

Sermon preached at the 146th Synod of the Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands, held in the St. James' Parish Church, on March 29, 2016



Theme: The Church: Called to be a Holy People

1 Peter 1:15-16

Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”

The Church came in for some public scrutiny at the beginning of 2016, in an editorial carried in the Sunday Gleaner of January 10, 2016, with the caption: New Year’s Resolution For Church.

I would like at this point to quote some extracts from that editorial. It was partly in response to comments made by a minister of religion to the newspaper, to the effect that Christians needed to be more assertive and impactful in their role in the community and not to limit their ministry within the proverbial ‘four walls’.

The Editorial read in part:

“We’ve heard all that before.

Part of the Church's problem in engaging serious minds has been its reflexivity for trifling battles on personal conduct or its obstinacy in holding to archaic doctrines.

For decades the Jamaican Church has too often restricted its *raison d'être* to being a speaker box of monotonous cacophony, with its greatest passion devoted to the war on gambling, abortion and homosexuality. All three patterns of behaviour have been entrenched in Jamaican society and won't be eradicated anytime soon.

The Church, which at the last census had direct influence over more than half Jamaica's population, has had an underwhelming impact on public policy, besides cheerleading for reactionary ideologies.

... tax evasion and avoidance rob the State of billions of dollars, imperilling government's ability to fund basic responsibilities such as the provision of security, welfare, law enforcement and justice, but the voices of the clergy are loud only in advocacy for their own revenue.

Bible-thumpers, in particular – that is, the broad range of Pentecostal churches of 'clap-hand' and charismatic flavour – have been too focused on heavenly reward rather than earthly accountability.

The Church has the capacity to be more than a halfway house for the heartbroken, soup kitchen for the poor, or host for schoolrooms. It has the affiliation and membership to make the biggest transformation in Jamaican society, something even our political parties can scarcely compete with. Pity the parsons are too busy tallying the numbers in the offering plate.”

What then do we as members of the Church do with such a resolution?

This assessment of the Church must also be seen against the frequently articulated assertion that the Church is the moral conscience of the nation, placing it in the position of a moral watchdog, which, while comforting to many, may be compromising of the very nature of the church, or even be a clarion call to re-visit the nature of the Church. So, let me suggest in a preliminary way that the Church as the Body of Christ, and not just another social institution or member of civil society, is called to be first a body which reflects its nature and calling from God to be a holy people, before it can be assigned or take on certain roles in relation to the society. And in the exercise of this social responsibility, the church must ensure that it speaks and acts from a position of integrity and not get trapped in the role of reactionary critique of everything in the life of the society.

For some persons, the notion of focusing on holiness at this time may seem a very retrograde step as the church needs to be focused on active engagement of the world through the faithful exercise of its mission and ministry. And yet, the reality is that if the church loses its sense of identity, while seeking to become an agency for action in the world, it becomes nothing more than another social institution, perhaps even a second-rate one to those that exist solely for that purpose.

For others of us, the notion of holiness is one which immediately creates a sense of discomfort as it smacks of a kind of pietism, naivety, or lack of exposure to the realities of life in the real world, or of self-righteousness which looks down on others and their shortcomings. It may also suggest a state of lazy passivity which is very inward looking and subjective in its engagement of life and the world.

In its Hebrew origin, the word “**holy**” is also translated to mean “**set apart**” for God’s use, and also has similarity to the word “saint”. In the OT, Israel is described as the covenant people, Israel is a holy nation, being consecrated as the peculiar possession of God, who is uniquely holy and the source of Holiness. In Leviticus 19:2b, and 19:9-14 we find the reference to God’s holiness, introduced by the saying: Be holy **because I, the LORD your God, am holy**, and this is followed by the constant repetition, **I am the Lord your God**. Why the repetition? It is argued that God was commanding His people to act in a way consistent with His character. They were to be a mirror, reflecting God’s nature and ways to the watching world as His kingdom of priests.

