



The Annual Dean's Lecture

Date:

Tuesday February 11, 2020

Time:

7:30 P.M.

Location:

The Frank Collymore Hall
Bridgetown, St. Michael



Featured Speaker

The Very Rev. Fr. Sean C. Major-Campbell JP
Dean of Kingston, Jamaica

Topic:

"The Christian Faith in the Public Square:
Justice, Compassion and Humility".

Public Lecture

The Dean's Lecture

**The Christian Faith in the Public Square:
Justice, Compassion, Humility**

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Barbados

Introduction: Rastaman Chant by Bob Marley

It is such an honour and a special privilege for me to accept this generous invitation to share in this distinguished lecture series. The advancement of public education and religion is, indeed, a necessary component of the development of people in our Caribbean region.

We do this reflection within the context of the Judeo-Christian framework of theological reflection. However, it is to be noted that this goal of the St. Michael Centre for Faith and Action, says “religion”, and not necessarily which religion. This, in my view, is a good thing; since we live in world with different religious views, practices, and perspectives.

One of the challenges I often see, where I come from, is the assumption that the only authentic religious expression is Christianity. Maybe a good foundation for this lecture is John Hick’s Copernican revolution. You remember Copernicus. He had the audacity to suggest that the Earth is not at the centre. Instead, he boldly asserted that the sun is at the centre, and that the planets revolve around the sun. Students of history will recall that he was condemned by the church. How dare him, to suggest that man was not at the centre? And as is often the case, we in religion are prone to pontificating as if we alone have all the answers.

John Hick invites us to a philosophical engagement that we do well to explore this Copernican revolution applied to religion. We have been socialized to see our various religions at the centre. We must now rethink that schema and consider God at the centre, with all the religions like the planets which revolve around the sun, revolving around God!

Now it is also important in this kind of reflection to affirm freedom from religion, even as we affirm freedom of religion. This does not take away from our advancing religion and the values that we wish to teach, practice, and promote.

Some of the most beautiful persons whom I have met, with positive and life enriching energy, have never been Christian or even religious.

I have been asked to present theological perspectives on current public life challenges in the Caribbean. My question for you though is, “What

are some public life challenges that you are aware of in the Caribbean?" And this is not a rhetorical question. I expect responses.....

The Christian Faith in the Public Square: Justice, Compassion and humility.

What comes to mind when you hear a topic such as: **"The Christian Faith in the Public Square: Justice, Compassion and Humility"**?

Maybe some persons do a snicker. Maybe some do an Lol. Maybe some ask the question, "why should Christian faith be in the public square? Still there may even be those who ask, how dare you call the words justice, compassion, and humility with the Christianity that we encounter today, and even in history?

Well let me declare at the outset that since we live in a plural world, characterized by various cosmologies, it is of necessity that we engage, and be engaged by religious perspectives and varying philosophical positions in the public square. Silencing Christian faith in the public square will not be the way to go. If anything, challenging Christian faith in conversation, will be a more beneficial experience.

Let us consider some definitions re the topic:

Christian Faith, for the purposes of this lecture, must be clearly separated from the crass American Evangelical movement that serves political agendas versus living under the inspiration of Jesus the Christ who understood himself to be one who fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy:

Luke 4:18 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoner and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free,

19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

The Christianity I speak of, is the Jesus Movement that sought to inspire through living the mission of Jesus Christ in the world.

The public square is any space where civil society engages people. It may be in a school, in the parliament, in the workplace, on the internet, in cyberspace, anywhere people are engaging matters of human interest.

The word 'justice' is an interesting one. It has been mentioned several times in the Book of Common Prayer, within the context of intercessory prayers. It is largely informed by two Hebrew words, mishpat and tzedakah, with a particular focus on tzedakah regarding right relationships. It is about righteous living. How we live in relation to God, and to our fellow human beings.

