



The Church of England
in Essex and East London

Diocese of Chelmsford

Plough Sunday 2025

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Plough Sunday traditions mark the day that agricultural workers returned to work following Christmas. Motivated and inspired for the future growing season, the workers put Christmas behind them and returned to the land with God's blessing upon them.

Those of us supporting farming communities will be aware of the distress surrounding the impact of the recent budget on UK farming. If Christmas held a brief respite, this week might mark the return to facing the fears of a harsh future. Unusually, on Plough Sunday 2025, I'll be dwelling a little longer with the Christmas story! This isn't about avoiding reality, it's because I think there are some riches within Luke's telling of the birth of Jesus that might inspire us to step less fearfully into the new year.

Luke chapter 2, verses 3 tell us that:

"In those days a decree went out from the Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and it was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their towns to be registered."

These are the verses that have inspired the start of many good nativity plays. A heavily pregnant, exhausted Mary has to endure an uncomfortable ride on a donkey to Bethlehem to enable Joseph to register in his town of birth. This mass movement of people catches the hospitality venues by surprise. On arrival in Bethlehem, they find that the inns are full. There are no beds available. Nativity plays often depict the situation as a terrible muddle. According to later tradition, poor Mary gives birth to Jesus in a stable.

Whether it was a stable or simply a room beyond the usual living-space, the historic accounts of the period describe a muddle of a different kind. Quirinius was charged with carrying out a census to provide property and asset information for the imposition of a new Roman tax. The people were on the move in order to declare their taxable property and assets. The census met strong opposition. The streets of Bethlehem weren't full of tractors, but they might not have been as still and quiet as the Christmas carols depict.

This Plough Sunday, I couldn't overlook that Jesus was born into a community in turmoil due to the imposition of an unpopular inheritance tax. As Agricultural Chaplain, I'm acutely aware of the intense concern surrounding the impact of the planned changes in Agricultural Property Relief. Anger and anxiety; helplessness and hopelessness are palpable amongst those who produce our food.

Could we be drawn to look with fresh eyes at what God offered us when he stepped into a community that had some parallels? Three aspects come to mind.

Firstly, let's acknowledge that God did just that. He stepped into the midst of this human turmoil. Arriving as a human baby into the thick of this sent a strong message. God didn't distance himself from the difficult stuff; nor did he extract his chosen ones from it. In Jesus

he simply came alongside us, assuring us that's he's in this with us. It's a message that hasn't diminished.

Secondly, I'm always struck by those who God chose to initially draw into this event. You may recall that the first visitors to the baby Jesus were shepherds. Angels appeared to them whilst they were out in the fields. Why shepherds? Was it because they noticed the angels? People who work with the land and care for animals are skilled in noticing. They observe their land, its crops and livestock with care. They see the minutia, they see the signs and are ready to respond. They read the skies, the weather, their surroundings and their times. In these things, they perceive the potential and the dangers. In short, they often hold wisdom that can be diminished or overlooked by larger society, at our peril, I fear.

It wasn't overlooked by God.

The angels appeared in the fields. The shepherds sensed the importance of what they were witnessing. They heeded their call. These tough men of the land were the first to fall to their knees in humble adoration of the Christ-child. They were the first to spread the good news to the world too.

And thirdly, let's think about what people found when they accepted the angels' invitation. They found a new baby. When all goes well with a birth, a new baby is the ultimate symbol of hope. If there's anxiety for the future, any baby reminds us that life will go on. The people resentfully registering for an unpopular tax, found themselves drawn by God to a different place. It was a peaceful, burdenless, holy place where hope was palpable. Luke's gospel tells us that the shepherds returned to their fields glorifying and praising God for all they had seen and heard. What a wonderful image of ecstatic joy in the fields surrounding Bethlehem. Many people who visited the baby Jesus probably couldn't put what they'd sensed into words. That's how it is with holy moments. But words don't matter when it's held in your heart, transforming how you live your life from henceforth.

Perhaps this is a Plough Sunday to let the Christmas message of God's gift to us through the birth of Jesus to linger for longer than usual.