Welcome and Address delivered to the Church Army Evangelism Conference held at the St. Andrew Parish Church Hall on May 5, 2017

My sisters and brothers in Christ, I would like to use this opportunity to welcome all of you to this Evangelism Conference that has been organized by the Church Army Officers of the Diocese. In so doing I want to congratulate them on this effort and to express the hope that this Conference will in some way fulfill the dreams of those who conceived of it and planned it, even as it fulfills the great need that we have for a clearer vision and understanding of the nature of the Mission to which we are all called by virtue of our Baptism into Jesus Christ.

In this regard, I would like to make special mention of our presenter Shawn Branch who has come to us from Canada to share with us of his testimony, experience, and understanding of the Mission to which we are called in this global village within which we all live and in which human beings are forever searching for meaning for their existence, and even as we have a mandate to share with them the gospel which can transform their lives and fulfill their longing for meaningful existence, as our Lord expressed it, “that they may life and have it more abundantly”.

I believe that we have come to this Conference with different expectations. I have found that often when we think of Mission and Evangelism we immediately tend to think that those outside of the membership of the church must be our target audience, those who are potential members for filling our pews, (and helping us to meet our Mission Share to the Diocese), and as such, we must shift our evangelistic efforts into high gear in order to reach them. I am reminded of the book entitled *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism* by Walter Brueggemann, in which he sheds some useful light on the meaning and significance of evangelism for us.

He proposes that Evangelism must speak first of all of a wakeup call for those of us who claim Jesus as Lord and Saviour, and which involves taking our baptism seriously. The claims of the gospel of God’s decisive victory in Jesus Christ must find full expression in our language and in our living. The reality is that we are mostly kept and domesticated by our culture, and end up making of the gospel a private, subjective affair, while we accommodate ourselves to the ways and mores of the culture and society around us, rather than seeking to challenge and transform the society through the living and proclamation of the gospel.

Brueggemann deposits the notion that “it is obvious to everyone that “outsiders” to the faith should be a proper target of evangelism. It is not so obvious that insiders also need evangelizing. They are a prime constituency for reincorporation into the vitality of faith.

So, let us be clear on one thing. In coming to be a part of this conference it is not just about equipping you to look outside of the community of faith, but to call the members of the church, you and me, to what profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord means, and what a manifestation of what Brueggemann identifies as “vitality of faith” should look like.

I want to suggest further that Evangelism is not just about outsiders and insiders. There is an increasing number of persons who sit somewhere between the two categories which may be regarded as two poles for our purpose just now. There are those who have not been to church for a while, those who are trying to find a new sense of grounding in the faith of their birth and earlier commitment, those who may have no prior commitment to Jesus Christ but would like to engage the gospel from a new place in their life’s pilgrimage, as well of those who make no claim to faith. Here I want to make mention of a group that the church is not quite sure how to handle, namely, those who have a problem with institutional expressions of Christianity and say that they are not religious but spiritual. In this regard, I would like to take the opportunity to share a perspective on our Christian faith which may be unlike the approaches you have heard before, but which gives expression to our faith in a way that may speak to these various categories of persons, and which must inform our approach to Mission and Evangelism.

On the Sunday when hurricane Matthew was expected in Jamaica, I was presiding at the Holy Eucharist in the St. Andrew Parish Church, and when I came to the Great Thanksgiving, it struck me in a very profound way that this very ancient expression of the Eucharistic tradition to which newer churches have claimed no affinity, contains a complete expression of the faith of the community, called Christian, and to which I identify as an adequate articulation of the faith commitment to Jesus Christ which I hold and which I proclaim.

For many Christian traditions, preachers and Christians, Mission and Evangelism immediately brings to mind the notion of sin, and that we must confront people with sin and the Cross, and while this has everything to do with the gospel of Jesus Christ, if that is where it begins and ends then we have a very truncated gospel.

One of the questions raised by life in our modern world is this, what constitutes reality? Is there place for accommodating the sense of mystery and the spiritual in our understanding of reality? As products of the modern scientific era, many have tended to reduce the definition of reality to the objective, visible and tangible, the things which can be manipulated by science and technology. Whatever does not fall within this system of classification is not real. The interesting thing about it all is that the very science which has claimed to be definitive of reality has now led to a situation in which it is almost impossible to determine what constitutes reality. For example, when watching the television these days it is impossible to determine what is real and what is animation as this development in science and cinematography has blurred the boundaries for the definition of reality. So too has the development of what is known as artificial intelligence, on which much of computer technology rests. Accordingly, many have dismissed or lost a sense of mystery and the spiritual in life.

