It’s often thought that it was John Lennon who first invited us to “imagine” a different world. “Imagine all the people living life in peace” he sung. “It’s almost the communist manifesto”, he half-joked when asked about the meaning of the song – “anti-religious, anti-nationalistic, anti-conventional, anti-capitalistic, but because it is sugarcoated it is accepted.”

The irony, which I am sure was not totally lost on John Lennon, was that he was only inviting us to do what Jesus Christ did so many years before. Imagine that… “The kingdom of heaven is like…” said Jesus “a mustard seed”; “treasure hidden in a field”; “a merchant seeking fine pearls”; “a king who gave a great feast”; “yeast which a woman took and made bread”… we could go on and on. In each of these evocative verses, we are invited to imagine a different world. Jesus takes something familiar and invites us to reflect on how it evokes the possibility of a world reborn, a world where God is known, recognised, acknowledged and obeyed, a world where human relationships reflect the divine relationships of the Holy Trinity, a world which is cherished, cared for and shared in the way God originally intended.

This is why I have spoken on a number of occasions about the kingdom of God as our diocesan vision. When people ask, what are we here for, or why does the diocese exist, my answer is very simple – we exist to proclaim the kingdom of God, just as Jesus did, and we work and pray for the coming of God’s kingdom. We dare to imagine that a different world is possible and so we give ourselves to seeking first the kingdom of God.

To imagine is to represent in our minds something which is not yet a reality, or something we’ve never experienced before. We talk of how children have ‘vivid imaginations’ because they play at being astronauts or fairies or animals. They can see in their minds’ eye what these things are and they try to recreate them through their play. I’m a great believer that adults have just the same ability but we just don’t use it as often, or as publicly.

That’s why, in the Autumn of 2020, during an online study day for clergy and lay leaders, in the midst of lockdown, I invited the diocese on an “adventure of the imagination”. The phrase is not original – it’s from Bishop John Taylor, former General Secretary of the Church Mission Society and also Bishop of Winchester. In his book *Primal Vision*, he talks of how we desperately need the gift of the imagination to see how the Gospel of Jesus Christ interacts with different cultures. He calls for more creativity, more imagination to see how the church will take different forms in different cultures. There is no one way of being church – just as there are many languages and many different styles of food, clothing, customs and rituals, so there can be many different styles of church. It is only our limited imagination which makes us think that everyone should be like us and do everything in the same way that we do it.

In a moment, we are going to hear an update on Intergenerational communities – this is the third of our five priorities, the others being new communities, intercultural communities, eco communities and reconciling communities. There are many themes that link these five priorities, but one of them is the invitation to imagine a different world and to embark on an adventure of the imagination in thinking about the future of the church. Intergenerational church invites us to imagine a church of all ages where different expressions of worship, community life and mission are all equally valued. For most of us, this is an imaginative exercise, because, let’s be blunt, most of what we currently do in the Church of England is only accessed by people over the age of 60 (the statistics prove this to be the case). And yet we have around 20,000 children in our diocesan church schools. So let’s be bold in imagining a different church and a different world.

We’re then going to talk about finance. We may think that this is not a place for imagination and creativity, but I beg to differ. What if we dared to imagine that God has given us everything we need in order to do what God is calling us to do? What if it is not lack of money which is holding us back, but a lack of imagination concerning what we could do with the money that God has given us? I think of one church where the vicar left last year, and in conversation with the archdeacon, they have dared to reimagine the role of the vicar and suggested that the vicar should spend as much time in the local schools as they do in the churches? To put it another way, they’ve asked for a Growing Faith Minister who will link schools, churches and households and enable the growth of a genuinely Intergenerational Christian community. It won’t cost anymore, but it is the first step in imagining a different church and a different world.

After our coffee break this morning, we will be discussing *Living in Love and Faith,* and the *Pastoral Principles for Living Well Together.* I’ll say more about the Pastoral Principles in a short while, but essentially they are an invitation to imagine how we can live well together in the midst of all our differences. Some of you may wonder if that is even desirable let alone achievable. Surely the matters at stake are so important that the only outcome that we want to imagine is one where “our view prevails”. I want to say that I respect the passion and the desire behind this view – the passion for justice and the desire for purity and holiness. But I’m left wondering what this says to a world which is bitterly divided on all sorts of issues, and where, as Florence’s paper on reconciliation points out, most individuals think that people are becoming less tolerant of others and more extreme in their views.

If we are to be genuine reconciling communities, we will need to embark on an adventure of the imagination to see a church which is truly an image of the life in communion of the triune God – three persons, different in many ways, yet one in substance – the God who is reconciling all things to himself in Christ.

So can I invite you today to be creative and employ your imaginations. Dare to play in the same way that children play, picturing in their minds a very different world. Above all be hopeful. God calls us to pray for his kingdom to come, and to work to make this kingdom real, here on earth as in heaven. A different world is possible.