In the NT, the term generally refers to the Christian community as those who have inherited the covenant privileges as the sanctified and holy people of a holy God. In 1 Corinthians 1, Paul greets the church in Corinth with the following words:

To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours:

³Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

And in Ephesians 1: 4 he wrote:

God chose us in Christ before the world was made to be holy and blameless, and to live by his love in his presence.

In today's text the church is similarly addressed as holy (1 Peter 1:15-16). Christians are "saints" by virtue of being "in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:1). Their holiness (not to be confused with moral perfection) is in respect of God's calling; they have a vocation as a consecrated people.

The idea of holiness, therefore, brings us back to basics of the faith and to who we are as a community of faith. Indeed, in what is known as the Great Thanksgiving in Eucharistic Prayer A, we offer these words of prayer, "Confirm us in holiness, that we may be found ready to join the company of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Holy Apostles, and all your saints, when our Lord Jesus Christ comes again..."

Holiness also finds expression in our rites of Initiation. Accordingly, in the liturgy for Confirmation we pray that "those who now come for Confirmation may be strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit; and that they may live in righteousness and true holiness all their days". At the same time, holiness of living is a gift of the Spirit and a commitment to a quality of living. The call to the life of holiness begins with baptism as we receive a new identity in Jesus and which is lived out within the life of the community of faith and the wider world.

Engaging the text further, we may note that 1 Peter was written to Christians dispersed across several Roman provinces. There are questions related to the authorship of this Epistle to which I will not attend in the interest of time.

References to suffering occur various times in the letter but are not to be seen as the result of some widespread repressive policy by the Roman authorities. Rather, it was the result of the fact that the Christians no longer participated in many of the religious festivals of the Hellenistic world, which triggered outbreaks of persecution directed at them. To be identified as Christian was enough to provoke persecution. The purpose of the letter is therefore to urge the Christian recipients to hold fast to their faith and to offer comfort to them in face of hostility, because their acceptance of the gospel of Jesus Christ could no longer allow them to participate in aspects of the cultural life of the community.

While authorship of this letter is disputed, it is also asserted that ideas expressed within this letter are consistent with those expressed by Paul and may actually have been influenced by them. Former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams reflecting on Paul's theology provides an indication of

this convergence of thought in his book, *Meeting God in Paul: Reflections for the Season of Lent* regarding Paul:

... what Paul preached was not a new 'religion'. As we shall see, it was a new world order, a new way of belonging with God and one another.

Paul had to make it crystal clear that the traditional religious practices are simply not possible for anyone who has committed himself or herself to Christ. But this is not because he has invented a new religion that is unhelpfully 'exclusive'; it is because he believes that he and other believers have simply entered a new reality in which quite a lot of what everyone took for granted about their social world was about to be dissolved and reconstructed.



While in our context it would not be true to say that we are facing suffering and hostility because of our faith, we nevertheless need to hear again the message that, by our baptism, we are part of a new reality which, in the faithful exercise of the Mission of God, commits us to become agents of transformation and reconstruction of our social world.

From the opening lines of the Epistle, the author sets out the basis or foundation for all that is to follow by way of advice and direction for the community. They are acknowledged as part of the exiles of the dispersion who find themselves among gentile and pagan cultures. They are, however, a chosen and destined people through the redemption wrought by God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Because of this redemption there is hope for them, a hope and inheritance which is forward looking, as the greater part of its benefit is still to come. By faith they are currently in God's keeping, and their salvation is already revealed and accomplished, but not yet fully manifested. To that extent, the life they are called to live now is not just the outcome of personal effort or works, but

by grace already afforded them. A central element in this line of encouragement is the example of the blameless suffering of Christ.

