

Rt Rev. Philip North
Presidential Address to Synod
July 15th 2023

Friends, what a crazy God we worship. The basis of our whole cultural life in this country is that you get back what you put in. You put in some money, in return you get a service or a product. You work hard, in return you get a tidy pensions package. You pay your taxes, in return you get military protection and healthcare. That transactional mindset is the whole basis of western culture.

But the God we worship gives and expects nothing in return. In fact God gives whilst knowing that there is nothing he can receive in return. He just gives because he wants to. He didn't need to create this extravagantly beautiful creation. He just wanted to.

When we mucked it up through sin, he didn't need to send his Son. He just wanted to. That Son, Jesus Christ, didn't need to endure the cross to set us free. He just did in the greatest act of irrational generosity that this whole cosmos will ever know.

And this crazy, reckless generosity is modelled on the hillside in John Chapter 6. So much food. Bread and fish for everyone to eat in rich abundance. Basketfuls left over. This is a God whose very nature is boundless, undeserved, limitless generosity.

But what is really interesting in John 6 is that the abundant generosity of God relies on the abundant generosity of a child. Without that boy offering his packed lunch, the miracle would not have happened. Five loaves. A couple of fish. It seemed so little. No wonder the disciples were so scornful. What is that amongst so many?

But the insignificant generosity of a child unlocks the outrageous generosity of God. That's the God we worship. One who, when we trust him, will take our frail efforts and make of them something glorious beyond our imagining.

The western church has somehow developed a scarcity mentality. We have eye-watering wealth, a parish network that is the envy of every charity, stipended staff, buildings and the most extraordinary pool of volunteers and donors. What a contrast that is from the friends we have met recently the Diocese of Liwolo in South Sudan which we will be supporting in our Harvest Appeal. Their church buildings and schools have been destroyed, their Diocese has no funds, their clergy are unpaid, and yet they have an untiring evangelistic energy which has put them at the forefront of rebuilding a nation. But in the wealthy West we spend our time worrying about what we have *not* got. And that scarcity mindset undermines our generosity. We don't give because we have somehow convinced ourselves that we don't have anything *to* give.

So what does it mean to emulate that boy and to be a diocese whose DNA is generosity? What does it mean to be radically generous with the communities we serve?

Earlier this week, the Diocese of Blackburn took by storm an otherwise extremely complex General Synod and did so with an act of generosity.

A motion that came from Blackpool Deanery Synod and that was then approved here has enabled an experiment to offer marriage free of charge, costs to parishes covered during the experiment by the Archbishops' Council. A brilliant speech proposing the motion by Tom Woolford showed the electrifying power of generosity, because it set before synod members the opportunity to be more generous with the nation.

Now that may not seem like much. A few free weddings. But what the boy teaches us is that our own seemingly insignificant generosity unlocks the outrageous generosity of God.

Our Diocesan Synod today gives us the chance to do more of the same. So let's make generosity the heart of this Synod and so the heart also of our common life as a Diocese.

Let's be generous first in our proclamation of the Gospel. It is really powerful to see what so many of you are doing to share the Good News of Jesus Christ in your parishes. We now have just over 130 new local congregations. The Parish Renewal Programme is laying the ground for turnaround in parishes that have lived with many years of struggle. Mission Weekends are starting to become a regular feature of life in parishes of different traditions. Loving and committed pastoral ministry and a strong presence within communities is bringing growth to a number of parishes. Many of you are thinking hard about what it means to be generous in proclamation.

And today we will think about how God can magnify that generosity through the generosity of the national church. The application we are considering today, so brilliantly led by Carolyn Barton, is a generational opportunity to invest in growth and could see tens of millions of pounds of investment in ministry to the young, to our most deprived communities and to establish a strong pipeline of clergy and lay leaders.

Second, let's be generous in our finances. We have taken a massive risk in this Diocese over the past five years. We have maintained unchanged our numbers of stipendiary clergy and have instead actively sought to configure sustainable, manageable posts for clergy. That is so that we can be generous to the communities we are called to serve. And it can only be achieved with sacrificial generosity from our parishes.

Today the Chair of the DBF will share with us where we stand. Giving in our Parishes has been heroic. But in a diocese that does not benefit from the historic endowments that most other dioceses enjoy, parish share is high and the challenges we face are severe ones.

But remember what we learn from the boy. Our own seemingly insignificant generosity unlocks the outrageous generosity of God. Today Mark Ireland and his team will lay out plans to support parishes in learning the joy of generous giving. We give not to prop up an institution. We give because he has given to us.

Third, let's be generous with our love. We are part of a church that faces many threats and problems. We are divided over the Living in Love and Faith initiative. We are tormented by our safeguarding failures. We are slow to become a diverse church that reflects the diversity of God's world. General Synod showed a Church that was not at peace with itself.

When we are generous with our love, it doesn't suddenly take such issues and problems away. But it enables us to see them and solve them in ways that otherwise appeared inconceivable. And remember what love is. We know love because Christ died for us. It is not an emotion, it is self-giving. It is an act of the will. So whatever differences, we may have, let's be generous with our love. Because the power of the love such generosity will unlock is beyond imagining.

And how will we do all this? **By being generous like a child.** It is through a child's generosity that 5000 adults are fed. It is through a child's generosity that the disciples learn what generosity is.

To be honest I'm not interested in a diocese that makes *provision* for children as if they were a mere adjunct. I'm not interested in a Diocese that ministers to children in order to protect its own institutional survival. I'm not interested in a Diocese that wants children but on terms set down by the adults. My vision is for a diocese that learns from its children. That places its children at the heart of the community. That sees its children as role models of discipleship.

Let's invest in our children, our young people, our schools. You will hear much more about how we can do that today. And as we do so, let's learn afresh what Christ-centred generosity is. Because our own seemingly insignificant generosity unlocks the outrageous generosity of God.

This week many of us lost a friend. Canon Timothy Lipscomb was Rector of Preston, Area Dean of Preston, an honorary canon of the Cathedral and a hugely committed servant of this Diocese. After his death, photos of him started to circulate. In one he was offering a plate of strawberries. In one he was passing Easter Eggs around a crowded room. In one he was celebrating the Eucharist. In every single one he was being generous. Because generosity was his lifeblood. And that's because the blood that gave him life was that of Jesus Christ who went to the cross in that act of perfect generosity.

Friends, let's be generous. Because our generosity, insignificant though it may seem, can unlock the extravagant generosity of our generous God. And when that happens, anything is possible.

+Philip Blackburn