Because human beings have been able to use the visible and tangible to create, invent, and build the things which manifest the achievements of civilization, we have tended to move into a state of arrogance and idolatry in asserting that there is no God. God is only a reality for the uneducated, the unsophisticated, the superstitious mind, the poor, and people of underdeveloped societies.

**Christian faith does not emerge out of a context of contesting arguments, proofs of a scientific nature, or debates. It begins with an understanding of the origin of human life and the created order; the experience of people of faith through the ages and captured in Holy Scripture and ongoing daily experiences; and an understanding of human life and its relation to the world as one guided intentionally, not by cause and effect, but by a loving creator who wills to be in relationship with human beings and the entire created order.**

The Great Thanksgiving/Eucharistic Prayer/Canon of the Mass is of ancient origin but constitutes the core of Anglican Eucharistic liturgy across the world. So whether I am in the Cathedral in South Korea or in the Gold Coast in Ghana, I can follow the liturgy without recognizing the words of the native language. There are long and short Eucharistic Prayers but they all follow a certain structure. I would like to share with you from the CPWI Prayer Book, Eucharistic Prayer A. It begins:

***All Holy and glorious Father, our Creator God, we give you thanks because in your loving wisdom you brought all things into being, and are truly worthy of praise from every creature you have made.***

This we may say is a profound statement which takes us back to the Beginning, expressed in the Creation Stories in the Book of Genesis, but re-stated and re-affirmed in various contexts in subsequent books of the Bible.

It speaks to the nature and character of God as Holy, Father (personal) and Creator, affirming that far from an impersonal world which is just driven by cause and effect after what some have called the “great bang”, the entire created order, whether of human beings, plants, animals, the total environment of land, sea and the galaxies of planets and stars, are expressions of the loving wisdom and will of God. It speaks also of human beings created in the image of God. Humanity is unique within creation because men and women are made in God’s image and likeness. Human response is therefore appropriately one of a reciprocating love and praise. The idea of human beings created in the image and likeness of God brings into focus the matter of relationships, what theologians speak of as relationality. God himself is a relationship of Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is irreducibly Father, Son and Spirit: the Father is only Father in relation to the Son and the Spirit, the Spirit is only Spirit in relation to the Father and Son, and so on. Each Person of the Trinity is in relation with the other Persons; God is pure relationality. Each Person of the Trinity is the fullness of God. So, when we speak of the Trinity, we are not offering a lesson in Mathematics, as the Jehovah’s Witnesses argue, but giving expression to a relationship within the being and personhood of God.

Just as the Persons of the Trinity are only known in terms of their eternal mutual relations, so human beings, who are created in the image of God, are also to be known through their relations. Every human person is a child of his or her parents, a sibling, spouse, parent or friend, a colleague, leader or helper. It seems to be the case that no single relationship wholly defines any human person. Our creaturely relationships are fluid and no single relationship fully captures our human nature. Nevertheless, it is argued that human beings are in the image of God through the relationships of love and peace which are maintained both with other individuals in the social order and with God.

So then, our Christian story begins by affirming the purposefulness of creation arising out of God’s creative intention and purpose. It also asserts that we are created to live in a community of relations with other human beings and with God. As persons created by God we are each of infinite value and must appreciate and define ourselves in these terms and not just how the world defines us and chooses to place value on us.

What difference does it make to your understanding of yourself as a person to affirm that you are created in the image and likeness of God as the product and object of divine love? How then do you and I deal with this elevated status which God has conferred on us?

The Great Thanksgiving goes on to tell the story of how human beings, including us today, have responded to God:

***Again and again we have turned away from you…***

Created in the image of God for the purpose of fellowship with God and each other, we either fulfill God’s will or resist and deny it. If I may quote from a statement of faith of the Reformed Tradition, the Westminster Shorter Catechism, I would say that “The chief end of humanity is to glorify God and to enjoy this God forever.” Through the ages and in our own lives we reflect a different reality. Perhaps Frank Sinatra rendition of “I did it my way” best sums up our approach to life. At worst it may be rendered “I did it the way society dictates”.

What then is your perception of and relationship with God? Many of us have heard and have internalized some very judgmental preaching and pronouncements about the nature of God. **Our Anglican understanding, informed by our incarnational theology affirms the loving, compassionate, merciful, holy and just nature of our God as his primary nature.**

So while we have turned away from God, the Great Thanksgiving goes on to tell the story of how God responds:

***… yet in every age your steadfast love has called us to return to live in union with you: for it is your eternal purpose to put new life into all things and make them holy.***

Here, I invite you to reflect on aspects of your life in terms of your handling of relationships. How do you handle a family member or person with whom you have to interact socially and who is antagonistic toward you or just plain objectionable? Most of us in our honest moment would point out that we avoid, ignore or simply abandon any effort at nurturing a relationship.