The text comes from that section of 1 Peter regarded by some biblical scholars as that which deals with *Living as God's People* (1:13-2:10). Here Peter contrasts the former way of life of that Christian community with the holiness to which they are now called. Holiness connotes the idea of separateness, and so the members of the Christian community are to be a people set apart from the surrounding culture. This holiness must, therefore, find expression not just in beliefs but in **conduct**. The author is able to urge appropriate conduct on the part of the members of the Christian community by reminding them of their privileged position (verses 18-19), the cost of their redemption, and the futility of their former way of life from which they have been redeemed. Throughout the letter the writer utilizes a number of metaphors to speak about the situation of the Christians in this state of alienation from the prevailing culture in order to offer encouragement to them in face of the suffering they were experiencing because of their faith. The Christians must somehow show by their lives that they reject the religious and moral ethos of a pagan culture to which they no longer belong.

As a nation and as church we are facing serious moral challenges, and there is the need for a realistic assessment of our situation, for visionary leadership, and concerted action that will lead to rebuilding and reconfiguration of our institutions and structures and, among the people, a moral, social, political, economic and religious transformation which will make for the building of community, that is based on integrity, honesty and justice for all.

So who are we as the people called to a life of holiness in a context of this nature, and what is our witness? Among the metaphors utilized by Peter to describe the Christian community in the pagan context of his day is that they are like:

- Exiles and aliens – they belong to a new commonwealth, which is God's household (1:2-5)
- Slaves who belong to another – Jesus as Lord
- Wives, who in the culture had few legal rights

But these negative metaphors cannot define the boundaries of Christian presence in the world, and so Peter points to some positive metaphors which are life-giving, action-oriented, and transformative, namely:

- New born infants –eager for nourishment and growth to maturity
- Priests in a new sanctuary
- Stones in a new building – Just as God chose Jesus to be the cornerstone of the new temple (2:6-7), so Christians are a “new race” (2:9) living stones of the spiritual house of God (2:5)
- A new people chosen by God
- Workers setting about a task
- Soldiers armed for conflict

I am struck by the various references to the new and life-giving and of persons ready for action. Does that sound in any way like us, the people of this Diocese?

By reminding the readers of Jesus’ suffering and the suffering of countless fellow Christians throughout the world, the author assures them that they are not isolated in the struggle.

As if anticipating the kind of response that some may have offered then, and perhaps in our own time, which sees a dichotomy between holiness and action, Peter sets the stage and context for his exhortation to holiness in verse 13:

¹³Therefore **prepare your minds for action**; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. ¹⁴Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance.

Far from calling for disengagement from action, Peter summons his audience to prepare their minds for action, and goes on to make the point that not everything that passes for action is acceptable, and therefore calls for personal discipline exercised with reliance on the grace which comes through Jesus Christ. Then he calls for holiness as that which is to drive the pursuit of all that he has said before. So in verse 15 he says – “as he who called you is holy, be holy yourself in all your conduct”, which recalls the distinctive name of God found in Isaiah 30:15 – “Thus saith the Lord God, the Holy

One of Israel”. In that Old Testament context, the idea of being called by this Holy God refers to the conversion of the members of the community of faith to which Isaiah’s letter is addressed, and underscores the new life of holiness, separation from that which is sinful, and a commitment to a life of moral rectitude (perfection). This recalls also Matthew 5:48 – “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father who is in heaven is perfect”.

Just as the character of Israel’s God was to be reflected in its life and work, Peter is equally clear that the Christian Church constitutes the new Israel and, as such, is likewise called to be holy and to let the power and glory of God shine through it in its conduct. The life of holiness to which the Christians are called is one which, if put into practice, would see a revival of the church, be characterized by spiritual power, be able to address the growing influence of secularism and atheism, and lead to our conversion into a joyful community to which persons want to belong.

Verse 16 of the text is a quotation from Leviticus 11:44-45. Used in the current context, it points to the fact that Christians, no less than the Israelite community of old are summoned to holiness, but the holiness demanded is not of the nature of ritual and external practices, but speaks to the inner depth of the person’s life – the holiness of “the pure in heart” who shall see God because they are like him.

In the subsequent sections of his Epistle, Peter identifies for us several features of the life of a community characterized by holiness, and which move the understanding from sheer piety to spirit-directed action. Not surprisingly, some editions of the Bible entitle this section The **Obligations of Christians**. What are these obligations?

