

Sow/grow your own

I recently had the chance to look at a copy of a pre-enclosure map of Acle detailing the strip-cultivation system: fields divided into narrow strips, each allocated to a different parishioner. That helped me understand the idea of the parish plough underlying this festival: those individual growers will have had their own hand tools, but presumably depended on communal use of anything larger, like a plough. The map demonstrated just how many people were involved in cultivation, before Enclosure put the land into the hands of the wealthy minority, with commoners' rights and poor allotments for the rest. That certainly aided the necessary growth in the efficiency of food production; but was the start of a process which, over time, has divorced most of the population from the land and from growing the food on which we depend.

I suppose the closest equivalent to that set-up today are allotments: but they are the province of an interested few. For most of us that just leaves our gardens, if we have one, and the personal choice of whether to attempt to grow fruit or vegetables. Maybe Plough Sunday comes not just with an opportunity to pray for those who work the greater part of the land on our behalf, but also with an encouragement for us to *grow our own*, if we are able. Our recent innovation of issuing an invitation for us to bring our own tools or seeds for blessing reflects that. Even if we don't have a garden, there may be smaller-scale possibilities on a balcony or window ledge or sill.

When we *Celebrated Nature*, there was a stand from the *Papillon Project*: working with children at Acle Academy to grow fruit and veg in a school garden. As long as the cultivation is done in a nature-friendly manner (no pesticides, please) I can see how that might go hand in hand with recognising and enhancing the contribution gardens make to biodiversity. Fruit tree blossom and bean flowers provide a resource for the pollinators they (and I) need. Even the compost heap will provide a home and food source. Much as I dislike working in the garden, that time spent outside is often when I notice the other creatures which share it with me. And, as the Academy project illustrates, it provides an education: learning about soil health and nutrients; natural pest-controllers and decomposers; seasonality and the importance of the weather and changing climate. Growing our own can help us reconnect with the natural processes from which humankind has attempted to divorce itself, but on which we still depend. If enough people gain that awareness, there is the potential for a wider political effect in shaping policy. And it helps us appreciate the challenges and achievements of those whose work we celebrate today: the farmers and growers for whom we are grateful.

This isn't an attempt to emulate *dig for victory*: what we're able to grow in our gardens isn't going to contribute significantly to the food security of our nation: we still need farmers. But if it reduces consumption of air-freighted vegetables, that's all to the good. And although it may not have the supermarket look, the produce so often tastes so much better!

There will be other benefits too. I'm not interested in going to the gym: the garden and my conservation volunteering have to provide me with the physical exercise I need. Nobody could call me a gardening enthusiast; but I know that I have gained spiritually as well as nutritionally by attempting to grow things to eat. In our Judaeo-Christian tradition, much of our understanding of God has developed through interpretation of cultivation. In the New Testament, growing crops are the source for lessons in perseverance and patience; coping with disappointment; being given another chance; experiencing abundance; generosity and fulfilment. Think of Jesus speaking of sowing and growing seeds and fields ripe for harvest. We cannot fully appreciate the meaning of harvest if we haven't had the experience of investing ourselves in what precedes it: the digging, sowing, manuring, pruning, even the weeds – all words from the vocabulary of New Testament.

The investment of God in his creation is what we see in Jesus: his giving of himself in his ministry and on the cross. In our gospel reading he starkly focuses on the latter in answer to those who *wish to see him*: he is the *grain of wheat which falls into the earth and dies*. But he does so in order to reap a harvest, in us: *if it dies, it bears much fruit*. And our bearing fruit, according to Paul and others, will involve the sowing of further seeds: seeds of love, compassion, faith, justice: *sowing to the Spirit*, that we and others may *reap eternal life from the Spirit*.

So even if you decide not to sow beans or courgettes, or tomatoes or salad leaves, there are seeds which all of us can offer to God for his blessing: promising to cultivate them in the hope of a fulfilling and eternal harvest.