Yet the message of the gospel is that God responds to us in our most resistant and rebellious condition with pursuing love. In Hosea 11 there is one of the most intimate expressions of God’s love for his rebellious children. Listen to the imagery in this passage:

“When Israel was a child, I loved him,  
    and out of Egypt I called my son.  
**2**But the more they were called,  
    the more they went away from me.  
They sacrificed to the Baals  
    and they burned incense to images.  
**3**It was I who taught Ephraim to walk,  
    taking them by the arms;  
but they did not realize  
    it was I who healed them.  
**4**I led them with cords of human kindness,  
    with ties of love.  
To them I was like one who lifts  
    a little child to the cheek,  
    and I bent down to feed them.

St John captures the expression of that love of God for us in relation to Jesus Christ in the ever popular words of John 3:16:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

But, as we know, not all profession of love or expressions of the same are positive or enhancing of human personhood, and so Jesus himself clarifies the wholesome and transformative love of God which he comes to offer to human beings by saying, “I **came that they may have life**, and **have** it abundantly.” There are many avenues that persons pursue in today’s world in an effort to achieve a wholesome and full life, and yet so much of it proves to be empty or at best elusive. The promised abundant life for the Christian is elaborated further within the Eucharistic Prayer.

The Great thanksgiving goes on to indicate how that abundant life, as part of the pursuing love of God, has been made possible for us. It says:

***Through your Son, Jesus Christ who took our human nature upon Him, you have redeemed the world from the bondage of sin…***

One of the problems some have with the Christian faith is that of understanding how the suffering of the Cross endured by Jesus Christ can have anything to do with love and with abundant life. So let me share with you some insights on this concern.

There is a little book, *Lament for a Son*, written by a theologian who lost his son in a skiing accident, and who underwent a long period of grief. His name is Nicholas Wolterstorff, and he was only able to move beyond his overwhelming sense of grief by reflecting on the issue of suffering and death as embodied in the Cross of Jesus. So, he speaks to the issue of suffering and links this with love, more especially, the love of God which is manifested in Jesus Christ. I want to quote a few lines from his work which speak to the reality of suffering endured on the Cross as an expression of love – God’s love.

God is love. That is why he suffers. To love our suffering world is to suffer. God so suffered for the world that he gave up his only Son to suffering. The one who does not see God’s suffering does not see his love. God is suffering love.

So Jesus’ suffering was real, and the declaration “It is finished” by Jesus on the Cross prior to his death, is an acknowledgement of the ultimate expression of love, the giving of one’s life, as part of the divine love for humanity.

But not only was Jesus revealing God’s care and inclusive love for us, he was also taking upon himself the sin of the world. Jesus was dying, not because he was evil and deserved to die, but because he, in his person, was bearing all of the brokenness and sin which are ours. Sin here refers to the ongoing agenda of the human race to resist God, to neglect the way of justice and mercy in dealing with each other, and God’s attempts to reach out in love to embrace us. It is our failure to choose the fullness of life which God intends for us by settling for the appealing but non-life-giving path.

Consider then what it means, not just to be another statistic of society, a mere consumer, a number within the labour force, but a person loved of this pursuing God, who goes to such lengths to share in the experience of suffering for you and for me. Yes, we may share in many love relationships as spouse, parent, child, friend, but this precedes, informs and transcends all the others. St Augustine of Hippo makes it clear that to be in relationship with God and to be embraced by his love is to fulfill his intention for each of us:

 “**Thou hast made us for Thyself**, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in Thee.”

Earlier we noted that God created human beings as an expression of his love and for us to live in a community of relationships with himself and with other human beings. There has been a distortion of the Christian life and vocation informed by societal values which sees the Christian life as an individual and personal journey which touches only the inner part of the individual known as the soul, and which is confined to a private space between God in Christ and the individual. The Great Thanksgiving again challenges that notion and points to a restoration of human community as intended by God from creation. So it says:

***… by the power of your Holy Spirit you have gathered a people to yourself, to make known in every place His perfect offering which He made to the glory of your Name.***

The message of the gospel is that there are no status distinctions when we come before God, no big sinner and little sinner, no big redeemed sinner and small redeemed sinner. In Christ and through our baptism into him we are born into a new community where those distinctions, so important to the way society is organized, do not hold.

But, for those who embrace the love of God in Christ Jesus, life in this new community carries with it new responsibilities and way of living. Each member of this community is called to represent Christ and His Church, to bear witness to Him wherever they may be; and according to the gifts given them. In addition, we are to carry on Christ’s work of reconciliation in the world, and to take our place in the life, worship, and governance of the Church.