1. Love one another deeply from the heart – verse 22
2. Rid yourselves of malice, all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander – chapter 2:1
3. Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices to God – chapter 2:4-5.
4. You are a chosen race etc. ... in order to proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness... chapter 2:9
5. Abstain from the desires of the flesh ... conduct yourselves honorably among gentiles – chapter 2:11-12
6. Accept the authority of human institutions/respect for civil authority + controversy regarding conduct of slaves – chapter 2:13, 18+
7. Family relations – mutuality/unbelieving husband may be won by example – Chapter 3:1+

8. ... have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart and humble mind + do not repay evil for evil – chapter 3:8-9
9. Always be ready to make your defense ... concerning the hope that is in you – Chapter 3:15
10. Keep your conscience clear ... good conduct – Chapter 3:16
11. Be serious and disciplined ... maintain constant love for one another... be hospitable...serve one another with whatever gift each of you have received – chapter 4:7+
12. Word to the Elders/Leaders – chapter 5:1+

Grouped together, these obligations deal with Christian hospitality and living in community, spirituality, mission and testimony, relationship with the civil authorities, family relationships, and pastoral leadership.

Spirituality

Over a number of months, a small group of us clergy, have been studying a text “Imagining a Church in the Spirit: A Task for Mainline Congregations” by Ben Campbell Johnson and Glenn McDonald. The authors argue that the church is facing a crisis, not the crisis of decreased membership or declining income, which have become our riding horse, but the loss of the vision of the presence of the living Christ among us, a perspective which I want to suggest is pointing to a loss of the sense of holiness of the Church. They express it this way:

“The consequence of losing the sense of Christ’s presence in and among us here and now has changed the vital fellowship of believers into **an institution**; and the institution, rather than radiating the presence of the Spirit, often shields us from it. **Forgetting the presence among us has produced lifeless gatherings of the baptized with neither vision nor passion for their mission.**”

One manifestation of this is the attitude of many of our members to the call to undertake responsibilities within the life of the congregation. The excuses are multitudinous and those who condescend indicate that they are willing to help but not be in charge of anything. Likewise, it is a feature of us Anglicans that, when tackled regarding the skills bank which we have in the diocese, and at the same time find it so hard to get persons to assist with activities within the life of the congregation or its mission, there is the frequent retort, “but nobody ever asked me”. Any yet, we console ourselves with the argument that it is because the newer churches and those that are growing have lively music and don’t use liturgy why they are growing. Perhaps it is that they are passionate about their call to a life of holiness, fully conscious of the living presence of Christ in their midst.

Consequently, we go through the motions of being a church but without spiritually transformative power, passion and spiritual urgency; function to legitimate the social, economic, and political practices of the culture; and fulfill societal needs like caring for hurting members, marrying, burying, and baptizing. **The bottom line, according to McDonald and Johnson, is the ineffectiveness of our congregations to give a powerful, life-changing witness to the gospel, or our failure to make much of an impression on the emerging culture.**

One of the signs of this awareness of the presence of Christ is the practice of the discipline of prayer. And while our prayer life is centred around the liturgy in corporate expressions, the evidence of the practice of the discipline of prayer in private leaves a lot to be desired from the springling who participate in bible studies and prayer meetings, and the number of Anglicans whose worse public experience of embarrassment is to be asked to say a prayer in a corporate context.

Johnson and McDonald make the point that *Prayer is the life breath of the church; it is the natural posture of the people of God; it is the means of healing and the source of empowerment.*

Archbishop Enos Nuttall, the centenary of whose death we celebrate this year, in his 1912 Synod Charge had this to say:

Our greatest need of all in the Jamaica Church ... is spiritual power. We have a provincial, diocesan, parochial and congregational organization fitted to deal with varied conditions and requirements... We have abundant machinery some of which will no doubt require to be adapted from time to time to changing circumstances: but we do not need more machinery. What we need is power... It is not surprising that many Christians... have a vague idea of what is meant by spiritual power. It is thought of as something intangible, fanciful or unreal – that is and at the most, a mode of expression with little reality behind it... We have the agencies – the means of contact with the Divine, and yet we fail to feel the motive force, the power, the current of Divine Life stirring our own life. The Holy Spirit is more than an influence: He is a Person. His Presence is a Personal Presence: He is Christ's Representative with us, as the ever available source of our spiritual strength and wisdom and influence and power. His contact with the human soul is close, personal, real.”

