tells us in the parable of the sower. Many things can happen in life to have that faith tested. We are not alone though and for those who are having a testing time there are those of us who can support them.

We can do so by our actions, in taking care with the food they buy, showing proper respect for the food and the effort gone into producing it. We can support those in difficulty by listening to them – their concerns and their worries and by encouraging them. And always we can support them in our prayers: So I will finish by doing just that, let us pray:

Heavenly Father, we ask for your blessing at the start of this year to be upon all those who work the land to provide our food. Help us all in our thoughts and deeds to remember their struggles. We pray that you may sow the seeds of hope for the future

in all of our hearts, a future promised to us by your Son and our saviour, Jesus Christ.
Amen.