

**SERMON PREACHED BY THE RT. REV. HOWARD GREGORY
BISHOP OF JAMAICA & THE CAYMAN ISLANDS
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Theme – Intentional Disciples: Instruments of Grace and Hope

Recently, I have been reading a book entitled *Turning to Christ: A Theology of Renewal and Evangelization*, written by the late priest and scholar of the Episcopal Church, Urban Holmes. In that book he offers a very sobering assessment of the Episcopal Church, the expression of the Anglican Communion in the United States of America, and which assessment I would like to proffer as appropos to Anglicanism in Jamaica. He writes:

“The Episcopal Church has for generations been accused of being the church for the upwardly mobile. I suspect my grandparents, at least in part, joined it in 1907 for those social and economic reasons. Perhaps, the prestige of the Episcopal Church is not what it used to be, or so our *downward* growth would perhaps indicate. In fact, people become church members for a variety of reasons, and motives will never be pure. But we need to be as clear as we can about our complicity in the less than edifying reason for coming to the church. In this way we can begin to chasten our claims and to shape our ministries so as to act for the Kingdom of God.”

It is to an exploration of that action in the service of the Kingdom of God as disciples of Jesus Christ that I am inviting this Synod 2019. And, as the theme for this Synod suggests, we can only be so engaged if we are a people with a clear sense of our identity as disciples of Jesus Christ, and which takes us beyond the mere celebration of our status as Anglican disciples of Jesus to a mobilization of the body corporate in the cause of Christ by way of discipling, evangelizing, supporting and advocating on behalf of the children of God.

For this mobilization to take place it calls for renewal in the life of all of us, part of what the adjective “intentional” seeks to capture in speaking about our discipleship. It is, in fact, a stirring and a wakeup call. Holmes captures it this way:

“... renewal, *properly understood*, is the community’s response, in grace, to the Gospel, the proclamation that God’s reign is upon us. Renewal is God shaping our vision and action. For the people of God, renewed by the Spirit of Christ, their world is turned upside down. The renewed community no longer constitutes its world of meaning as the society closed to God. It “marches to the sound of a different drummer”.

If we hear the Gospel, we have no choice but to be renewed.”

Since we embarked on this observance of a season of intentional discipleship, we have heard much about discipleship. We have explored the call to discipleship as demonstrated in the call of the first disciples of Jesus, and we have been reminded of our understanding of discipleship as that which begins with our baptism in Christ and is affirmed in our Confirmation and participation in the sacramental life of the church and her mission.

Rowan Williams, Former Archbishop of Canterbury, lists several features of discipleship in terms of what may be regarded as an ever widening circle. So he speaks of discipleship as:

- a state of being, and staying in an ongoing relationship with Jesus,
- active participation in the life of the Christian community in a relationship of both giving and receiving,
- following Jesus, and taking up the cross in the form of confrontation of the challenges of life, and
- **following Jesus in relation to and in service to those whose company Jesus loved, the excluded, the disreputable, the wretched, the self-hating, the poor, and the diseased.**

Sherry Weddell, in her book, *Forming Intentional Disciples: The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus*, picks up on the same note where Williams ends by pointing to the connecting thread between the personal acceptance of oneself as a disciple to the ever-widening circle as informed by that indispensable dimension of discipleship identified as discipling and evangelizing:

Disciples evangelise because they have really good news to share. Disciples share their faith with their children. Disciples care about the poor and about issues of justice. Disciples take risks for the Kingdom of God.

The use of the word “**instrument**” in the theme – Intentional Disciples: Instruments of Grace and Hope – has a kind of mechanical and functional ring to it. However, it is being used here with a relational focus. Indeed, the Anglican Communion is held together by what are known as the Instruments of Communion and the “Bonds of Communion” which describe, not just institutional connections, but the relational dynamics and understandings among human beings across this global Communion which hold us together. So the theme is not just speaking of institutional proclamation by means of the spoken word, but of relationships – sharing the faith, but also caring and compassionate concern regarding issues of social justice as it impacts the life of those to whom we seek to witness.

