

The Archbishop delivered the annual Henry Plumb Lecture to the National Union of Farmers at the Royal Society in London this evening. Read the speech below.

As prepared for delivery.

Thank you so much for inviting me to speak to you today. Main thanks must go to Lord Plumb, who has championed the interests of farmers as well as young people interested in farming on the local, national and international stage for so many years.

There is, of course another reason I'm very glad Lord Plumb is here today. When Pope John Paul II was heckled whilst speaking at the European Parliament in Strasbourg, Lord Plumb - in his position as President - ordered the heckler out of the room.

So, I feel comfortable today knowing that Lord Plumb will surely defend me against anyone who might dare interrupt.

It's a real pleasure to be here and to be seeing so many people properly in person again rather than over a screen. I've been watching a lot of screens - I got into watching Clarkson's Farm over the last 18 months. I don't know how you feel about it - maybe for you watching Jeremy Clarkson feels a bit like me watching anything with a vicar in it: either you can't stand it or you get completely addicted.

But I take away from Clarkson's Farm not just how much I enjoy watching it, but how hard, extraordinarily stressful and deeply complicated and scientific farming and agriculture is.

Additionally I am deepened in my wonder at the natural land, wonder throughout my life, increased by 7 years as a rural vicar. It reminds me of a passage in the book of Job - Job is facing real challenges, disaster and despair:

and God says: 'ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds in the sky, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish in the sea inform you. Which of all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In his hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind.'

The context and the challenges

The farming community has faced many challenges of its own over the past years. These challenges, both good and bad, that farmers face are global, national and local. They are both immediate and longer term.

We haven't yet begun to see the impact of Covid, or the fallout of working from home, different working patterns, people moving into the rural areas as working from home becomes easier, and even different ideas about how and where we should live at the deepest levels.

Throughout the pandemic it's been shown that communities the size of rural communities flourish - villages did extremely well in comparison to urban areas in terms of community help and weathering the pandemic.

They are wonderful places for people to live, and they have an exciting future, of which I hope the church can be at the heart.

Community is clearly the key to unlocking the potential of that future: community means building relationships that enable us to support and encourage one another during difficult times, and celebrate and empower one another in better times.

Many things are unclear right now as the dust only just begins to settle, but what is indisputable is that this is a time of rapid change, and that change has been accelerated by the pandemic -

We have seen change scientists did not expect to happen for decades, change that at the turn of the millennium seemed like science fiction.

Autonomous forms of transport are now practical, not only for cars but also for ships, aircraft and indeed, tractors.

Artificial Intelligence is advancing very rapidly. It raises existential questions for people regarding their identity, purpose and what it means to be human.

Communications are unrecognizable, hugely powerful, and immensely subversive of existing orders and structures of many societies and institutions. They are also very unequally distributed, a profoundly moral failure and not only a logistical one.

Medicine is advancing ever more rapidly as the decoding of the human genome begins to bear fruit.

Social tensions grow as traditional societies and structures either resist or seek to adapt to change.

For most of us – including the farming community - the impact of these changes will be revolutionary – for jobs, development and life expectancy and quality.

And, of course, there is the overarching threat of climate change, which will define not just the livelihoods, but the lives, of every single one of us and our descendants if rapid action is not taken.

But change can mean opportunity if we seize it, shape it, mould it.

The past 20 months have also forced us to be aware of the connections that we didn't always see but which are vital to our communities. We stayed home to look after one another, in recognition of the fact that our welfare is dependent on that of our neighbour.

But we also gained a new understanding of how our society works, or rather who we really depend on to keep our country functioning.

No one will have failed to see the news or notice the ramifications of some of the things that happened over the past few years: concerns about supply lines, headlines about empty shelves and labour shortages, and worries about food prices mean people might have a new awareness of what goes into the things maybe we previously took for granted and expected to magically show up on our shelves and our tables.

We peeled back the skin of our society and we were faced with the inequality and injustice that has made a home in our country, but we also paid tribute to the hard working people who keep our country going.

It is obvious, but during the pandemic we saw first-hand that farmers are key workers. We saw how precious and valuable their work is, and how we need to look after them as we emerge from the pandemic.

