

SERMON

Rev Dr Will Adam, the Archbishop of Canterbury's Ecumenical Adviser

Hello, my name is Will Adam and I work alongside Lindsay here in the Octagon Parish. I don't know about you, but I am finding life at the moment very uncertain. We all hope that this new year will be a year when the sickness, worry and restrictions of the last year will fade. We hope for a future not only of getting back to some sort of normality, but to a better new normal. But if the last year has taught us anything it is that we are more often than not stuck with uncertainty and unpredictable change. We see good news and bad news in the fight against the pandemic, there is hope one day and sadness the next.

So, in such times, as Christians, it is more important than ever to hold on to two things – hope and confidence – the hope and the confidence that come not from ourselves but from God.

Where we are in the South Downs, not far from Chichester in West Sussex, we are never more than a few metres away from land that is farmed. Around our small villages there are fields and hillsides, some with cattle, many with sheep. There are vast tracts of arable land growing cereals and other crops. And mixed in with all this are the examples of modern, diverse farming – horses, pheasant, llama and even the occasional vineyard.

Throughout the ages those who work the land have lived with great uncertainty. There have been great advances over the years in the science and technology of agriculture, but, as yet, nothing has allowed us to control the weather. We can improve the soil, or spoil it, we can match the crops or the livestock to the type of ground but we cannot make the rain fall or the sun shine. My long years of taking summer weddings show that, whilst it is more likely to be good weather in, say, July, it cannot be guaranteed.

On Plough Sunday we are still in the deepest days of winter. But we are in a new year and, as we look forward, we are looking forward to the days getting longer and warmer, to the ploughing of the land and the sowing of summer crops. We look forward to lambing and hay-making and harvest. And we look forward with hope – hope built on faith – faith in God who made all the creation, who loves it and who gives us what we need.

Jesus knew the realities of agricultural life. You can hear that in his parables and sermons. And in today's Gospel reading we heard him referring to the plants and animals – the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. 'Do not worry', he says, our heavenly Father knows what we need. 'Do not worry.'

Now, you might hear this and think, 'well, that's easier said than done.' Worry is something that we all do. It is a natural consequence of uncertainty. If we cannot be sure what is going to happen – and if things not turning out well is one of the options – then worry is very easy to come by. If the rain and the snow talked about in our Old Testament reading come down from heaven and, rather than merely watering the earth, flood it then those growing crops on that land will, of course, worry.

But worry, as Jesus tells us, does not accomplish anything. Rather, we should strive for the kingdom of God and his righteousness. In doing so we acknowledge that ultimately it is God who is in charge. And when we acknowledge the authority of God then we can have that hope and that confidence that I spoke of earlier.

The farmer knows that he or she needs the rain and the sun and, looking ahead from this point of the year, trusts with faith that these will come in the right quantities and at the right time. This is a challenge. And you don't know whether the year has been a good one until the crop is in the barn. But this is what Jesus invites us to do – to trust and to be confident in God's love and care for us.

Here in the countryside we know the harsh realities of failing crops and poor weather. Climate change has made what the scientists call 'extreme water events' more common (be that too much or too little rain, or rain at the wrong time). But, with each new year there is the new hope of a new beginning and a good and fruitful year.

Wherever we are, in city, town or country, we stand at the beginning of a new year. Worry is easy, but let us all this new year hear again Jesus' words and trust in God who knows our needs. Let's face 2021 with confidence and hope for a better year, a healthier year and a year where, together, we strive to make the kingdom of God visible in the world that he made.