

## Growth Strategy Homily Pentecost 2011

I want to begin with a disclaimer – I did not choose tonight’s readings! The Dean warned me some time ago that they were pretty tough and when I read the heading in my Bible for the Gospel – *repent or perish* – I realized, with something of a shock, what he meant. Is the message – turn around, embrace the Growth Strategy or perish? Is this venture to be commended on the basis of fear of extinction if we don’t do *something*? Well, to echo St Paul, and I’m sure also the Dean, the Ministry Development Officer, and all who have been involved from this and other regions so far, God forbid. We’ll get nowhere on that kind of basis, injecting that very fear which the love and grace we celebrate at the heart of this adventure is meant to cast out.

But, if we are thus forbidden to take the readings in that drastic kind of way, what might God, in and through those who chose them so carefully, be urging us to take from them, to see in them as we come together to offer in worship this great adventure for our region, our charges, our whole diocese?

Well, not to be in any way fancy or clever about this, I suggest three things, all of which are to do not at all with fear but in every way with freedom. One to encourage: God asks; one to energize: God gives; one to challenge: God breaks through.

To encourage us: *God asks*. Elijah, the man of God, encounters a mother and son quietly waiting, even preparing for death, but, encouraging the mother not to be afraid, asks for something for himself. It might seem like the last straw but the risky offering is made and the result is abundance and blessing, even in a time of drought. Why do I think this is encouraging for us? Simply because it suggests that God asks us, first, not to be afraid, and so to take the risk of even small steps in planning for growth, trusting that blessing and abundance will come through God’s love and grace. Small steps, medium steps, large steps, all can be beautiful, but the real beauty is

where what is tried is in line with your circumstances, your stories, your resources – neither selling them short, nor over-reaching them. And I think, indeed I know, that the Growth Strategy as it unfolds will be a response to this kind of asking and will support this kind of trying.

To energize us: *God gives*. I love Peter’s sermon towards the end of that very celebrated second reading from the Acts of the Apostles. It is immensely energetic! It envisages a community where people of all ages, all backgrounds, both genders, even pretty unlikely, commonly disregarded and unnoticed people, have a contribution to make, a gift to offer, because God *pours out* His Spirit upon them all unreservedly, exuberantly, energetically. As I pursue my nomadic life all over the diocese I am in no doubt whatsoever of the extraordinary giftedness of our congregations at large, of our lay ministers of all kinds, and of our clergy. In ways too numerous even to begin to list in a short sermon, I see the fruits of God’s pouring out of His Spirit among us every single day of my life. And I see them among *you*. I come away from my parish visits *energized*. (I see other stuff too, of course, but so what? Glory abounds all the more where there is grit). And I think, indeed I know, that The Growth Strategy as it unfolds will help us to celebrate this giftedness and steer it into growth of all kinds, rooted in the love and grace of God the giver of all good gifts.

To challenge us: *God breaks through*. For this third and last thing I want to draw your attention to the middle section of this evening’s Gospel, the wonderful story of Jesus healing a crippled woman on the Sabbath, the Sabbath of all days! And, embedded in this, it is the reaction of the leader of the synagogue that interests me, and I hope you too. To paraphrase somewhat, what he says is: this isn’t the way we do things here, we’ll have none of this, thank you very much. There’s a proper way to do this kind of thing and you should stick to it! I know that I am myself a lot like that, being of a conservative and traditional cast of mind in almost everything. And many of us are like that. Nothing amiss there, unless it solidifies into rigid refusal to try anything new, anything out of the box. But even I know that God breaks through all of that and, from time to time, even I have given God a hand to do

that. And I think, indeed I know, that The Growth Strategy as it unfolds will help us to help God break through as we dream new dreams and try them out, allowing the love and grace of God free rein in our churches and communities.

I began with a disclaimer, I want to end with a ringing endorsement. I promised the electors of the Diocese that I would commission a process for mission, allow it to develop in the hands of all involved, and that when it came time to launch it I would lead as strongly as I could on it. This sermon is part of that leading and, in a way, it is an offering of thanksgiving for all who have so generously offered of themselves to this adventure. So, let us be encouraged by our God who asks, let us be energized by our God who gives and let us be challenged by our God who breaks through in love and in grace.

Amen.