Challenges that farmers face: mental health, health and safety, isolation and deprivation

At the same time, we know that this is a tough time for many involved in these jobs. The Farm Safety Foundation ran a survey which found that 88% of farmers cite poor mental health as the biggest hidden problem facing the industry – an issue that will only have been exacerbated by the pandemic and shows no signs of abating.

The ONS reported that 133 people working in farming and agricultural trades took their own lives in 2019-20.^[1]

Health and safety in the farming community is a real issue – it's one of the most dangerous jobs in the country.

Agriculture continues to have the worst rate of fatal injuries of all the major industrial sectors, around 20-times higher than the average five-year annual rate.

In the last ten years, almost one person a week has been killed as a direct result of agricultural work. Many more have been seriously injured or made ill by their work. Just over one in a hundred workers work in agriculture, but it accounts for about one in five fatal injuries to workers.^[2]

We know rural communities face isolation and serious deprivation. We know that the number of families categorised as homeless in rural local authorities has risen to almost 20,000 – an 115% increase from 2017/18.^[3]

The storms they have weathered over the last few years have been deep and often very painful indeed.

Now we are at a juncture, and the future can go two ways:

Will we treasure and support our farmers, provide them access to good health care – especially mental healthcare, bolster community support, campaign strongly for education, equipment and legislation that enables farmers to do their jobs safely and profitably?

Will our rural areas be active, lively places where the future will happen, full of energy and innovation? Or will they be areas of rest and recreation, preserved in aspic for those who are able to afford it? Facing challenge, building opportunity?

Now we are looking to build a bold, exciting vision of Britain, a vision fit for the 21st Century and beyond. Farming will be, in many ways, the backbone of that. And that's for 4 reasons, all of them interlinked:

Firstly, our heritage and communities.

As we look towards who we want to be, we need to have a strong foundation of where we've come from, who we are and how we live together.

To do that, we need to build and support rural communities which flourish, ones which serve every generation, with access to services and opportunities that unlock people's potential and bring people together.

Secondly, providing a reliable source of nutritious food available to everyone. This is, without doubt, indispensable.

It is the first priority of every farmer, and it must be an integral part of government policy at every level, from the local to the national.

Third, the climate. I have said – and it's not controversial to say – that climate change is the biggest threat we face, one that will become a fate if we do not do anything about it soon.

The Government has committed to net-zero by 2050.

The Church of England has gone a couple of steps further and set 2030 as our target.

The NFU has a 2040 target.

Net zero will not happen in this country without the farming community.

And fourth and final: our relationship with the rest of the world, our trade deals, and how we show leadership on the global stage.

In a post-Brexit era, a time of such globalisation, our farming communities can lead the way on food standards, animal welfare, trade and exports that make people's lives better and more prosperous around the world.

These are both the challenges and the opportunities on a very macro scale, where those involved in farming and agriculture have a real role to play.

How do we get there?

So, how do we get from where we are now, to this vision of rural communities as lively, flourishing, exciting, prosperous places to live and work?

Many of the answers, I believe, lie in traditioned innovation in rural communities that equip them to be areas that make use of their history and heritage to meet the challenges and opportunities of today.

This will need to happen in 5 main areas: food production; housing; community generation, through churches, schools and other community hubs; communication infrastructure and adaptability to new science and education; and training in and adoption of new technology which is sustainable and economically viable.

I spoke of change earlier. It's something we are all experiencing – farming communities and also the Church. Change unsettles. Jesus spoke of being worried about the future in one of his parables (apologies: There will be some Jesus in this because I'm the archbishop of Canterbury and it's sort of my job.) The thing about the parables is that many of them are agricultural, because that's the community Jesus lived in.

The Bible is full of rich language about our relationship with the land – and good, fertile land is often synonymous with a good life and blessings. You could say that understanding farming helps you understand the Bible.

In this parable, in Luke 12 16-34, a man wonders what to do with his bountiful harvest. God tells him

'do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.'

This worry about the future is common to the human experience – what will become of us? Will I be a success? Will everything go right?

God's response is to tell us not to worry about it. Not because if you're a Christian then everything goes absolutely perfectly all the time – I know personally that that's absolutely not the case - but because we can have faith in something bigger, and we're not alone on the journey.