Compassion

Matthew 9:36 When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

splagchnizomai: to be moved in the inward parts, i.e. to feel compassion. ... have compassion. Middle voice from splagchnon; to have the bowels yearn, i.e. (figuratively) feel sympathy, to pity -- have (be moved with) compassion. see GREEK splagchnon

Humility | Definition of Humility by Merriam-Webster

Humility: Its Use and Meaning. Humility means "the state of being humble." Both it and humble have their origin in the Latin word humilis, meaning "low." Humble can be used to describe what is ranked low by others, as in "persons of humble origins."

I use humble to mean not pompous. Not grandiose and imperious. To put it in a Jamaican way – not behaving like a bull and duppy conquerer – or a bull in a china shop. There are people who have weaponized religion and the bible. They feel that if they can wave around a big bible and hit you over the head, then they have secured their ticket into heaven. However, we are seeing a generation of young people who are reading and researching and they know that the church with all its pompous preaching, has walked through the history of the transatlantic slave trade and the attendant crimes against humanity during the holocaust of slavery, while holding the bible piously and feasting on holy communion, and still oppressing and hating and abusing and disregarding fellow humanity.

If we are going to do justice, and act with compassion, we must humble ourselves. There is enough evidence to prove that having religion is not a guarantee against the practice of injustice.

I will lean on reflections I have done in other areas, and not so much on heavy academic quotes from a host of other thinkers; so please blame me for anything that sounds crazy. I will comment on such matters as various anti human rights stances – namely anti-sexual and reproductive rights positions, antiLGBT marches, stigma and discrimination, fashion show in church, and so on.... So here goes:

Church of England Comedy

Some recent confusion in the Church of England may have been avoided, if only the starting point were a responsible engagement of Christianity in the public square, informed by justice, compassion, and humility.

The Guardian (International Edition) of Thursday, January 30, 2020, states, “The archbishops of Canterbury and York have apologised over a statement issued by Church of England bishops last week which declared that only married heterosexuals should have sex.

Justin Welby and John Sentamu said they took responsibility for releasing the statement which “jeopardised trust”. They added: “We are very sorry and recognise the division and hurt this has caused.”

The archbishops’ statement did not retract the substance of the “pastoral guidance” issued by the bishops, but implied it should not have been issued while the C of E is in the midst of a review of its teaching on sexuality and marriage.”

One day there was a crude, unthoughtful, and crass heteronormative presentation in service of patriarchal biases. The next day, there was a recognition that an apology was in order. Interestingly, on the day of the release, I posted the news item to my page, under the words, "Bishop's comedy".

There is a reason why I do not engage the media when asked to comment on the matter of gay marriage. I do not, because to do so in Caribbean contexts is to derail a necessary conversation around the broader, if not more important subject of human sexuality.

It is difficult to speak to matters that have not been sufficiently explored with the latest available information in the areas of gender and sexual diversity. We are calling on clergy and church leaders to navigate

spaces of critical thinking which have not been engaged outside of just a traditional view.

Saying that sex is just for straight married couples is at best a joke. In truth, it is okay to hold this as a faith position if one wishes to do so. However, in the public square, where people already know that the morality of an individual may not be correctly determined by that person's marital status, gender, or sexual orientation, we run the risk of affirming an already held view of irrelevance on the part of those who speak in the name of church.

More of us in church should remember that one of the earliest converts to Christianity was a sexual minority — the Ethiopian Eunuch — who was not married; never had a woman; never had children, and would have met with much disdain in our Caribbean church. In accordance with the Kingdom of God ethic of impartiality, God's family would be incomplete without those deemed queer.

We in the church cannot expect to be taken seriously when we make comments such as some of those seen in a protest held in Port of Spain under the name, “Trinidad Cause”. I wrote to the Trinidad News Day to share some reflection on expressions which Christians use in the public square, which are not helpful. Even worse, these statements fail to make sense.

Ref to Trinidad Cause

It is with sadness that I reflect on the state of the Caribbean church as I look at the march staged by TT Cause against a minority group which belongs to the LGBTQ community.