Several of the readings for today and, in particular the gospel, have something to say about the ordering of life in the world, the various boundaries which we establish in the ordering of life in community, including the community of faith, and which are based on materialistic and other measures of human worth, and our call to be instruments for the reversal that takes place in God's kingdom.

The First Reading from Amos 6:1-7 is a denunciation of persons of private wealth and luxury who are blind to the situation of deprivation confronting the poor and marginalized. Amos prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam, a period which was characterized by great prosperity for Israel. The words of the prophet are addressed to those who in verse 1 are described as “notable”. They are the ones who constitute the upper classes, the ‘conspicuous citizens’, the prosperous ones, the trend-setters, and are looked to as authorities and leaders, whether in political, commercial or social life. The prophet points to their increasing self-indulgence and selfish heartlessness in the face of the poverty and misery of those who have, not only no ivory on their sofas, but no sofas at all on which to rest their bodies.

Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory,
 and lounge on their couches,
 and eat lambs from the flock,
 and calves from the stall;
⁵ who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,
 and like David improvise on instruments of music;
⁶ who drink wine from bowls,
 and anoint themselves with the finest oils,
 but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!

Psalm 146: 9-10 echoes the denunciation of the rich as in the first lesson and affirms God's concern for the poor, the hungry and the oppressed, while the Epistle reading from I Timothy 6:11-19 articulates a perspective on life that is designed to inform the way human beings relate to and value each other and the things that constitute the material world. In so doing, it contains a note of caution concerning riches and the stewardship of the same.

The Gospel reading from Luke 16:19-31, picks up the themes of the previous lessons in the form of a parable, giving a very concrete expression to the relationship between the rich and the poor in the form of the two men, Lazarus and the rich man (commonly called Dives), and then adds the idea of the reversal of fortunes and the balancing of the scales of justice by drawing on the eschatological image of life in the next world. It is a picture of persons living in the closest physical proximity, but two clearly defined socioeconomic worlds, and never the twain shall meet. Notice that it is all set in the context of people who stand within the tradition of the community of faith as told by Jesus.

Let us then attend to the dynamics of this parable and see what we may glean from it regarding the nature and challenge of discipleship as instruments of grace and hope in face of the reality of life in our context today.

1. It portrays the life of plenty which is self-absorbed.

There is portrayed for us in the narrative what many would regard as the good life and the symbols of success defined in terms of:

- wealth - a rich man;
- luxury - clothed in purple and fine linen – expensive clothing;
- opulence - one who feasted sumptuously every day;
- exclusive living arrangement - one who lived in a house behind a gate – keeping out undesirables.

As the parable is told by Jesus, he lays the groundwork of a life characterized by what many would define as success and which they deserve because of their personal efforts and accomplishments, but tinged with smugness, and self-satisfaction. What more is there to desire for the achievement of the good life?

In his self-absorbed state, the epitome of success and prosperity, the rich man is blind to the existence and destitute state of the poor man, Lazarus, who lies at his gate with no shelter and in a condition of sheer destitution. With empty stomach gnawing at him, and his life perhaps hanging in the balance, Lazarus looks toward the house of the rich man hoping that he will be noticed, not

hoping for a portion of the leg of lamb or any of the gourmet dishes being served, but for just some of the crumbs that would be part of the leftovers. He is covered with sores, and the dogs come and lick his sores bringing him perhaps the only measure of relief and companionship that he knows. At worse, it may also be that he lacked the energy to drive the dogs away. How much closer could one get to the rich man's world? But he never really noticed him. Lazarus just became part of the scenery.

We can perhaps look at the relationship between the rich man and Lazarus within the context of the prevailing global economic model of the free-market economy which is based on the notion that the welfare of a nation is based on the financial success of the few which will then trickle down to the poor. In that light, the rich man may have been committed to the macroeconomic indicators which measure success, and accepted the position that the economy could not support the social programs that would help people like Lazarus. However, when the economy boomed the trickle-down effect would then reach to Lazarus. Of course, by the time that would be realized Lazarus would already be dead and in the arms of Abraham.

