

Bishop Ian's Charge to Synod, 8 March 2025

In today's gospel, Jesus goes off to a deserted place, and, because the people follow him, and there is nothing else there in the desert, he tells the disciples to feed the crowd of five thousand with the little that a young boy had offered them, just five loaves and two fish. So they do as he says. And all are filled and well satisfied, and there are baskets of food left over.

By feeding all those people Jesus is giving us a sign what the Kingdom of God is like. Not only is there *enough* in the Kingdom of God, but there is *abundance*.

There wasn't much abundance to start with, of course. "Here is a boy, they say, with five small barley loaves and two small fish. But what is that among so many?" The disciples view life through the lens of scarcity: "We **only** have five loaves and two fish." If we view life through the lens of scarcity, we will always be fearful and anxious, like them. But, as Pope Francis said, "Looking at those five loaves, Jesus thinks: this is Providence! This is abundance."

In 1924 a man named Cardini owned a popular restaurant in Tijuana, Mexico. One holiday weekend supplies at the restaurant ran low while the dining room was full of hungry patrons. The cooks were upset because they had nothing to prepare. How could they feed their customers? Señor Cardini entered the kitchen and looked over his meagre stock. He toasted some bread, then cut it into croutons. He took some romain lettuce, a block of parmesan cheese, some hard-boiled eggs, vinegar, olive oil, and Worcestershire sauce. All this he carried into the dining room. With a flourish, Señor Cardini – Señor Caesar Cardini – created, on the spot, the Caesar Salad. The customers were duly impressed. They ate their fill and went away satisfied.

This is what 5-10 year planning is about - in a situation where we have fewer resources, money, and people, than we would like, asking how we can bring what we have, what we actually have - resources, money, people - however meagre they seem to us - to the task of enabling our churches still to be fulfilling the call of witness to Christ in our communities, in 5-10 years time. That's the vision behind 5-10 year planning. It isn't a vision for the church to have a future, but for the future to have a church. That may be our vision, but any vision without a plan is just a dream.

Making a plan, for the Diocese as much as for a Charge, means we cannot just go on using what we have in the same old way. To do that would give us a 5-10 year plan that simply points to a date in the (near) future and says, this is when the loaves and fishes will all be gone, when we will run out of money and of people. The day our church will close. That would be a plan that looks through the lens of scarcity, not the lens of God's abundance.

Looking at what we have, and trusting in God's abundance, will mean having a plan that does some things differently. That's as true for the Diocese as for your Charge. It will mean that fewer congregations will be able to have their own full-time priest. But many congregations together can enable the leadership and ministry of a full-time priest, provided they are also served by trained and authorised lay ministries, and provided full-time priests are supported to become the enablers and sustainers of the ministries of others as well as their own.

It will mean that congregations can no longer think of themselves as independent and isolated communities, but as working together more routinely to share people and resources. Because energy costs will get higher, and net-zero is hard to attain, it will mean that some congregations will decide to gather in different buildings - such as sharing with another denomination.

These may sound like drastic changes to us, but we all need to think and work differently if we are to help God to turn our scarcity into his abundance in the life of our Charges and our Diocese. We mustn't be so overwhelmed with the size of our problems that our response is to engage with the detail in front of us and forget that our small story is part of the large story of the kingdom of God.

“Here is a boy with five loaves and two fish, but what is that among so many?” the disciples said. But the young boy’s meagre meal became a feast for all those people. Señor Cardini’s Caesar Salad became, not just all there was to throw together in a kitchen crisis, but a dish that would take off and become a staple of every restaurant menu.

How different that planning, and everything else on our agenda looks, if we realise that nothing is too small to offer, and that even the smallest offering of ourselves and our resources will be enough, and will be gathered into the baskets of God’s abundance. It’s not that there’s too little: it’s that there’s too much.

The resources which our 5-10 year plans are concerned with, may be all we have to offer. But, like Señor Cardini’s ingredients, and like the young boy’s five loaves and two fish, in God’s hands they can become a sign, in our lives and our churches, of the abundant nature of the kingdom of God.