At best, the march is an excellent affirmation of democracy being alive and well in TT. It is also good to see members of the church being confident in expressing their views publicly in a country that clearly protects religious freedom and the diverse nature of their plural society.

On the other hand, it is embarrassing to see fellow Christians getting so much wrong with regards to what were supposed to be Christian messages. Some of the placards betrayed the ignorance prevailing in the church and the willingness of genuine believers who get led astray as

they support messages which they have not critically assessed themselves. Let us have a look at some of these unfortunate statements.

“Protect children; keep the buggery law.” Even conservative thinkers would agree that this makes no sense. Children should always be protected, whether or not there is a buggery law.

“Don’t remove the buggery law. Consider the children.” This is another excellent example of post hoc fallacy. It suggests that having the buggery law causes the protection of children. One does not have to be a progressive thinker to understand that correlation is not causation.

There was also one that paraded, **“God’s law is truth.”** Maybe it is time for the church throughout the Caribbean to appreciate that the role of democracy in a plural society is never to determine “God’s law” or “God’s truth.” Our governments do not do governance by theocracy.

I like how this provides an excellent example of, yet again, the post hoc argumentation used by TT Cause. **“We are a nation under God. We cannot go forward without him ... Keep the buggery law.”** Anyone who is into church language and culture will readily find appeal in the first two statements. How many will however realize that the last statement has absolutely nothing to do with the former two?

Then there is, **“Protect the natural family. Keep the buggery law.”** What is the natural family? Is it the extended family or the blended family or the nuclear family or the mixed family? What is this? How does “keep the buggery law” protect any family? By the way, which families produce a gay child?

By now readers would have got the trend of the fallacies. I will, therefore, not elaborate on “Family first. Keep the buggery law.”

“Politicians defend our freedom and our constitution.” Yes. This should always be promoted. Note though, that this applies to all the citizens of TT. The call to “Protect freedom of speech” must, of necessity, apply to all citizens too.

Did the holder of this placard “**No to cultural colonialism**” make any sense of it?

The time has come for us to bring critical thinking to our Christian heritage and seek more to follow the early Jesus movement versus the crass fundamentalism being spread by American evangelicalism which has lost its way.

PLURAL SOCIETY

I carry a burden which I would challenge my sisters and brothers in the space and experience of Church to consider with me. We see what has been happening in a world gone mad from irresponsible conservative thinking which has used religion as a bedrock for right wing politics. We see the increasing pain and confusion from the unbridled drama within the arenas of various political leaders across the globe.

It is for a time such as this that in contexts where the Church has a loud voice it ought to seek intentionally to be a source of healing and strength, in the midst of division and confusion.

Some hold the view that human rights are antithetical to the *Bible*. Others hold the view that human rights came from the *Bible*. **How might we in a plural society, though, act for the good of all, regardless of views?**

Looking at the Church's role in any democracy is an interesting exercise, given its history of being inclined more to a preoccupation with being dogmatic, theocratic, autocratic, and if we are not careful, even tyrannical in an effort to present a bias that has been accorded divine status.

Then, there is the matter of religious extremism which also obtains in various expressions of the Church. Let us not forget that the church has been alive and well in places where racism, slavery, apartheid, and various crimes against humanity have also been alive and well.

Pre-modern political thinkers were enthused with the notion of “the good” and what characterized this “good”. They also tasked themselves

with the challenge to identify those whom they considered were in possession of the capacity for this good, the objective being to get these individuals into positions of power and influence as they sought to create change.

Then came the problem of the realization that there may be competing ideas about “the good”. It is not a secret that, certainly in terms of Protestantism and Catholicism, the definition of good was determined by the side on which you stood.

Can you imagine? Pre-modern thinkers such as Plato, St Augustine, Aristotle, St Thomas Aquinas, and Luther did not always agree on what was the good. Imagine, Aquinas thought it was okay to have stubborn heretics put to death. John Calvin was comfortable with the execution of dissidents.

Without going into too much history, I am sure we see that a number of our pre-modern political thinkers were not tolerant at all with regards to a plural society. The idea of toleration, which informs the notion of tolerance we speak of today, is informed by democratic political theory which invites thinking in the interest of a plural society.