Consider for a moment the thought that the rich man may have been diligent in attending the synagogue every Sabbath, exiting his gate, perhaps like an Anglican, in pious devotion and preparation for his anticipated religious experience that day. But we need not assume that he was an elderly Anglican. He may very well have been one of those young professionals, possessing the MBA degree, and who shunned traditional worship, and so joyfully went to Praise and Worship and to Gospel Concerts, returning to his home in high spirits on each occasion. Nonetheless, unlike the Levite and the priest in Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan who looked at the man beaten nearly to death on the side of the road, and who took a conscious decision to walk on the other side of the road, Lazarus never even registered in the rich man's consciousness as he passed by daily.

There is a sense in which images of prosperity abound in our country today and statistics are used to point to the positive direction in which the economy is moving, inclusive of data on the number of jobs being created, and which is undeniable. Nevertheless, there is an underbelly of a world occupied by those who have a different experience of life and which is just as real as that of Lazarus, and which is dividing the country into several cultures and classes.

So, for example, while we must acknowledge significant improvements in the macroeconomic prospects and in the employment statistics, we must also look behind those figures and ask the relevant question as to how this relates to the widening gap between the rich and the poor. An article published in the Jamaica Observer on October 12, 2018, had this to say about how we are dealing with the widening gap between the rich and the poor in this country:

As Jamaica starts to see some improvements in its economy — growth at 1.8 per cent, unemployment at about nine per cent, a world-leading stock market in terms of growth, and consumer confidence at a 17-year high — it is still lagging behind much of the region in terms of battling income inequality, according to a recently published report from Oxfam.

The Commitment to Reducing Inequality Index 2018 (CRI), released on Tuesday, is a global ranking of governments based on how they tackle the gap between rich and poor. The index looks at three main pillars of social spending, taxation and labour.

On the list of 157 countries, Jamaica lists below the half-way mark at 96, between Honduras at 95 and the Central African Republic at 97. And out of 25 countries in the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region, Jamaica ranked fourth from the bottom at 21.

Likewise, in a report in the Daily Gleaner of November 30, 2018, dealing with the issue of poverty among the children of this nation, UNICEF representative to Jamaica Mariko Kagoshima asserted that at least 25 per cent of Jamaica's children are living below the poverty line.

"Child-poverty rate is growing, and it is a great concern for us, she stated in an interview during the first regional dialogue in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) on the Convention on the Rights of the Child in Santiago, Chile.

She pointed out that at least 15 per cent of Jamaica's children were living in poverty in 2008, but that figure moved to 25 per cent in 2014.

I have been informed by one of our leading economists that there has been an improvement since those figures were released. The fact remains that there is a gap in the lived experience of different sections of our society, including our children, whose socioeconomic plight cannot be ignored.

We must acknowledge the fact that, in the budget presented for this year, one of the areas of significant increase is that related to PATH (The Programme of Advancement through Health and Education) and related programs. But, while we applaud these charitable gestures, we must affirm that the dignity of a people cannot be based on charity or the goodwill of others but, the dignity that comes with the opportunity to earn an honest living with a livable wage and in a manner that is affirming of their worth and dignity.

Accordingly, we need to engage the employment statistics for the nation at another level if we are to be honest with ourselves as a people and as church. For example, several of the most lucrative industries at the moment need to be brought under the microscope for their employment practices which it does not appear that our political leaders over the last decade are addressing, and certainly without any sense of alacrity. Business Processing Outsourcing (BPO) is demonstrating that it can be a primary driver of the economy and contributor to the employment statistics.

Workers in this sector, however, are contract workers without job security, and who do not enjoy the benefit of vacation, health insurance, worker benefits for which Labour Unions fought as part of the development of modern Jamaica and an expression of social justice.

Likewise, in the hospitality industry, the shining star of the economy, there are similar employment strategies being employed. The government is becoming a trend setter in these practices, as well, in dealing with the employment of persons who are already living in or on the borders of poverty.