Community, Hospitality and Testimony

A church or a Diocese of spiritual power as urged by the late Archbishop must also be a living community to which members can feel a sense of belonging and one which exercises hospitality to the stranger.

We have noted that the church is called upon to be holy because it is of the very nature of God to be holy. In a similar fashion, Henry G. Brinton in his book the *Welcoming Congregation*, makes the point that hospitality is clearly a quality of God and is meant to be a quality of God's people as well. Thus the covenant community of the Old Testament was constantly reminded how they were to treat the stranger and the alien in their midst as they too were aliens in the land of Egypt.

William Willimon, that outstanding Methodist Bishop and pastoral theologian in the *Foreword* to the *Welcoming Church* begins with the same point made by Johnson and McDonald, namely, that most mainline churches are in decline, but not all. What is it that makes the difference? He makes two comments which are deserving of our attention. The first is that he has learnt that hospitality may be the key factor in a faithfully growing church. The second is that he has learnt that the main difference between a congregation in decline and one with a future is the difference between practicing the faith for the exclusive benefit of "insiders" (the members of that congregation) or passionate concern for the "outsiders" (those who have yet to hear and to respond to the gospel). In developing his ideas which are consistent with this position by Willimon, and in proposing a new paradigm, Brinton makes the following comment about church members:

Unfortunately, we often go to church with the attitude of a guest, not a host- we are concerned more about ourselves than about those who visit with us. Consider this mind-set: as guest, we are focused primarily on having a good time. We enter the church, and look for our friends. We pass personal judgment on the furniture, décor, and feel of the place. We sit where we want to sit, with little regard to making room for others. We listen to the church's music, and decide whether we enjoy it or not. As guests, we are basically consumers, concerned about our personal comfort. The experience is all about us.

According to Johnson and McDonald, the vision of the Church as a community inhabited by the Spirit of the risen Lord has been lost in the building of institutions. The church as an organization has often become one more social institution alongside others. It is true that Christ dwells in each of us, but not all of Christ lives in any one of us. Because of this, the fullness of Christ can only be known in community.

In addition to having a sacramental life – Baptism and the Holy Eucharist, in a context of worship and fellowship, to be a living community, the church must be a place where members share in the life

stories and sufferings of each other, along with the demonstration of affirmation, caring, and ministry, which cements together members of the congregation.

Archbishop Rowan Williams puts it this way:

“... the gathering of baptized people is therefore not a convocation of those who are privileged, elite and separate, but of those who have accepted what it means to be in the heart of a needy, contaminated, messy world.

To be with Jesus is to be where human suffering and pain are found, and it is also to be with other human beings who are invited to be with Jesus. And that, says the New Testament, is a gift as well as sometimes a struggle and an embarrassment. It is a gift because in this community of baptized people we receive life from others' prayer and love, and we give the prayer and love that others need.”

Many of our disaffected and marginal members who stay away from participation in the life of the congregation, as well as many who leave to join other religious assemblies, do so, not because of any theological or biblical disgruntlement with us, but because of the lack of a sense of caring, fellowship, and community. I found it interesting that in the St. George's congregation in Grand Cayman, they are developing a mentoring system among members. Recognizing that members tend to sit in the same place Sunday after Sunday, they are developing a system by which members are to become mentors to those who sit in the same pew and to be in touch in such a way that when one is absent from church to make that telephone call to check up on the welfare of the person so that they may not just fall through the cracks as happens to so many Anglicans.