If the Church is to be a credible voice in national and regional development it will, of necessity, have to be a critical voice that is informed by critical thinking which seeks not to promote one's bias regarding “the good”, important though that bias may be.

The area of political thinking, which is to serve the interests of a plural society, should never be preoccupied with questions of the ultimate: Does God exist? What happens after death? Which day is Sabbath? Where does evil come from?

To put this another way, the critical voice of the Church in national and regional development must, of necessity, be focused instead on how we may facilitate a respectful and protected space for all members of the society in so far as they do not breach the rights of others in terms of liberty and justice.

Creating change is an act of necessity in every age. However, necessary change is often affected by the pace and dictates of dominant voices. May we steer clear of prejudice and stereotyping, popular though this might be with normative positions and political biases.

Another topical issue across the Caribbean is that of the sexual and reproductive health rights of women. It is not sufficient for us to just close the conversation with anti-abortion statements. Maybe terms such as pro-life and pro-choice should remain in their political categories, since they are often used to determine mutually exclusive positions.

A good starting point might be some questions which are not new, but which have not been sufficiently engaged. Is the foetus' integrity compromised by a genetic illness? Is the foetus deformed? Is the mother's life at risk? Is an underage mom ill-equipped to care for a baby? Is a pregnancy the result of rape? Is a pregnancy the result of incest?

Who would best determine the choice of a woman whose health, life, safety, human dignity, and autonomy are honoured when it comes to making a decision regarding the mother, concerning abortion? Should the life of the foetus ever take precedence over that of the mother?

When it comes to challenging ethical and moral decision-making, there is value in seeking the collective wisdom of different disciplines. Medicine, psychology, theology, law, human rights, and gender concerns, for example, ought to contribute to this conversation.

If access to safe abortion is denied, and statistical data indicate that, in such instances, the likelihood of a mother's dying is increased, would this not amount to a potential threat to her right to life? If, after professional counselling, and any objective considerations, should not the woman's right to making a decision be protected?

It seems most appropriate for the woman to be the final decision-maker in the matter since she is the greater burden bearer; since she really bears the challenge alone; since her physical, psychological, and emotional investments would far outweigh that of the father, doctor, pastor, and so on.

The place and voice of the woman's conscience ought to be respected. The wider community of health professionals, faith leaders, and political stakeholders have an obligation to educate and empower her with any information which would assist her in making a choice in what she understands to be her interest - physically, mentally, emotionally, economically, etc.

In matters of faith, dogma has no interest in the position of conscience. At any rate, dogma and various theological platitudes seek to speak for, and on behalf of, some philosophical/faith position which, in the final analysis, does not have any interest in the lonely road of a woman who is faced with all the challenges leading her to seek an abortion.

Transcends religious boundaries

There is no Caribbean territory that is a theocracy, and as such, laws ought to be determined by the State and not by any religious group. The concerns facing women and their reproductive health rights transcend religious and cultural boundaries.

If they had an informed choice, enhanced by legislative support, would 78,000 women die annually as a result of unsafe abortion practices or lack of medical accountability or 'open' post-abortion care?

If they had legally undergirded choice possibilities, would any of the 78,000 women who die annually as a result of unsafe abortion practices attend clinics which do not have the benefit of any governmental oversight?

If they had protected reproductive rights, would any of the 78,000 women who die annually as a result of unsafe abortion practices have sought post-abortion care - since the risk of criminal charges would have been absent?

To deny a woman access to safe and legal abortion is clearly an affront to ethical health practices; respect for self-determination; and most of all, the woman's right to life. Safe and legal abortion ought not to be just a physical procedure exercised under law. It should, of necessity, include

the benefit of informed counsel with the possibility of a multidisciplinary approach.

I add my voice to advocacy, not for 'abortion-on-demand', but for promoting the reproductive health rights of women, promoting the voice of reason, promoting the dignity of life, and promoting respect for the ability of the oppressed to make their own choices. After all, these are some of the most Christian things we may do!