In a society in which only a small proportion of workers are on any pension plan, and where many persons designated self-employed are not contributing to the National Insurance Scheme or the National Housing Trust, we better begin to think long term, and not just how playing with statistics can make the situation look good today. It must be the responsibility of this and any government in power to engage these dynamics, and for citizens, including those who claim to be intentional disciples of Jesus Christ, to advocate on behalf of these workers, or is it to be the lot of these exploited workers to carry the burden for economic prosperity, however we define that?

Yes, Lazarus still sits by the side of the road outside the gate, and he hears and he sees the prosperity of Jamaica's Dives passing by daily, self-absorbed and expounding the language of prosperity, rehearsing the statistics, but unaware of his presence.

2. The divine justice and the reversal of human injustice

In the parable, drawing on a symbolic and eschatological image, both men die and the reversals of the kingdom of God begin to take effect. The poor man is carried by angels into Abraham's bosom - a favoured place - where he is comforted and enjoys the privilege of union with the great patriarch. The rich man also died and was buried. Who to tell, perhaps Lazarus was found dead and given a hasty burial in a pauper's spot. The rich man probably was buried with much pomp and ceremony. All the distinguished people of the community were probably present. Can you imagine the number of tributes that were given at that funeral! **Wear cheerful colours** the funeral announcement probably said.

When all of this smoke had died down, the rich man experiences the reversal of fortunes. He finds himself in Hades - the place of separation from God. He saw Lazarus in Abraham's bosom being comforted but, he figured that the way he understood and lived life was the way things should be even to eternity. Lazarus' status should be no different from the way it had been on the earth.

"Father Abraham", he calls out, "send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue" - certainly he can be the errand boy to one of my standing!

Abraham speaks in return:

"You in your life-time received your good things". "Lazarus for his part experienced the evil of neglect, abandonment, and confinement to his socially defined role". A reversal has taken place, so Lazarus is being comforted, the consolation and reward of those who hope and trust in God.

Abraham continues "now you are in anguish"; your fate is sealed and as a consequence a great gulf is now laid between us. It is no longer just a social barrier which separates.

Once more the rich man returns to his distorted notion of the way things should be ordered. Lazarus is to be sent on an errand to his father's house to warn his brothers so that they do not end up in this place.

Here is a forceful reminder that many of the social distinctions we make in this life have no place in the divine order, and that many of the things to which we give our life may be of no ultimate value. But while this is all cast in the metaphor of the afterlife, the reality is that for the disciples of Jesus Christ this reversal of the distinctions we make in life must begin in this life where the kingdom of God prevails, a challenge for us who would claim to be instruments of grace and hope.

Dr. Valerie Nam, who played a pivotal role in overseeing the last national census and a member of our Anglican community, placed before one of our Clergy Conferences a different kind of metaphor for understanding the story of Lazarus and the rich man in the context of our mission and ministry as Anglicans in the Kingston metropolitan area; and which insights are challenging to us at the very core of our understanding of our discipleship as instruments of grace and hope. After doing a comprehensive analysis of the percentage of Anglicans in the population of Jamaica, and a parish by parish breakdown, she then offers us a breakdown of Anglican affiliation around selected areas of metropolitan Kingston beginning with those with the highest percentage.

At the highest level of affiliation we have Upper St. Andrew reflected in Norbrook with 19%, Cherry Gardens 16%, Trafalgar Park 16%, Hope Pastures/UTECH 15%, Mona Heights 13%, Acadia 11%, and Meadowbrook Estate 10%. She then goes on to show those with the lowest percentages in descending order, ending with those communities with less than 1% affiliation with the Anglican Church. Those with less than 1% include Whitfield Town, Seaview Gardens, Waterhouse, and Denham Town, to name a few.

The analysis for the entire island would be a whole other exercise in itself. But, to what extent is this information a troubling or a comforting revelation and, what is your guess concerning what the picture looks like for the rest of the island in 2019?