Additionally and most importantly, for mission to be effective, according to Johnson and McDonald, it must be grounded in a living community; otherwise it becomes **good works without Christ, humanitarianism without spiritual grounding.**

The living community of Christ embraces all kinds of persons and opens itself to change as they enter it. In this regard it is distressing to hear how several congregations respond to the youth who seek involvement in the life of the church as well as visitors who do not fit some people's definition of the ones suitable for membership. A major challenge facing us as a diocese is how to get members of established congregations around which new housing developments are taking place to reach out in mission to welcome new members to their community and church. A hospitable Christian

community has as its primary interest the reception of person, and goes way beyond a hand-clap during the notices and an invitation to sign a visitors' book at the west door, a book into which no one ever looks, and a west door that means nothing to a visitor who has no sense of the application of such labels to the church building.

Mission

The mission of the church is to re-present Jesus Christ to the world in an incarnate, communal form. This involves addressing the question of what is Jesus Christ calling a particular congregation to be and do, in this place, at this time? This is precisely what our strategic visioning and planning exercise is intended to do for the congregations across the diocese. There are some who would like to see a strategic plan prepared and sent out from Church House and which is to be implemented at the local level. The truth is that the exercise of mission across the Diocese requires taking seriously the social, political, and geographic situation in which a particular congregation finds itself, and utilization of the *gifts and resources of the people of God*. It is an imperative which calls for the involvement of all members of the community of faith.

Archbishop Nuttall also had some words for this diocese on the matter of the mission of the church:

“No real steady permanent and rapid advance of the work of Christ upon earth can take place till the primary, essential fact is and must always be acted upon that every Christian is and must be always and everywhere a Missionary. Every day is a wasted day for a Christian in which something is not said or done or some influence exercised which makes others feel how really we love Christ, how deeply we value the Christian Society, how entirely the Spirit of Christ and the influences acting upon us through the Christian religion permeate our conduct and mould our character.”

Leadership in the Church

In a world in which matters of religion are treated as personal concerns, we need to remind ourselves that the church of God which is called to holiness is one which is guided by leadership which is called of God. Leadership, lay or ordained, is the action of authorized persons to equip, nurture, and guide a particular people of God in their mission to represent Jesus Christ to the world, and who must be in a constantly growing relation to Christ himself.

We have only recently elected new church committees across the Diocese, and the question which we should have asked then, and must ask even now, is on what basis have we made those selections, and what do they bring to the leadership of the Church? Are they the ones who contribute the most

to the financial life of the congregation or the ones whose family have been running things for ages? The spiritual leader must have the capacity to evoke and nurture community. Community refers to participation in a vision that transcends the individual in the church, but it also denotes the interpersonal relations within the church. According to Johnson and McDonald, a minimum requirement for leaders is that they know and be able to articulate the vision of the particular church and have the relational skills to create and maintain relationships with members of the church. Because of the critical nature of community for the mission of the church, leaders must have both visionary and relational skills in order to be generative leaders.

At this point in the life of the Diocese when we are talking about visioning and planning, the matter of leadership is of vital importance. Vision relates the church to the future; it visualizes how things might be. Visionary leaders have the power to arouse the enthusiasm and stir the excitement that energizes a congregation. The inescapable truth is, however, that pastoral leadership is essential for the building up of the kind of vibrant congregational life which is here envisaged. The administrators of one of the Dioceses in the United States of America sent me some information concerning their implementation of a system of strategic planning for the Diocese and appraisal for their clergy and found that in just about every situation effective pastoral leadership made the difference in the performance of the local congregations.

Johnson and McDonald offer a disturbing assessment of ineffective pastoral leadership:

If the pastor does not have a vision or embrace and proclaim the vision shared by others, the church cannot be driven by a vision. Most likely this church will fix its attention on the past, defend the status quo, become blind to changes in its context and back its way into the future. Reality for this visionless church lies in the past, and it will soon die because it has no idea where it is going.

