



A THOUGHT FOR THE WEEKEND

3rd February 2023

This weekend sees 'plough Sunday', traditionally the beginning of the agricultural year, when in some farming areas still there are celebrations and blessings of the land, the farm equipment and workers, -and even a plough brought into church!

Without going quite that far it is good for us to be mindful of where our food comes from and of the cost in terms of hard work and even exploitation, the food miles and 'footprint' behind the cheap food that we have come to expect. I have a picture from the front cover of *'The Farmer and Stockbreeder'*, dated 17th January 1939, showing my father ploughing on Box Hill near Dorking to demonstrate a Ferguson tractor. My early years (much later!) have left me with an appreciation of that life, and of the danger of being separated from a grateful appreciation of God's provision through the earth.

Ploughing was embedded in Hebrew culture as they became sedentary agriculturalists; it is mentioned in Old Testament laws and stories, often as a spiritual metaphor. *"They will beat their swords into ploughshares"* (Isaiah 2:4; Micah 4:3) is a powerful picture of the 'shalom' of God's peace-bringing. *(We pray that such a process may happen across our world today.)* Another lovely passage from Amos includes *"the reaper will be overtaken by the ploughman"*, -a picture of God's restoration and overwhelming blessing.

There's a challenging picture too, in Luke 9:62: *"No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."* It's one of a series of Jesus' statements about the cost of following him (the 'paradox' of losing life to gain life). He speaks to a potential follower who wants to say goodbye to his (or her) family. Perhaps Jesus saw that this person would struggle to follow him, if burdened by looking back with regret over their loss.

We've heard it said that to plough a straight furrow one needs to focus on a fixed point ahead and not look back. Looking back with pride to some golden age, or wistfully to things we regret, is not helpful for our onward journey as followers of Christ. The 'evil one' wants us to trip up over things behind us, to question our resolve to follow our Lord, to be hampered by the past, or by the future, doubting whether God really *"...will make our paths straight"* (Proverbs 3:6).

I like going to ploughing contests; I watch the ploughmen (and women!) pause, measure up, adjust things, restart; but the focus remains forward; going back isn't an option. This is a parable for us too, not to try following the one who makes all things new, whilst wanting to remake all things old. *"Fixing our eyes on Jesus"* (Hebrews 12:1-2) is the watchword for the follower; he is the fixed point for a straight furrow. We need to be like Paul, *"forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead," ... "to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me."* (Philippians 3:13 and 12).

Enjoy your ploughing!