

Iona style Morning Prayer: Sunday, January 17th 2021.

Introduction:

Traditionally, it is at this time of year, in early January, that country areas have celebrated Plough Sunday. This festival was originally celebrated after the twelve days of Christmas as a way of getting back to work. The plough, stored in the church, was decorated, blessed and taken around the village to collect money for the 'plough light', which was a candle kept burning in the church until harvest, reminding people to pray for the land and those who worked on it. Sometimes seed and soil were also blessed.

Of course, this all dates back to a time when all the sowing of cereal crops was done in the spring, so ploughing was done from January onwards, with the long hours of tilling and preparing the land before seed could be sown. But there have been major changes in farming since those days, with autumn sowing much more common, so as to grow winter wheat, winter barley and so on. In recent years we have had such wet winters that there has been more change: farmers are starting to return to spring sowing so that their soil and their seed doesn't get washed away, So we may see a January Plough Sunday becoming the norm again.

But it does lead us to think at this time of year about the potential ahead of us: we can start to look ahead to better times, to new growth, and hopefully, new health.

Prayer

The world belongs to God,
the earth and all its people.
How good it is, how wonderful,
to live together in unity.
Love and faith come together,
justice and peace join hands.
Open our lips, O God,
and our mouths shall proclaim your praise.

Confession

Holy God, maker of all,
have mercy on us.

Jesus Christ, servant of the poor,
have mercy on us.

Holy Spirit, breath of life,
have mercy on us.

At the centre of Christian faith is the belief that God's goodness is at the heart of humanity, planted more deeply than all that is wrong. Let us in silence confess our faults and admit our frailty.

For the dullness of our vision, Father forgive.

For the weakness of our faith, Jesus forgive.

For the joylessness of our living, Spirit forgive.

Holy Three have mercy upon us; forgive us our sins,

help us to seek,

help us to see,

help us to serve you.

Listen to the words of Jesus, words that we can trust

'Don't be afraid, your sins are forgiven. I love you. Come and follow me'.

A Prayer for God's help

Move among us, faithful God; give us life.

Let your people rejoice in you.

Make our hearts clean within us.

Renew us in mind and spirit.

Give us again the joy of your help.

With your spirit of freedom, sustain us. Amen

The Collect

Eternal Lord, our beginning and our end,
Bring us with the whole creation to your glory,
hidden through past ages
And made known in Jesus Christ our Lord
Amen

Bible readings:

Psalm 139, 1-5 and 12-17

1 Samuel 3.1-10

John 1.43-51

At the end of the readings

For the word of God in Scripture,
for the word of God among us,
for the word of God within us,
Thanks be to God.

Reflection.

We're still in the church's season of Epiphany: it runs right on until Candlemas at the end of this month. The definition of the word 'epiphany' is a 'manifestation'—or a 'sudden and striking realization'. Two weeks ago at our Benefice service, we thought about how we might make ourselves more open to God's presence—to that striking realisation of God's reality and nearness., and we talked about how, when we do make ourselves more open to God, it changes us and makes us want to behave in a different way, just as the wise men in that week's reading visited the Christ child, and found themselves going home another way.

And this week, following the same theme, the lectionary has appointed some of my very favourite readings from the whole bible. First, psalm 139, with its beautiful explanation of how God is always near us, whether we know it or not—closer than our own skins—and that he knows us through and through, all the good bits and the not-so-good. And then the story of the young Samuel, and how Eli the old priest had to help him to recognise when God was calling him, and teach him how to respond. And it leads us to ask ourselves the question—would I hear God when he called me? What would that be like? Would it be in a dream, or perhaps through someone else's need? Or would it be a strong sense of vocation, to follow some new path? All those ways sound rather dramatic—something we perhaps might feel are for someone else, not ourselves.

I know that many of you feel a great affinity with the natural world around us—or you wouldn't choose to live here in the first place, as country life can have its downsides, especially in December and January! And I think that Plough Sunday gives us a useful nudge, to remind us of what other ways we can become more aware of God's presence, for example in the natural world around us.

Many of you, like me, will be busy ordering seeds at the moment, more important after our experiences last year when it was hard to get them because so many people were turning to gardening because of the lockdown. And I expect you will be eyeing your veg patch, or your flower beds, and, like the farmers, working out what you want to plant and where it would do best.

And then of course there is the soil itself. Any farmer, any gardener knows that to grow good crops, we need to look after the soil, which is such a remarkable, and in many ways mysterious substance. We're only really just starting to understand the web of interactions between soil particles, bacteria, fungi, worms and other tiny creatures which gives us a fertile growing medium. We know we can help it to be the best it can be, by turning it over, exposing it to the frosts, adding manure and compost that we have made. At the moment the soil is cold and wet—it has only just thawed out up on our

hill—but it won't be all that long till it becomes warm and friable, a pleasure to sieve through our fingers. It gives us a very different way to notice God, and to listen to him—as Creator, and companion, and as force of life.

So let us pray:

Creator God, you give us the amazing gift of soil in which to grow crops to feed both humans and animals. Grant us wisdom as we seek to work with you and in harmony with all life in maintaining soil fertility. As we plant our crops, we trust you for the miracle of growth enabled by the balance of light, warmth, nutrients and moisture to produce an abundant crop.

Amen

Affirmation of Faith

We believe in God the Father,
from whom every family
in heaven and on earth is named.
We believe in God the Son,
who lives in our hearts through faith,
and fills us with his love.
We believe in God the Holy Spirit,
who strengthens us
with power from on high.
We believe in one God;
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

A time for prayer when you may like to:
give thanks for something good that has happened for you.

pray for someone you know who is in trouble of some sort

pray for your friends and family

remember someone who has died.

The Lord's prayer

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name; your kingdom come;
your will be done, on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power
and the glory are yours
now and for ever. Amen.

Closing prayer

Loving God, you have set before us a great hope that your kingdom will come on earth, and have taught us to pray for its coming. Make us ready to thank you for the signs of its dawning, and to pray and work for the perfect day when your will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven. In the name of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

A Blessing

May the blessing of the God of life be ours,
the blessing of the loving Christ be ours,
the blessing of the Holy Spirit be ours,
to cherish us, to help us, to make us holy.
Let us leave this time of worship in peace to love and serve the Lord.
Thanks be to God. Amen