In a fairly recent conversation with one of the leading elected leaders of this nation, who is an Anglican, he expressed concerns about the mainline churches, highlighting in the process his concern about our church (his church) by saying that, it is his experience that when problems arise in some of the most volatile communities in which mainline churches are located, the people do not call for the intervention of our church or those of the mainline community but representatives of the newer churches.

And so, as we think about a season of intentional discipleship, a commitment which must involve discipling and evangelization, we must ask ourselves how shall we exercise this vocation if we are satisfied with the status quo, while failing to see the world of Lazarus which looks to us, not just to receive physical crumbs from our tables but, to hear and experience a word of grace and hope?

Abraham's response to the rich man may shed some light on this question for us as he points to the fact that God, through his activity and word spoken through his messengers, is always reaching out to us and challenging us and, if we choose to ignore this movement of God, not even the miraculous will make a difference. Abraham reminds the rich man that his brothers have all the warning they need. If they should end up in his situation it is not because of a lack of warning, as they have had a long tradition of Moses and the prophets to whom to respond.

But it is not only the rich man and his brothers who may fail to respond to the word of God which has been active through the ages. We often spend our time looking for the extra-ordinary and miraculous, thereby missing God's engagement of us in the ordinary and everyday events and encounters - those things and those persons that are already with and amongst us. As the Collect for Friday Evenings in the Office of Evening Prayer reminds us in part: "Give us grace to behold you, present in your Word and Sacraments, and to recognize you in the lives of those around us" - those around us as they yearn to hear that word of grace and hope which is at the heart of the gospel.

- 3. As intentional disciples of Jesus Christ we are called to be instruments of that word and compassion that will bring the gospel of grace and hope to the life of both (the rich man) Dives and Lazarus in our nation, as Lazarus is a victim of the social order, and**

Dives a captive of the same order which tells him that the way the status quo is structured is the only option for success and prosperity.

Grace

If we are to be instruments of grace, then we must have a grasp of what grace is all about. Recently I returned to a book by Philip Yancey entitled *What is so amazing about Grace*, which I believe explains grace in a way that is easy to understand. In the very early section of his book he locates grace within the life of the church:

The world can do almost anything as well or better than the church”, says Gordon McDonald. “You need not be a Christian to build houses, feed the hungry, or heal the sick. There is only one thing the world cannot do. It cannot offer grace”.

In another place Yancey writes, “Grace is the church’s great distinctive. It is the one thing the world cannot duplicate, and the one thing it craves above all else – for only grace can bring hope and transformation to a jaded world.” In a rather unsettling manner he asks the question, “... if Christians are the sole dispensers, then how are we doing at lavishing grace on a world that knows far more of cruelty and unforgiveness than it does of mercy.”

In the Old Testament grace often appears as one of a pair of Hebrew words being references to God’s character: grace/gracious and compassion/compassionate. This pair emphasizes both God’s undeserved favor and his tender, compassionate heart with regard to human needs and is used interchangeably. Examples of this coalescing of this pair of words expressing God’s grace and compassion can be found, for example, in Psalm 103 verse 8:

The LORD is compassionate and merciful;
he is patient and demonstrates great loyal love. (v. 8)

In the New Testament St. Paul provides us with one of the clearest insights into grace in Ephesians 2:4-9:

⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ^[a]—by grace you have been saved— ⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— ⁹not the result of works, so that no one may boast.

We can only be instruments of grace, as asserted by our theme, if we ourselves understand what it means to be a recipient of God's grace. It is that which makes it possible for us to envisage the church as a community of the forgiven and the compassionate. It is vital that as Anglicans we grasp the message of grace and where it all begins. It does not begin with sin as so many preach, but for us as Anglicans and, as is conveyed by St. Paul, with God's love.

St Paul declares further that we are a people "created in Christ Jesus for good works", good works, not to save ourselves, but for us to live lives in which our good works are expressions of Christ alive in us ministering to the world, God's children exercising God's dominion of love in the world. That is intentional discipleship in action.

