

**Sermon delivered by the Rt. Rev. Robert Thompson  
Suffragan Bishop of Kingston and  
Chairman of the Jamaica Church Missionary Society  
On the Third Day of the 145<sup>th</sup> Synod  
Of the Diocese of Jamaica & The Cayman Islands  
Thursday, April 9, 2015**

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SERMON text: Luke 24: 46-49

*“Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”*

These are indeed unsettling times for the church and for our nation. And although we may not leave this Synod with any earth shaking resolutions we hope that with God’s Holy Spirit and our journey together we will begin to see ourselves in a new light.

Luke’s account of Jesus’ meeting with the disciples and his commissioning for their future work, shares some common features with that of the Great Commission in Matthew’s Gospel. In both instances the commissioning takes place after the crucifixion and Resurrection. In Matthew, Jesus promises that his invisible presence will accompany the disciples; Luke speaks instead of the Holy Spirit as initiator and guide of the disciples’ mission.

Now that mission and evangelism are no longer on the periphery of our diocesan agenda the question is what are the theological and operational tools needed to make mission the centre of all our activities? What struck me on reading the Great Commission again, is the fact that the **Evangelist saw the commissioning of the disciples as the logical conclusion to God's salvation history culminating in the ministry and work of Jesus** - All that God had accomplished through Jesus Christ; the reconciling love that ignited and transformed so many lives; would now become the task of the disciples. The disciples, like so many of us, never readily understood this to be their new role; nevertheless Jesus commissioned them to continue his work.

Two things our text reminds us of. First, that although God's great transformation of the world has begun, it won't continue without us. And secondly, the task of mission is not about us, but what we are prepared to do in order to cooperate with God's Holy Spirit, who has already preceded us in mission.

For decades the Church of England has been declining in membership. It may surprise you to learn that during the last three years the Church of England has grown numerically by some 2% per annum. What is not surprising is the strategic approach they took in placing evangelism and mission on the hearts of every baptised member. Archbishop John Sentamu, quoting the late Canon David Watson, said recently the Church of England must either "Evangelize or fossilize". "The truth is that not every Christian is an evangelist. Evangelists are specially gifted by the Holy Spirit to *proclaim* the Good News and to bring people

to a living faith. But EVERY CHRISTIAN *IS* A WITNESS. Witnesses are empowered by the Holy Spirit simply to tell the story of their encounter with Jesus Christ; to *share what they have experienced*.

Archbishop Justin Welby is equally passionate about evangelism and the critical role of the baptized. However, the Archbishop is under no illusion as to “the seismic (siz-mik) shift that needs to take place in order to re-position Evangelism at centre stage”. But he says, “A seismic shift is what we need. **For this country will not know of the revolutionary love of Christ by church structures or clergy, but by the witness of every single Christian**”.

That seismic shift has already begun to take shape in the Church of England’s revolutionary approach in using the catechism as a teaching tool for discipleship. Confirmation candidates are trained to see themselves as pilgrims on a Christian journey instead of being prepared for “church membership”. Surprising results will always occur once we become deliberate in enabling the lives of every follower of Jesus to be faithful witnesses to the transforming love of God”.

“A witness simply says what they have seen and experienced. We witness as we go, not to what we must do, but to what God has done and is doing and will do to bring about the change we seek (in our personal lives) and to bring God’s Kingdom near.

Many devout Christians fail miserably in their effort to introduce others to Christ simply because they do not know how to go about it. Before you can introduce others to Christ, you must:

1. Know that you yourself are a Christian
2. Understand the empowering ministry of the Holy Spirit in your personal life
3. Follow the example of Jesus and love and respect the one to whom you speak.

Ultimately the most effective witness is not the eloquent words we use, but the humility of our life. In the final analysis Christian witness is not about what we are able to accomplish, but our willingness to be used by God's Holy Spirit.

**This then is the second thing we can draw from our text.** That there can be no mission until hearts and minds have become open to the living presence of the risen Christ. For the witnesses that were to go to the ends of the earth were witnesses of the resurrection. And what made this possible was the action of the Holy Spirit. And so Bishop John V Taylor could write: "the chief actor in the mission of the Christian Church is the Holy Spirit. He is the director of the whole enterprise". So obvious to Christians in the first century, but largely forgotten in our own day, and so have lost our nerve, our sense of direction turning a divine initiative into a human enterprise.

The promise that the Holy Spirit will remain as God's sustaining presence is one by which the Church stands or falls. The Holy Spirit is that power that opens eyes that are closed. If one is open towards God, one is also open to God's beauty, abundance and transforming possibilities.

If one sees only the limited resources that are available for mission; one is inevitably shut off from God. So Luke is reminding us today; that as Christ bequeathed to his friends what he himself had received; so he bequeaths to us God's Spirit to sustain and guide us into all truth. So it was for the apostles, and similarly for us. There can be no mission until our eyes are open to the work and witness of the Holy Spirit in our lives. When Christian witness is so infused wonderful things become possible.

Imagine with me what life at the congregational level would look like if we began to see confirmation preparation not as an activity to boost our membership pool, but to engage pilgrims on a Christian journey. Imagine what our missionary endeavor would look like if each local church became more intentional in the formation of witnesses to God's saving truth. If this is your dream then let us, at this Synod, **commit ourselves:**

- To making discipleship and witnesses as a normal and natural part of our common life
- To providing opportunities for nurturing faith, prayer and discipleship across all generations – beginning with our Sunday schools.

- To a governance structure that acknowledges and promotes the total ministry of the baptized.

Compared with **Evangelism and Mission** everything else is like re-arranging furniture when the roof is leaking. Tragically too often that is what we are doing.

Reorganizing the structures; defending entitlements and arguing over our costs, while our children and others in this “strange but beautiful land” are left floundering amid meaninglessness, anxiety, and despair.

Resurrection challenges life. It reminds us that the ultimate passion of Jesus to make things right in our broken world puts all our religious activity in the shade.

The task of the disciples is not to guard an empty tomb; it is to follow the Risen Jesus, and to try and understand afresh something of how he appears to us today. The Resurrection is all about embracing new life. Jesus is now to be truly encountered in the present. I believe as a Diocese we are ready to commit ourselves to that challenge and to grow the Body of Christ not only in numbers but also in depth of discipleship. **I conclude with one of our Good Friday**

**Prayers.**

**Let us Pray:**

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: look favourably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquillity the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were

made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Sermon Synod April 9, 2015