



The Church of England
in Essex and East London
Diocese of Chelmsford

Plough Sunday 2026

Isaiah 28.23-29

Matthew 13.1-9

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A particularly wintry spell has made this year's Plough Sunday gatherings especially authentic. Most of the Diocese woke up to snow last Monday. It wasn't only the farmers who needed a bit of encouragement and inspiration to get out again!

But weather aside, for the farming community, 2026 has dawned with more hope than anticipated.

On 23rd December the government announced that they would revise the thresholds on their proposals for imposing Inheritance Tax on agricultural holdings. The adjustment represents a relief for many ordinary family farms. Farmers are entering 2026 in a more hopeful space than the one they were bracing themselves for.

2025 held considerable anxiety for the farmers of our diocese. It might be tempting to draw a line under 2025, to blot it from our memory. But rushing on might deny us the opportunity to acknowledge the subtle messages from that year. I sense much from 2025 that offers the potential to make our future more hopeful, beyond the world of agriculture.

There are a few little details that I hope I always remember from the day in February when the farmers rallied in London.

I'll remember that the police praised the farmers for leaving the streets of London cleaner AFTER the rally than they were before! *It's second nature to farmers to remove litter.*

Imagine the uplift to our countryside, towns and cities if nobody left litter.

I'll remember how the London foodbanks were filled by farmers on the days they went to the city. *It doesn't surprise me. The farmers' vocation is to produce food for everyone's sustenance and nourishment. Even in tough times, if we can share what we have the world becomes a kinder place.*

I'll remember the children on their toy tractors. Parents and organisers knew they'd be safe, confident that there wouldn't be violence. *How wonderful it would be if children were freer and safer to play in more of our outdoor spaces.*

I'll remember prominent people in government praising farming leaders for their dignified, respectful campaign. *In our world, loud, aggressive power seems to be having its day. But dignified and respectful voices are out there.*

They are being heard. They are changing things, quietly and calmly.

During 2025, farming people truly looked out for each other, listened to worries and actively cared for one another. *This wasn't new of course. The friendships, the structures, the support organisations were already there. You can't suddenly magic support structures into being. Building friendships and structures in the good times means they're there when you need them.*

People were left in no doubt that farming has to take the long view. The farmers in London were speaking for future generations of farmers and their vital role in protecting future generations from the vulnerability of dependence on global food sourcing. This wasn't about £s in present pockets. When farmers invest in planting trees, they probably won't shelter under their boughs. They plant in hope that their children and grandchildren, and the flora and fauna of their age will be able to. *Surely, allowing our actions to be shaped and motived by the impact on future generations holds the key to many of our environmental challenges.*

And I will always remember the powerful way that ordinary people, more comfortable in tractor cabs found themselves making a stand, speaking in public, with passion, from the heart.

The Catholic businessman and philanthropist, John Studzinski, speaks of a conversation he had 35 years ago with Pope John Paul II, on a possible calling to priesthood. John Paul encouraged him to stay on in Wall Street.

"Start from where you stand. You are an original," the Holy Father said, "and you must encourage others to be originals. That changes things."

In turn, Studzinski himself now encourages others to be entirely themselves, to start from where they stand, to be the power of good wherever they live and work.

And that was so clear last year, when individual farming folk spoke out, they spoke as themselves, telling of their land, their families, their unique stories that formed part of the collective agricultural whole: making a stand from where they stood.

When we bless the soil from farms on Plough Sunday, we will be affirming unique places of farming, offering God's blessing upon it.

Likewise, when Plough Sunday blessings of the plough and people are offered, the affirmation will be for unique individuals and their unique work.

Plough Sunday might have emerged from medieval practices but God's affirmation of us as unique human beings isn't new. The Old Testament prophets regularly reminded people of it.

In Isaiah 28, the prophet might have been speaking of eastern crops, and cultivation methods of past centuries but you probably get the gist! Each individual crop requires unique methods of cultivation; each stage of growth and harvest requires bespoke processes. Farmers constantly fine-tune their farming practices to the individual crop and numerous variables: soil, weather, technology, environmental considerations, equipment, inputs, labour and markets. Each year, and on each farm across the diocese this will look slightly different. Some years are particularly tough, but the aim is always the same, to bring the crop to the most fruitful harvest.

I imagine the farmers listening to Isaiah all those centuries ago. This would have been a parable that comforted the people of Judah during the tough times of eighth century BCE.

It's remarkable that the imagery remains strikingly authentic today. "Surely," says Isaiah "you wouldn't keep ploughing, when the land requires no more breaking. You wouldn't overlook the crops such as fine herbs which require gentle cultivation." We might simply include that environmental concerns draw us to more gentle cultivation methods too. Likewise, says Isaiah, your God knows that human beings can't be constantly broken and pulverised. Hold on in there, keep close to God's wisdom, don't let yourself be broken, look for the gentler ways.

And Jesus added depth to this message in his agricultural imagery. In Matthew 13 he took his listeners to the soil, the foundation of farming. They were to consider broadcasting seed which fell on four types of ground: compacted soil of a path; thin stony ground; thorny weedy ground and finally good soil. They were invited to imagine the potential growth of the seeds on each: the birds ate that on the path, the plants grew rapidly on the poor thin ground but withered quickly, the plants were soon choked amongst the weeds but of course on the good, deep soil they were able to root securely, they grew and fruited well coming to abundant harvest.

Last year we were left in no doubt about the depth of connection between farmers and their land. In some places, good soil had been nurtured for generations and the family's roots run deep in this soil.

Jesus told his Parable of the Sower to people who understood soil and rootedness. He wanted to give them something additional to hold onto. Life on the land has always been vulnerable. Throughout history land-use has been challenged, systems and land-needs change. When you're deeply rooted to a place, such changes can be life-shattering.

Jesus said, let my word root in you. Don't just hear it and let the greedy birds gobble it up; don't let it wither in difficult times; don't let it be choked out by other stuff but let me root in you. Then I can enable you to grow as a human-being, to be fruitful in God's ways. And in St Paul's words, the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will protect your hearts and minds, whatever comes your way in life.

It's my prayer that amidst all that we do across the Diocese on Plough Sunday there's something holy that settles deep inside you, something that will root to comfort, strengthen and encourage you in the year ahead.