Yet, this is often not the way in which the world experiences us. Yancey speaks of his attempt to reach out to members of the gay community from a Christian background. He records one response from one to whom he reached out. "As a gay man, I've found it's easier for me to get sex on the streets than to get a hug in church". In our Jamaican context, the research indicates that one of the greatest hindrances to the eradication of HIV/AIDS, is the negative messages and responses displayed by members of the Christian community and experienced by those so infected in the church and the wider society.

As a nation we are currently involved in a debate concerning abortion, and having not developed a culture of respectful dialogue on issues, we take emotional positions at extreme poles and label those who differ from us as enemies, as we have done with our politics. As members of the wider Christian community, we need to enter into that dialogue with a sense of humility rather than the arrogance and the name calling which have been forthcoming from some quarters. We must acknowledge that as a people who affirm the sanctity of life, we have been less than compassionate to those countless generations of women who choose to hold to that value and have their babies under very challenging circumstances, and to which our response was to give the children the dishonourable status of "illegitimate", and which wrong it took legislation by the state to remove.

The irony is that some of these same mothers, who constitute a significant part of our congregations, can still only yearn for the day when they, like Lazarus will be able to receive of some of the crumbs from the Lord's Table. The difference between them and Lazarus is that they do not live at the gate, they are within the household. Where then is the grace that we as instruments have been sharing?

Additionally, amidst all of the exchanges regarding the sanctity of life, there is the paradox by which many who are doctrinaire on the sanctity of life when the issue of abortion comes up, are

equally doctrinaire in their supports for capital punishment. Is there consistency in the designation of the sanctity of life?

Our Lord provides for us the perfect example of the operation of grace and compassion in several of his encounters with persons, such as the woman caught in adultery, and those he healed on the Sabbath. In each case Jesus, in his grace and compassion, sees not just the prescription of the letter of the law but the human person of infinite worth and possibility, and whose life was subsequently transformed through the encounter with the merciful and compassionate Lord.

Anglicans have always been suspicious of absolutes beyond the command to love God and love neighbor, and especially when they are framed into doctrinal absolutes and civil law. Urban Holmes in his book, *What is Anglicanism*, speaks of this as Anglican “comprehensiveness” in one place and in another as “feminine consciousness”. By way of clarification of what this all means he says:

If by comprehensiveness we mean the priority of a dialectic quest over precision and immediate closure, then we are speaking of the Anglican consciousness at its best. This sense of a community of thought as opposed to a well-defined, definitive position, is what is meant by a feminine consciousness. This is why Anglicanism has never been a confessional church...

Guided by a theological methodology which is informed by Scripture, Tradition and Reason, we seek to arrive at positions which can articulate the truth with integrity. In this regard I share with you a perspective on Abortion consistent with reflection from within the Anglican Communion:

The church forbids “abortion as a means of birth control, family planning, sex selection or any reason of mere convenience.” But, the church allows space for abortion only in cases of rape or incest, cases in which a mother’s physical or mental health is at risk, or cases involving fetal abnormalities. At the same time the church takes seriously the crucial role which a woman plays in the decision-making process and who must be accorded due consideration and respect.

So grace is not just about a word spoken or a law invoked, but an attitude and vantage point from which we approach human beings wrestling with the fundamental and complicated issues of life.

Hope

So then, as intentional disciples we are to be instruments of grace but, what of **hope**? What is this hope about which we are to speak? Meeting as we are in this Easter week, it certainly cannot

escape our attention that at the centre of our faith is the hope which is declared in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

The prophetic tradition of the OT had, as a central feature, the proclamation and nurturing of hope in the life of the people. The element of hope is most evident in the exilic period as it speaks of God's concern for a dispirited and hopeless people who could only harbor nostalgic ideas about the glory days of a kingdom which was now destroyed. In Isaiah 40:1-5, for example, the prophet proclaims words of hope to a people who have been in exile in Babylon and have been reduced to a mere shadow of who they were and, as a consequence, were broken and overwhelmed with a sense of abandonment and rejection. The prophet is being called upon to announce a word that he had seen and heard from the Lord, but which as yet the people could not visualize. True to the prophetic tradition, Isaiah is to announce what, in the providence of God, shall emerge out of the present situation, though not yet obvious or even possible of conception to the human mind.