This God is not just a God of Sunday mornings in the church pews. I believe he's the God of everything – of our work, of our rest, of creation and the smallest and biggest things.

So what does a vision for the future – what I believe is God's vision for our future – look like in relation to farming?

Justice, Value and Relationship – a vision for farming

When I spoke of the five areas of traditioned innovation – food production, housing, community regeneration, communication infrastructure and training in new technology –

I think they roughly fit under three broader categories, which I think are essential as we think about the flourishing of farming and rural communities going forward – and these are value, justice, and relationship.

Value:

Firstly, there is inherent good, inherent value, inherent worth in our land, our livestock, our crops and in ourselves. In that previous parable, we read 'life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap...and yet God feeds them... consider the lilies, how they grow...even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.'

The basic things matter to God, the Bible tells us.

The food we eat, and the people who get it on our tables, matter. We need to start appreciating that value. I've seen headlines recently about farmers having to slaughter pigs because of labour shortages – this is the exact opposite of being able to treat livestock and labour with the value it requires and deserves.

We need to pay fair prices for work and produce.

Justice:

When you appreciate the value of things, you want them to be treated fairly. You hunger for justice.

Food justice is a major issue. Everyone should be able to afford good, nutritious, healthy, sustainable food. Schools should supply it, obtained in the UK, as part of our normal education in healthy living.

One thing that was absolutely clear about Covid was the risk of underlying health issues – obesity Cost of diabetes by 2025 will outweigh the cost of cancer. How we live and what we eat is absolutely vital to our welfare, to our health and the health of the NHS in perpetuity.

Secondly, the need for labour justice. The seasonal and agricultural workers who contribute so much to this industry deserve to be treated fairly, but it's an area ripe for exploitation

. The Clewer Initiative is a partner of the Church of England, working within all 42 of our dioceses where it seeks to combat modern slavery in all its forms. They have developed an app, the Farm Work Welfare app, to help combat labour exploitation and modern slavery in the rural and fresh produce supply chains, where people – businesses, locals or workers, can flag concerns or seek help if they suspect there is exploitation going on. It educates worker about their rights, and provides farmers and growers with information and tools to combat this evil[4].

Thirdly, climate justice. We've already mentioned the Net-0 commitments and the need to cut our emissions. We will need to eat locally, seasonally and more consciously.

We need to cut our food waste - household food waste costs over £19 billion a year in the UK, emitting over 25 million tonnes of greenhouse gases.[5]

We will need to develop and adopt new technology and take advantage of opportunities to produce renewable energy.

Some fascinating scientific developments are pointing us towards more climate friendly and efficient production, like technology that monitors in high fidelity the nitrogen content of soil [6], or genome editing which can increase the efficiency of cows' milk production [7].

Lastly, economic justice for rural areas. This includes the need for affordable housing, education centres, schools, broadband and other opportunities to learn and do business.

Earlier this year the Archbishops' Commission on Housing, Church and Community, set up by myself and ++Stephen Cottrell, issued their report. They focussed on the vital importance of building not just housing, but community and looked at how church land might be used for the provision of affordable homes.

They looked at a case study: Keswick Community Housing Trust in the Lake District [8], where local people were living in substandard housing, with unaffordable rents or being forced to commute long distances whilst property prices sky-rocketed, many being sold as second homes or holiday lets. In that situation, the Church worked with partners to form a Community Land Trust, to provide affordable homes in perpetuity (and affordable according to local earnings, not market rates!).

Research from English Rural, a [non-profit housing association in rural communities](#) which has partnered with the church on multiple projects] suggests that investing in affordable rural housing is key if we want to 'level up and turbo-charge the rural economy'[9]

We have not even begun to feel the fallout yet of population moves resulting from the pandemic and high costs of living in the city. We need to ensure that rural communities are not priced out of their homes, to make sure there is sufficient affordable housing that supports stable communities.

Relationship:

This leads us on nicely to the urban/rural relationship. We need to encourage urban communities to understand better the value rural Britain offers, the challenges they face, and what is behind the food on their plates. There is often so much ignorance about the realities of farming and rural life.