What are your plans for Holy Week in 2020?

Many Christians will celebrate the Passion of the Christ. Many will recall the accounts of Christ's life, death, and resurrection.

This is a time when movies, plays, sermons, and liturgies speak to the crucifixion with all the gore of beating, nailing, bleeding, and dying. There is much focus on the death of Jesus the Christ on the ancient symbol of condemnation, shame, and death.

I wonder, though, if we have become so focused on the death of Jesus, while ignoring the death of our fellow citizens, fellow sisters and brothers, who die, or worse, suffer their whole life under oppression?

It is mind-boggling that some who cry while watching a movie on the Passion of Christ could not care less about violence against women and children, or the law's negligence in having not defined rape in gender-neutral and object-neutral terms; or the gross disregard for the reproductive and health rights of women.

Is there a likelihood that religion satisfies in some persons a need to cry about pain and death, while they ignore the present reality of people in their suffering, confusion, loneliness, pain, and dying?

Without denying the historical account of Jesus' crucifixion, I wonder if the time has come for the Cross to be tagged with some post notes bringing focus to the current pains and struggles of people living with and among us? Maybe in the veneration of the Cross, we might be more realistically moved if we placed some notes on that cross or at the foot

of that cross. Notes with words such as: abused children, forgotten homeless, stigmatized gays, condemned transgender, oppressed LGBT persons, abused men, abused women, battered wives, battered husbands, your name, my name, Jamaica, Barbados, Guyana, those in prison, those falsely accused, molested children, children in need of care and protection.

Who are the oppressed here in Barbados? Who would complain most about being treated with disregard, and a lack of compassion? Who will walk the Stations of the Cross on Good Friday? Who will be in tears?

Who speaks up for Rastafarians when the church school wants a child's locks to be cut off?

Who speaks up for the protection of those folks who wish to use their medicinal cannabis in peace?

Do you see the tears of women who have been robbed of the right to make challenging decisions regarding their sexual and reproductive health rights? Do you hear the cry of children who continue to be victims of corporal punishment, and incest, and rape, emotional abuse, etc.?

The Via Dolorosa is trodden by children who are crying out for help, screaming, and you hear, since you are just next door. But you remain silent. You will, however, cry on Good Friday for Jesus!

If your practice of religion or spirituality or politics or civil society work is not helping you to become a better person and equipping you to build a better human community, you are wasting your time and that of others! Prayer and piety are nothing without love.

May we, indeed, wash the feet or serve in love, all those we profess to love, remembering that in as much as we have done it unto the least, we do it unto Christ and, indeed, for the good of all humanity.

A timely reminder from Christine Mowry LaCugna, writing in 1991, *God for us: The Trinity and the Christian Life*. San Francisco, Harper Collins) is "Living the Trinitarian faith means living as Jesus Christ lived: preaching the gospel; relying totally on God; offering healing and reconciliation;

rejecting laws, customs and conventions that place persons beneath rules; resisting temptation; praying constantly; eating with modern day lepers and other outcasts; embracing the enemy and the sinner; dying for the sake of the gospel if it is God's will."

When you speak Christianity in the public square, what does it sound like? What does it look like? How liberating is it? Recently we saw a big shake from a 7.7 earthquake which rocked Jamaica, the Cayman Islands, Cuba, the Bahamas, even part of Miami, Haiti, Belize and other places. Did you hear the response of one Legislator in the Cayman Islands?

The Caymanian Compass reported that "MLA Eden calls earthquake, coronavirus 'warnings' over gay lifestyle."

Legislator Anthony Eden moved a motion in the Legislative Assembly on Friday to affirm Christian values, an action he described as a direct response to debate over same-sex partnerships.

He advised that natural disasters and disease could be viewed as "warnings" against expanded rights for same-sex couples.

"Mr. Speaker, once the flood gates are opened, what will happen in Cayman? How are we going to stop it? A little population of less than 70,000 built on Christian values. We have been warned over the years," Eden said on Friday.