Family Relationships

All of us are the product of some kind of family, belong to some kind of family, and live out our lives daily within the context of some expression of family, and yet, one of the most challenging tasks is that of asking the Jamaican, or better yet the Church to define what is a family. The Resolution on the Family which was adopted by the Provincial Synod in Guyana in 2009, acknowledges from the very outset the fact that there is no single form or pattern which family takes in the Caribbean, and for our purpose, Jamaica in particular.

It has become fashionable these days to blame every ill in society on the breakdown of family life, with a naivety which suggests that we once had a thing called “good family life” which every home experienced, and it is only this generation of parents, and young people in particular, who have come and destroyed the good thing which this country had going for it. Perhaps we need as church to begin to approach the issue of family with a new level of honesty and with a measure of confession for our contribution to the state of the family in today’s Jamaica.

While marriage in its legal definition has been the ideal to which the church has given its blessing, the reality is that it has never been normative for our society and indeed the members of the church. The Registrar General Department can provide the statistics for marriages for the Jamaica society which indicate that these have not changed for more than a century. The only change has been with the tourists who come here for the marriage packages which the hospitality industry has to offer. If we would get beyond our state of denial, we can ask ourselves, how many anniversaries of marriage are celebrated in the congregations of our Diocese on a given Sunday, among the membership present?

We have pursued a strategy over many years of exclusion by which we have relegated to the margins young women who become pregnant, excluded the majority of mothers of our congregations who have to raise a family either as a single mother or while living in a stable relationship with a partner who has no commitment to legal marriage. We have absolved the males of their involvement in the family by our non-engagement of them, and have been satisfied with excluding the women from access to the grace of God through the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, up to their death, if their partner does not accede to be legally married. All of this while the children in our congregations are being nurtured by these mothers, who themselves sit in the pews and can only come up for a blessing, for as many decades as their situation remains the same. And then we wonder what is happening to family life in this nation.

In the Epistle of Peter, his injunction to the family is to exercise mutuality in relationships and to set examples so that the unbelieving spouse may be brought to faith. If we are to be faithful to this mandate, we must first claim our historical identity and how that has shaped family in the life of our nation. Secondly, we must apologise to those many families, especially mothers whom we have marginalized but who have, through the quality of their family life and parenting, produced leaders of state, church and nation, and continue to provide the bulk of the membership of our congregations

and Sunday Schools. Thirdly, we must position ourselves to be involved in the life of families, without the distinctions we have perpetuated, and help our people to affirm themselves, because, people who cannot affirm and love themselves, cannot do the same for spouse and children. We must get involved in helping men and women to understand their individual and joint roles in providing the environment for socialization, nurture, and stability necessary for raising rounded children. In this regard we acknowledge the initiative of the Mothers Union in its parenting program, even as we note that we again relegate this responsibility to the women, including many of whom were themselves marginalized along the way. We must help our children to understand the nature of positive and wholesome relationships, so that they can recognize abusive relationships and grow to enter into positive relationships that will later make for positive family life. We must also remove those barriers which restrict the sacramental grace to only parties to one family form. By a strange twist of irony, if not scandal, across the Communion and the world, we are now talking about the grace of God that is unquestionably mediated to two persons of the same sex who seek to marry each other, while denying that it is possible for a man and a woman who have raised their family in a stable relationship into adulthood but without being legally married to be eligible recipients of God's sacramental grace.

Relationship to Civil Authorities

Recalling the fact that Peter urges his audience to accept the authority of human institutions and to respect civil authority, we must ask what does that have to say to us the holy people of God in our time? We have recently gone through the General Elections and have been reminded, not only of the deep divide among the population in terms of political loyalties but, we have also been made vividly aware of those who have excluded themselves from involvement in the political process which they consider corrupt and impotent to make the changes necessary for the progress of the nation, as well as those who, for religious reasons, see participation in the political life of the nation as participation in a system that is inherently evil.