But it's not just urban/rural relationships that need support. The lack of social interaction recently has taken its toll on so many of us. For rural communities, where village shows and livestock markets are so often a chance to chat and interact with others, the loss of this time has been really difficult.

To have flourishing communities and community generation, you need something that provides life and health within that community— churches, schools, Further Education colleges, businesses and skills development. All of these hubs need to be supported and accessible for local communities.

65% of Church of England churches and 66% of our parishes are in rural areas of England. [10] The Church of England has agricultural chaplains - and just appointed a first Hedgerow chaplain! [11] - connecting people with rural areas on their doorstep.

I want to take this opportunity to say that the local church is there for everyone in the parish, whether they are a church goer or not, and are intimately bound up in the community. This is a challenge to and for the church as to how we ensure churches in rural areas flourish and support local communities. We need to change, to reclaim the vision of being not only the Church of England, but also the Church for England, every part, rural and urban. It cannot be achieved only by spreading clergy more thinly.

When we are unable to be face to face, rural communities need proper communications infrastructure to enable them to be connected for business and social interaction.

During the pandemic, the need for WiFi became a necessity, for work, for school, even just for staying in touch with friends, family and neighbours.

A communications infrastructure company called WiSpire, founded by the Diocese of Norfolk, aims to provide better broadband service to rural areas, using parish church towers amongst other things to deliver high speed wireless internet access. [12]

So that's relationship and community at home, but farming communities also need to be at the forefront as we forge new and maintain current relationships abroad.

Making the most of the overseas market post Brexit is crucial. We need to get our trade deals right to protect the world-class British standards of farming - bad deals risk exporting environmental and animal welfare harms and destroying farmers livelihoods.

Government needs to partner with farmers to build global ambition and increase the British food brand identity across the world to grow global markets.

The new Agriculture Act means there is an opportunity for British farming to become a global leader in sustainable, climate-friendly, high-standard food production.

The reach of the NFU is not just in the local communities and the farmers it represents, it's global. Now is the time to harness these challenges, from the local to the global level, and transform them into opportunities.

To grow you don't make sharp turns: you do progressive change embedded in virtues and traditions.

That turn is initiated through relationships - not policy or large radical changes, but by gently knowing someone and suggesting something.

Both the church and the farmers have been in this country for centuries, and we plan, God willing, to be here for centuries more. If this country wants to be a leader in the 21st century it will need to take a leaf out of the farming communities' book, characterised by adaptability, resilience and, above all, hope and a bit of faith.

God tells us that he is with us in all seasons, of feasting, fasting, of sowing and reaping, and in fallow times.

We can put down firm roots in values and communities, and those roots enable us to be resilient and flexible when any storms come. They are what will help us - the country, our farming communities and the church - to be ambitious & innovative as things change.

That way we can ensure we fulfil our potential and flourish together, as the farming industry cares for our wellbeing, our environment and our economy for many years to come.

[1] <https://www.pressandjournal.co.uk/fp/business/farming/2905042/suicide-toll-on-uk-farming-revealed/>

[2] <https://www.hse.gov.uk/agriculture/hsagriculture.htm>

[3] [English Rural | Investing In Affordable Rural Housing Will 'Level Up' And Turbo-Charge The Rural Economy](#)

[4] <https://www.theclewerinitiative.org/farmworkwelfare>

[5] <https://wrap.org.uk/taking-action/food-drink/actions/action-on-food-waste>

[6] <https://arpa-e.energy.gov/technologies/projects/soil-sensors-nitrogen-use-efficiency>

[7] <https://genomebiology.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13059-018-1583-1>

[8] [COE 4794 – HCC Full Report – V6.pdf \(archbishopofcanterbury.org\)](#)

[9] [English Rural | Investing In Affordable Rural Housing Will ‘Level Up’ And Turbo-Charge The Rural Economy](#)

[10] [Rural Multi-Church Ministry report \[Karen\].indd \(churchofengland.org\)](#)

[11] <https://www.bathandwells.org.uk/news/chaplain-to-hedgerows-and-those-who-wander-them-and-to-pilgrims-and-pilgrimages.php>

[12] <https://wispire.co.uk/about/>

Source URL: <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/speaking-writing/speeches/archbishop-justins-speech-national-farmers-union>