He then listed hurricanes Gilbert, Ivan and Paloma as having been such warnings.

"Just earlier this week, Mr. Speaker, an earthquake – the strongest tremor that I've known in my 75 years – hit these islands. There's SARS. AIDS has been there over the years, gradually taking out many people. And now we hear of the coronavirus, recently declared a global emergency by the World Health Organization," Eden continued.

"You've seen what's happened. We better take warning of what's going on."

Eden's private members motion, seconded by MLA Alva Suckoo, seeks "to affirm that expressions of Christian doctrine and scriptures by Christian organisations and individuals is a right protected by the Cayman Islands Constitution Order 2009".

“I brought this motion in light of the atmosphere of tension and concern in regards to same-sex marriage and what it could lead to in the Cayman Christian and religious community and the values that we have grown to accept over the decades and decades as taught by our families,” Eden said.

“Christian preachers [abroad] are not allowed to refer to the biblical teaching as not supporting same-sex marriage and LGBTQ lifestyles, and it is termed, as we hear so often, Mr. Speaker, ‘hate speech’ and can be prosecuted.

“We’ve seen this propaganda in our own local newspapers when we try to speak up for the values of what we’ve been taught in our lifetime, that what we’re saying is ‘hate speech’. It’s not ‘hate speech’, Mr. Speaker. It comes from the Bible that I read frequently.”

Now, before anyone rushes to quarrel with the Legislator, please note that there are pastors who continue to teach that earthquakes are caused by lesbians! Please do not ask me how they know that lesbian sex is earth-shaking.

Homophobia and misogyny have no place in any country which seeks to serve the work of goodwill for all people within the community of nations. When someone has such a history of oppressive preaching, causing pain and insult to gender and sexual minority concerns, those with power and influence should seek to represent what is in the best interest of building community.

Prejudicial statements promote stigma and discrimination. Stigma and discrimination interfere with positive health and dignity for people living with HIV/AIDS. The prevailing evidence shows that where this is common, the fight against the spread of HIV is further challenged.

FASHION SHOW IN CATHEDRAL

An item of earth-shaking news was that of swimsuits in the Holy Trinity Cathedral of Port of Spain, Trinidad.

The swimsuit dimension to the designer show in the Holy Trinity Cathedral of Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, interestingly brings into focus some perspectives which we may not be ready to hear.

To be clear, Dean of the Cathedral, the Very Rev. Shelly-Ann Tenia (a progressive thinker by the way), did not agree to such a presentation. The organizers were aware of what was expected according to the Dean's comments. It is reasonable, then, to observe that as a matter of principle, they breached the confidence that was so generously bestowed.

There are those who were quick to condemn and speak of desecration. Might we, however, take pause and ask, "what desecration?" In the scheme of things, one understands that there is a time and place for everything, so to speak. One does not expect the precincts of a church to be confused with a catwalk or the beach. In the midst of all this though, might there be a deeper reflection to be engaged?

Many from the space of church have, over the years, attended carnival and have also enjoyed the pulsating rhythms of the ever beautiful Calypso and Soca. Now the reverse occurred. The land of carnival and Calypso entered the space of church. Did the appearances of nudity awaken the Judeo-Christian anxiety over nakedness and human flesh?

Might creative license have crossed a line that it does not know when it brought nature into the building we know as church? Beautiful bodies made by God, were adorned with beautiful couture made by human hands. With these they presented themselves, their lives, and their work.

While I am not about to suggest a repeat of the event here, is it okay to acknowledge that the Cathedral was not desecrated? In the prophetic tradition, it is not skimpy clothing that offends the divine. Instead, it is injustice! There are far worse things that take place in churches across the world every day. And there is no outcry unless these things become public. In fact, even when they are public, many still try to do a cover up.

I cannot help wondering, what might have been the response if say a group of men did a dance, in the Cathedral, clad only in shorts? More likely, this would not have evoked any anger. To what extent does this speak to our religiously socialized contempt for femaleness and displays of the feminine in the presence of patriarchal power and prestige?

