

Who are you looking at?



BY BISHOP JONATHAN, BISHOP OF PORTSMOUTH

WHAT if a keynote speaker booked for the conference you plan to attend falls ill. You are asked to speak with a day's notice. How would you respond?

Present will be teachers, governors, educational policy makers, children and youth workers, and those who support families. There will be delegates from the C of E's 4,800 primary schools, 900 academies and 200 secondaries, and those working with children and young people in churches and communities.

The theme will be 'Sustaining Hope', which takes seriously the incomparable joy of serving children and young people, and the cost of such a calling. How shall hope be sustained? The conference will recognise the challenge of working in schools and youth ministry today: for example, overwhelming needs, weight of expectation and a sense of limited resource or personal capacity.

Well, it happened to me. Thankfully, the other speakers turned up and were grounded and inspiring. Children and young people introduced the sessions, led worship, and got 500 or so delegates dancing. Their presence and contribution brought life and joy.

I suggested that to sustain hope we will need to 'learn hope', by adopting two practices:

The practice of community (or choosing not to go it alone) and the practice of looking to Jesus (or choosing to trust in Christ's sufficiency and grace, not our own). I pointed to the story of the feeding of the 5,000.

Isn't it often a feeling of being overwhelmed that can crush hope and breed despair? We feel what's on our plate is too much for us or beyond our capacity. The disciples were asked by Jesus to feed the crowd. Philip speaks for the rest: "Two hundred days' wages would not be enough for them each to have a little!" Andrew follows up: "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish; but what are they among so many people?"

In this story, while the adults have been looking at the problem, its impossibility and their own meagre capacity, the child has been looking at Jesus. Something about him has drawn the child's gaze: perhaps his goodness and trustworthiness or the fact that he had time for children. Whatever it was, the child offers his packed lunch to Jesus, and something beautiful happens. It is enough.

Heaven comes to earth. The hungry are fed. Through the simple act of a child, adults learn together to look beyond their own possibilities to Jesus, the source of life, joy, and hope. That was my response. What might you have said?

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UPFRONT

- 3 Faith in Focus
- 4-9 Latest news

IN DEPTH

- 10-13 Ecumenical activities: how we work with other denominations
- 14-17 Carbon net zero: our drive to help combat climate change

PEOPLE

- 18-19 My Faith: the new vicar helping to revitalise churches on the island
- 20 The Big Issue: our project to inspire schoolchildren
- 21 Why I love my church: St Jude's, Southsea

AND FINALLY

- 22-23 Top 10: What parish share pays for

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