Hope then is something which is to be found between what is seen as human impossibility on the one hand and the divine initiative on the other. As Jesus was to declare later to his disciples in Matthew 19: 26:

For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible.

In verse Romans 8:24 Paul makes it clear that "hope" means both the act of expecting and the reality hoped for. Hope, as certainty about God's future, makes meaningful connection between God's salvation and the miserable realities of the present world. What can be seen in this life remains changeable and transitory, and bears the marks of death. To identify God's end with that would be to defraud faith. Instead, hope is what gives faith patience and enables it to endure in its reliance on God.

We are not a people in physical exile, although this is a strain in Rastafarian reflection on what they see as Babylon, but in our midst are people who live in captivity of one kind or another – poverty, neglect, social injustice, bad decisions and personal addictions. As persons called to be the instruments of hope to the people of God, we must come to the awareness, through faith and experience, that the suffering, the vulnerabilities, the brokenness, and the seemingly overwhelming experiences of the moment do not set the limits or define the possibilities in the divine economy, and align ourselves with those in captivity as advocates of their cause.

It calls for empowering people to question the situation in which they find themselves, why their situation is the way it is? Why they must work under certain conditions and never have the hope of moving beyond their poverty, while the institutions for which they work are exceedingly

profitable and managers can earn exorbitant salaries. I cannot help but think of Justice Batts quotation of Bob Marley at the recent ruling on NIDS. Quoting lyrics from the late reggae superstar Bob Marley, “No chain around my feet, but I am not free, I am down here in captivity in this concrete jungle”, Justice Batts said that the words reflected the sentiment of many inner-city dwellers and, to this I would add, this reflects the sentiment of many workers within the Jamaican workforce today and those who live in poverty. It means that we must become advocates of their cause and to reflect on the absence of social justice which is not of divine decree but, is of human construct and maintained by those who stand to benefit by the status quo.

This is what it means to assert that the hope of the Christian is not confined to the horizons set by these experiences of life or the dynamics of the social order. This is precisely the message of the suffering, death, and resurrection, which we have observed over the season of Lent leading into Easter, and to which Paul points as the symbol and paradigm for Christian hope. It is a hope which informs the present, but it is also a hope which moves us beyond the boundaries and limits of life in this temporal world and points us to a quality of life beyond death, the last enemy, a quality of life called eternal life.

One of our great biblical scholars, Walter Brueggemann, cites hope as a definitive feature or conviction of believing people. He writes:

It is premised on the capacity to evoke and bring to expression the hope that is within us (1Peter 3:15). It is there within and among us, for we are ordained of God to be people of hope. It is there by virtue of our being in the image of the promissory God. It is sealed there in the sacrament of baptism. It is dramatized in the Eucharist – “until he comes”. It is the structure of every creed that ends by trusting in God’s promises. Hope is the decision to which God invites Israel, a decision against despair, against permanent consignment to chaos (Isaiah 45:18), oppression, barrenness, and exile”.

Likewise in his book prophetic imagination, Brueggemann explores the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament and advances the position that the prophetic figures were able use their inspired imagination to deposit a vision of the future even in the midst of a world of chaos. The prophets were able to achieve this through the tradition of fearless truth-telling together with a strong sense of hope. To be instruments of hope and mercy will involve us at some point in truth-telling, including speaking truth to power, the ultimate goal of which is “so that we can re-experience the social realities that are right in front of us, from a different angle.”

It follows then, that to be an instrument of grace and hope is to be committed to the transformation of the personal, social, economic, political and religious conditions which keep our people captives and prevent them from attaining the potential which God intended for them.