The clutching of pearls is understandable. May we, however, now step back, take our eyes off those beautiful abs, electrifying hips,

quintessential boobs, and look at self (albeit less endowed), and enter within our thoughts. What really matters here? Does God care about our outcry if we remain silent on matters of justice? May we, indeed, seek even more to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

The Caribbean region has had a long history of oppressive teachings in the name of church and evangelism. We now need to facilitate healing and protection from further division, pain, and tragedy that is often motivated by characters with a history of preaching hate.

One of the things I have observed while doing services around the Caribbean, is that group that only sits in pews at the back of the church. I eventually learned that some of them do that because they are in common law unions. When are we going to be honest and help people to understand that marital status is not what makes love and commitment? When are we going to stop treating people like second class citizens on account of their marital status?

Until we recognize that morality has never been determined by marital status, we may find it difficult to accept that we should be holding men and women accountable for their families, whether or not they walked down the aisle and signed a piece of paper.

In our bid to sound holy in the public square, we must beware of diminishing the humanity of our fellow human beings. We have a message to tell, to the nations. However, we run the risk of losing the message when people are othered and despised.

The Church in the public square should add its voice to affirming the place of the Caribbean Court of Justice in the quest for a Caribbean that speaks for the Caribbean, acts for the Caribbean, and pronounces justice in the name of the peoples of the Caribbean.

Christianity in the public square should be heard in advocacy for Haitians who were deported from the Bahamas in the aftermath of the catastrophic hurricane, back to Haiti on a day when there was civil unrest and shooting in the streets of Port Au Prince.

Christianity in the public square should be calling on England to stop the injustice of double punishment when it deports those who grew up in its system and served their time in prison.

Christianity in the public square should speak up for the strangers in their midst, especially refugees, who are only seeking safety as fellow human beings.

Christianity in the public square then, must be a voice for the good of all. The church must be that organization that exists for those who are not its members. It ought, like Jesus Christ her Lord, to look at the multitudes with compassion.

The Church is not called to partisan politics. It is on mission for the Kingdom of God! For too long, the elite of the church has enjoyed an unholy alliance with Babylon. Whenever the church is selective about its preaching and teaching in sensitivity to civil politics, it is serving Babylon. Whenever it remains silent in the face of human suffering, it is serving Babylon. Whenever it is silent about the oppression of minority groups, it has lost its savour. Whenever it is silent about the abuse of children, maybe it should be closed!

Many years ago, I encountered a woman who walked into church while I was there sitting alone, in preparation for Bible study. She was dressed in a two-piece bikini bathing suit. She came and sat directly in front of me. I engaged her in conversation and discovered that she was suicidal. Did she desecrate the church upon entry into the building? I was able to facilitate a course of therapy and support for her. What if upon seeing her, I reprimanded her and directed her back through the door?

I am not suggesting a change of wardrobe for church goers. However, I would challenge us to see people and not clutch pearls over their garments.

Sometime ago, I invited a transgender man and a sex worker to address the congregation at Christ Church in Vineyard Town, Jamaica. On that occasion, I also washed the feet of two lesbians. The idea was to place a face on our fellow human beings. Too often in church we demonize others because we have failed to follow Jesus in respectfully engaging the foreigner at the well, and affirming the good in the foreigner who is

the Good Samaritan, and applauding the foreigner who was filled with gratitude after being healed of leprosy.

Interestingly, Jesus did most of his ministry in the public square. It seems to me that we would be accurate in suggesting that Jesus' ministry was about justice, compassion, and humility.

What if we understood more about Paul's reflection with the Philippians? Chapter 2: 5 In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

7 rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

The focus – preaching Christ. The mission – following Christ.

A humble and repentant church has an important role to play in the public square. We need to spend more time understanding our language and appreciating that there is good news that the church has, which a broken world still needs.