In the Church in the Province of the West Indies we understand that there are certain duties which follow on our commitment to represent Christ and his Church:

* Coming to God in personal prayer every day;
* Reading and meditating on the Holy Scriptures daily;
* Receiving Holy Communion frequently and in expectant faith and love;
* Following the example of Jesus in daily life, guided and inspired by the Holy Spirit;
* Speaking about Jesus openly, as the Lord whom you know and experience;
* Working for justice and reconciliation in society;
* Upholding Christian standards in marriage and family;
* Bringing up children to love and serve the Lord;
* Giving money in support for God’s work, bearing in mind the claims of tithing as an expression of gratitude for and dedication of our material possessions to God and his service;
* Giving personal service to the Church and to our neighbor;
* Letting our life be marked with self-denial and simplicity and permeated by love of God and our fellow human beings.

At the level of the Anglican Communion, and reflected in our Diocesan Strategic Visioning Process, these are captured in the five Marks of Mission:

1. To proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God.
2. To teach, baptize and nurture new believers.
3. To respond to human need by loving service.
4. To challenge violence, injustice and oppression, and work for peace and reconciliation.
5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and to sustain and renew the life of the earth.

The Great Thanksgiving comes to a climax with the re-enactment of the saving work of Jesus in his gift of the Sacrament of His Body and Blood, through which we are not only called to remember the past, but to receive of his nurture for life in the present, and our confident expression of hope in this life and for its ultimate fulfillment in our participation in the heavenly banquet. We pray also that through our participation in this sacrament as a community, there will be the outpouring of the gifts of faith, love, and the sanctification of each of us in our daily walk with God in Christ. We remind ourselves also that the community of faith, the Church consists of those of us who are alive today and the faithful who have departed this life, praying that we may be united with them in our worship and praise, and finally, when our life is ended be found ready to join the company of the saints who offer to God endless thanks and praise.

***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…***

So, as we go through this Missions Conference we must remind ourselves that we come to this conference from different faith positions and we will encounter persons of some faith or no faith at all. For those who are already members of the Body of Christ by baptism, Mission can speak of providing a moment for renewal of one’s commitment to Jesus Christ and his mission, while, for those who are not certain where they stand it may lead to a second and closer look at the story of the gospel and of the pursuing God who intends for them life abundant

As soon as evangelism is mentioned in many quarters within the Diocese, the first thing that seems to come to mind is setting up a tent, having street meetings, and calling for the Church Army. Now that they have planned this conference, it must make us wonder if it means that they are no longer going to be on call. The intention will become clearer over these two days.

Over these days participants will hear much about Mission and Evangelism and will no doubt come to a clearer understanding of how in a strange way, they are not interchangeable or synonymous, but nevertheless indissolubly linked together and inextricably interwoven in theology and praxis. Mission denotes the total task God has set the church for the salvation of the world, and authentic evangelism is embedded in the total mission of the church. *Evangelism involves witnessing to what God has done, is doing, and will do*. Evangelism is announcing what God, has done through the person and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth who is the Lord of history, Saviour, and Liberator. Evangelism is then the mediating of the good news of God’s love in Christ that transforms life, proclaiming, by word and action, that Christ has set us free.

In a strange way evangelism properly understood also brings us right back to ourselves and to the basics of our faith as the messengers and the witnesses. As one commentator puts it:

*Evangelism is not only verbal proclamation*. The word may therefore never be divorced from the deed, the example, the “Christian presence”, the witness of life. The deed without the word is dumb; the word without the deed is empty.

So we are reminded that in coming to this conference as members of the Body of Christ, there is a quality of life which we must exude, even as we seek to proclaim the Good News to a world of the unconverted, as well as to those in the church.

Finally, it is hoped that as we come to this Missions Conference we have come not just to be spectators or a listener to what we may describe at the end of the two days as “wonderful presentations” and that “it was good to have been here”. You will be exposed to one aspect of Christian mission about which we have not been speaking and which will sound like a new language, but is in fact the old language of the church being framed differently. I speak of **Intentional Discipleship**. This is an emphasis which the Anglican Communion will be pursuing together over the next year, beginning in Advent, and which we will be discussing and pursuing as a Province and Diocese after some amount of preparation. Suffice it to say that the use of the term “Intentional” speaks of commitment on the part of each baptized Christian. So the expectation is that at the end of this Conference participants will be leaving not just feeling good about having come, but with a new sense of commitment, motivation and zeal to be an integral part of this work of God in fulfillment of his mission for the church and the world.

Let us pray.

Ever-loving God, whose will it is that all should come to the knowledge of your Son Jesus Christ, and the power of his forgiveness, and the hope of his resurrection: Grant that in our witness to him we may make worthy use of the means you have given us; and prosper our efforts to share this glad news throughout the world to those who search for truth and the life abundant; so draw their hearts to you, so guide their minds, so fill their imaginations, so control their wills, that they may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.