So as instruments of hope our worship and prayer meetings must lead us forward to question the continuing high level of corruption and point to the failure of the institutions of governance to offer credible assurance that infractions are being investigated, beyond the usual treatment of such issues as nine-day wonders, as the prevailing situation can only breed further cynicism among the population. What the country needs now is advocacy for change on the part of disciples of Jesus Christ and citizens who desire integrity in governance, and decisive action on the part of our political leaders so that the country will not continue to see the kind of circus which surrounds corruption by public officials who are politically aligned or appointed and which proceed with impunity.

At the same time, let us be equally clear that acts of corruption and violation of trust by the church in its various institutional expressions must be subject to the same rigour and demand for accountability and transparency which we expect of government and public servants if we are to be a people of credibility and integrity.

The high level of crime and violence, especially the murder rate which prevails in the society is a major concern and a source of despair for many. In this regard, we have laid the burden of responsibility on the government and the security forces, police and soldiers, to rid us of this scourge. While in this scenario politicians get the opportunity to talk and to play politics as to which side is tougher on crime.

I believe that as instruments of grace and hope we have to engage and seek to change the narrative. I want to take one day's report on the crime situation as carried by the Daily Gleaner on February 16, 2019. It began this way:

Blood washed western Jamaica yesterday as fresh on the heels of Valentine's Day, lovers' quarrels ended in death for three persons in St James and St Elizabeth while a female farmer was butchered in Trelawny.

- the body of a female farmer was found in bushes with the head severed, the second such incident in western Jamaica in recent days and at least the third in the island within a week.
- a domestic dispute, which began on Valentine's Day, ending in tragedy yesterday morning in St Elizabeth.
- the 49-year-old [female victim] who was ambushed by her husband, who shot her multiple times before fleeing the scene.

- a former nightclub operator of St James shot his girlfriend to death before turning the weapon on himself.

Can we understand that we are not just dealing with statistics and with policing or government's policy for fighting crime? We are not even just dealing with states of emergency and ZOZOs. We need to address in a serious way domestic and gender violence? What is it that is creating among us the kind of brutish behavior that is making the beheading of persons commonplace? Yes, guns figure in most of the crimes, and gunmen are taking life and causing the figures to soar, but is it just a problem of guns? Or is there a more fundamental question of the value of human life and what is valued in life? We note that most murders that led to the introduction of the ZOZOS and States of Emergency are gang related, and many would like to see every gangster killed. But what does this mean for the future of this country if gangs are already a staple in our schools?

Intentional discipleship takes us beyond increasing numbers in the church to reaching out to the wider society to share the good news of the grace and hope which resides in God in Jesus Christ, not just by word, but by compassionate presence, advocacy, speaking truth to power, and releasing those who are victims of their own indiscretions and bad choices. In the process, perhaps we may even come to see how we may be complicit in creating the situations of hopelessness for our people.

It must involve the creation of space where people can come to engage around the issues of life and be transformed. We must move beyond the once a week opening of our places of worship and our church halls so that they can become centres for fostering education and dialogue within the congregations and the communities around these pressing national concerns. We need to think in ecumenical terms in focusing on these issues, ecumenical here speaking of other Christian denominations but, it must also involve civic groups with a common interest.

I rather like the way in which Urban Holmes speaks about the value of the creation of space for the exercise of our mission as disciples:

“... my own focus on mission is that of church as an imaginal space, where the possibility of growth in Christ – with all that means for renewal and evangelization –is supported and enriched”

Our buildings and our openness to others and our hospitality can provide that imaginal space. He says in another place:

John Wesley was a believer in prevenient grace, the doctrine that God is universally and already present to us before we ever are aware of his presence. God nurtures us, and when we are in a space where that feeding can elicit our response and cooperation, we will naturally grow in grace.

But we need to take Wesley's words further. The challenge is not just to grow in grace as individuals and as a community but, to be instruments of grace and hope in the service of the Kingdom of God as disciples of Jesus Christ. That, my sisters and brothers is the mission to which we are each being called in this Synod and as we go forth from here to our various congregations.

AMEN.