I find pertinent, some words from Walter Wink in his text, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, “God at one and the same time **upholds a given political or economic system**, since some such system is required to support human life; **condemns that system** insofar as it is destructive to full human actualization; and **presses for transformation** into a more human order. Conservatives stress the first; revolutionaries stress the second, reformers the third. The Christian is expected to hold together all three.

The Church has no more right to the public square than the rest of the human community. The public square as the term suggests is wherever members of the public meet. The church has a message of healing and change for the world. Our alien language is worth engaging since, even in the church, we run the risk of forgetting what we are about when we become preoccupied with selfish motives and desires.

Those who are not part of the church, do have the capacity to pause and hear that there is actually convergence of purpose. Sadly, much of what obtains in crass American televangelism has watered down what the faith really is.

Something that many have heard expressed in eloquent theological language, is worth our simplifying in the public square.

Incarnation. Kingdom of God. Redemption.

If you attended a Festival of nine lessons and carols over the Advent/Christmas season, you would have heard that John reading that states that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. It is an interesting way of telling us that in Christ, the physical and the spiritual are one.

Whenever you hear someone treating spirituality as if it is some ethereal kind of reality, that is flawed in terms of Christian theology. You are your spiritual self with all of who you are. You are not less because you are atheist, or deist, or agnostic, or religious, or HIV positive, or depressed, or a sex worker, or drug addict.

The doctrine of the incarnation is the most powerful affirmation that God cares about the physical, and the here and now. God is not to be reserved for some pie-in-the-sky destination. God must be at work now in and through you and me. And we have the capacity to accomplish the greatest good for humanity since we bear the image of the one who is love in action.

Incarnation is about everybody. Incarnation affirms that God is right here in every one of us, no more so in anyone than the other. Can you imagine the difference it would make if we truly respected the divine in each other? There would be less opportunities for god-complexes in some members of the church who are busy othering people and condemning those with different views. Wow! Just imagine.

The expression, “Kingdom of God” is so potent. May I remind my friends who may not be into religious speak, that the term describes what all self-respecting people and societies would want. The term which also means the “reign of God” or “rule of God” is not necessarily about

church or bishops and archbishops and clergy and canon law, etc. No. It is simply about a world characterised by justice, peace, and love.

The Eucharistic liturgy is clear when at the greeting of peace, it says, “The Kingdom of God is justice, peace, and joy inspired by the Holy Spirit.” People outside of Christianity should challenge the church to live up to what it preaches about the Kingdom of God!

There is another much misunderstood word. In fact, it has even been weaponized in the context of some evangelistic programmes where the hearers are made to feel that they are the worst sinners in need of being saved. The word ‘redemption’ is a beautiful word. It is saying that God does not give up on anyone. No matter how irredeemable a person seems, so long as they are facilitated with the grace and patience and respect that is consistent with the kingdom of God, they can become new creations.

The concept of redemption is full of hope. When you have been condemned by parents and school and church and society as a whole, the gospel is saying, “hey there is redemption.” You can change. You can be redeemed. You can start realizing your best you, that you actually have deep within you. You may start being in charge of you, and make wholesome choices which are life enriching because when you are open to the power of the indwelling Christ, the indwelling light, the indwelling wisdom, and the inner power of love. Yes, you may be redeemed from the old ways of being. You may be redeemed from the ugliness and the bitterness, and the condemnation that you meet in others. You may be freed from the oppressive people and systems that have been against you. You may be redeemed from self-hate that you have come to live with. Yes, in Christ, there is redemption.

Incarnation is that union of God’s presence with humanity. The spiritual and physical are working together in the here and now. The Kingdom of God; the rule of God; the reign of God – are all expressions that speak to the divine will of justice, peace, and love.

Suh mek we chant dung Babylon. Mek wi big up we Caribbean. Mek wi imancipate wiself fram mental slavery. Wa mi se? Mek wi liv justice an compassion an umble wiself; an memba se, God a God!

Closing: Redemption Song, by Bob Marley

Prepared and presented by Fr. Sean Major-Campbell, Rural Dean of Kingston, Jamaica

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