Any serious examination of the biblical tradition will reveal that God not only is represented as creating human beings to live in community, but that he directed the process of nation-building for Israel as it moved from being a mere collection of clans to become a nation with the evolution of a system of leadership and governance. Leaders were appointed and challenged not to copy the pattern of kingship present among their neighbours which was oppressive, exploitative and unjust. Instead

their pattern of leadership/kingship was to be God himself. So those who aspired to, or were chosen to represent the interest of the people in the life of Israel, were to demonstrate justice, righteousness, truth, and love in their dealings with their people. The New Testament makes a similar affirmation about political leadership in the divine purpose for the ordering of the life of society.

St. Paul speaks to the place of leaders in the social and political realms. In Romans 13:1 we read:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.

So then, civil authorities whether in politics or otherwise are not to be perceived with negativity and as if this automatically places one outside of the faith tradition. The only dishonourable thing about political involvement, for example, is when those who are elected forget that they are accountable agents, accountable to God and to the people they represent, and when they become intoxicated with power and become arrogant, corrupt, and pursue pathways to self-aggrandizement at public expense.

Tom Wright, in his book, *Creation, Power and Truth: The Gospel in a World of Cultural Confusion* expresses it this way:

... the church must affirm that the creator God intends the world to be ruled by properly constituted authorities, but insists that they be held to account, and that it is part of the task of the church to do this, to speak the truth to power, to affirm power in its proper use and to critique it in its regular abuse.

The church must, in short, learn from Jesus before Pilate how to speak the truth *to* power rather than *for* power or merely *against* power.

To this one may add the qualifier, not to exercise this role only when it is a PNP or JLP government in power.

Former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, speaks of our baptismal identity and outworking of the life of holiness in a way that is most relevant in this regard and which I have taken the liberty to paraphrase:

For many centuries the Church has thought of Jesus as anointed by God to live out a threefold identity: that of prophet, priest and king. The baptized person identifies with Jesus in these three

ways of being human which characterize and define his unique humanity. As we grow into his life and humanity these three ways come to characterize us as well. The life of the baptized is a life of prophecy, priesthood and royalty.

The prophetic role exercised within the context of the church calls us to ask questions of each other. 'Have you forgotten what you're here for?' 'Have you forgotten the gift God gave you?' Accordingly, we have to be prophets to one another, even as it calls us to ask of the wider society, concerning inequality, injustice and corruption, and those other questions which make for our health and survival as a people.

... as baptized people are drawn into the priestliness of Jesus, they are called upon to mend shattered relationships between God and the world, through the power of Christ and his Spirit. As baptized people, we are in the business of building bridges. We are in the business, once again, of seeing situations where there is breakage, damage and disorder, and bringing into those situations the power of God in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit in order to rebuild something. ...we offer our own service and devotion as best we can in the bridge-building process.

The 'royal' calling is about how we freely engage in shaping our lives and our human environment in the direction of God's justice, showing in our relationships and our engagement with the world something of God's own freedom, God's own liberty to heal and restore. So the baptized life is a life that gives us the resource and strength to ask awkward but necessary questions of one another and of our world. It is a life that looks towards reconciliation, building bridges, repairing shattered relationships. It is a life that looks towards justice and liberty, the liberty to work together to make human life in society some kind of reflection of the wisdom and order and justice of God.

If the church is to function with integrity and be an effective agent for the Mission of God in the world, it must understand what is its very nature and calling, failing which it will find itself seeking to justify its existence and measure its effectiveness by the world's assessment of it. The call of the Church to be a holy people is not a call to the individualistic spirituality and pietism which has characterized so much of 21st century Christianity. Neither is it a call to the kind of spiritual apathy and laziness which characterize the life of so many within the church who profess Christ and who bear no witness to the world regarding their faith commitment. The Church is called to know to whom it belongs and whose character it must reflect in its personal and corporate life and in its

witness to the world within which it is situated. Christian spirituality is, therefore, not about being individualistic and being involved in some kind of mirror gazing activity as we admire and live with ourselves, neither is it a call to sit in judgement on the rest of society, when its own life is lacking in integrity and holiness. It is a call to reflect in a positive way a life which reflects the very nature and character of the holy God who has called it into being in Jesus Christ.

AMEN.