

## **Sermon preached at the 147<sup>th</sup> Synod of the Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands, held in the St. James' Parish Church, on April 18, 2017**

### **Theme: The People of God: Called to Transformational Mission**

At our recently concluded Clergy Conference we reflected around the theme **“Transforming the Diocese through Clergy Leadership, Stewardship, and Accountability...Possibilities to make a difference”**. In those very challenging and engaging sessions we learnt that transformational change is intentional and strategic and involves radical alterations in the vision, culture, structure, and values of a community or organization among other things. We also learnt that the transformational moment becomes a reality when there is convergence between the forces for change including circumstances, follower readiness and the emergence of the appropriate LEADER (influencer of followership), and that the necessary stimulus for the activation of this process of transformational change is a sense of **urgency**. The question I would, therefore, pose for this Synod, is how may we engage the dynamics of life in our church and nation to bring about transformational change?

Within recent months the Church has come in for some unwelcomed attention because of allegations leveled, and the subsequent arrest of clergy from various religious traditions on charges of sexual and other expressions of pastoral misconduct and the consequent fallout in terms of loss of trust in pastoral leadership and the church.

The consequences have been far-reaching for the church in its widest definition, her pastors and members, and have generated a deepening skepticism concerning the integrity of the church and charges of hypocrisy in relation to the gospel which it proclaims. This skepticism has also been expressed in terms of questions regarding what the church is doing, or failing to do, in the society in relation to these and other issues affecting our children, domestic violence, and gender relations, to name a few. This, however, is neither the point nor the occasion on which to be the apologist for the Church, but rather to accept such responses with some amount of humility and confession for those points at which we have failed, even as we acknowledge that the church can never exhaust the possibilities for positive action in addressing these social ills in our society.

But we hardly need media exposure on this or any other issue to tell us that there are things which are amiss within our household, the Diocese, and that there is a sense of urgency to the task of taking appropriate steps towards arresting the deficiencies in the exercise of our mission and ministry and the decline and stagnation which have been impacting various areas of the Church's life. So, there are contemporary challenges to which the church must respond if it is to demonstrate to its members and the world that it is indeed the community of love, compassion and reconciliation it claims to be. For example, given the increasing sensitizing of the society to domestic violence and child abuse and violence directed against children in our society, the church must step forward and deepen and broaden its advocacy for the cause of our children, but must also use its existing network of congregations, as well as create linkages with existing NGOs to educate and actively sponsor programs which are geared towards

prevention and rehabilitation of victims of abuse and violence. And here I must proffer the notion that, the reason some persons express so much frustration and anger at the church is the fact that we (the church in its broadest definition) have a network that has no equivalence in this country.

This is not just a call to issue statements of condemnation each time an incident occurs, as some would like us to do, but to become more involved in advocacy, education, and other preventative measures, rather than simply dealing with the curative dimensions when persons have already been victimized and lives distorted. During the course of our Synod this is one area on which we will be focusing attention in our plenary sessions.

Additionally, while the ongoing life of the Diocese is being maintained by the faithfulness of many within the ranks of the clergy and laity, there is a sense of urgency for us to confront in more creative ways the issues related to decline in membership, the participation of youth in the life of the Church and in youth-directed ministries; the absence of Sunday School in some congregations even as the school system plays a decreasing role in any form of Christian education; the limitations in the financial resources available for the mission of the church; and the demographic changes which are impacting both urban and rural congregations. As a response to this latter concern of demographic changes and their impact on the mission of the church, we will be engaged in exploring a mapping exercise which should put some rationality to these concerns. Additionally, we have to do a better job

of communicating with our membership and the wider society using all the channels available to us, and as mandated by the relevant Resolution which was passed last Synod, and to which end a report on a Communications Policy will be tabled at this Synod.

In a similar way, the picture in our national context is one that is beckoning for attention. While we have achieved a measure of economic stability in recent years, and there is in place a high profile Economic Growth Council, whose mantra is “five in four”, there is a widening of the economic and social gulf between different segments of the society; there is still no national consensus around the direction in which the developmental thrust of this nation will move; the culture of dishonesty and corruption continues to thrive; there is a deepening level of decadence in our nation manifested in terms of our moral values, indiscipline and a lack of civility, and the high level of violence and murder; as well as the targeting of our women and children by way of abuse and violent domestic and criminal activities. Indeed, it was just over a week ago that the Office of the Children’s Registry (OCR) provided data indicating that close to 70,000 cases of child abuse were reported in Jamaica over eight years, from 2007, and the most recent figures available are pointing to an upward trend in the number of cases. And even as we tend to focus on the crime statistics, and primarily those related to murders, we seem to forget that the more fundamental issue is not just the statistics, or its impact on the business environment, which is a primary concern for some, but the fundamental devaluing of human life and the depravity of self that treats other human beings as disposable commodities. Yes, when in this very month an eleven year old in rural Jamaica can take a machete and

inflict wounds to the head of a fourteen year old, killing him on the spot, something has gone very wrong within the soul of this nation.

But we must understand also that the dehumanization of our people is not just what criminals do, it is also what our frustrating bureaucratic system of governance and business does to those citizens who in their contact with public and private institutions are treated with disrespect and sheer frustration, or who are denied justice, as well as those aspects of our economic and commercial life which treat our people as mere commodities in the race to increase profits, or to secure votes for political parties.

So, urgency is not a concept which is unknown at this moment within the life of the nation, and when we talk about prosperity and growth in this country, we must ask the question, prosperity and growth for whom? We cannot continue to advance the trickle down notion that once the economy grows everyone will prosper. The facts belie this assertion as it relates to the widening gap between the rich and the poor in this country. Many of the global indicators of growth used by some of our major global funding, developmental, and rating agencies are insensitive to the conditions and plight of the masses of citizens. When tax exemptions for the rich in a Western civilized nation can be premised on the saving of some one hundred and fifty million dollars resulting from cuts in public expenditure of government spending on health care, education, and social services on which the less fortunate in society depend, and some 24 million citizens losing health care coverage, something is radically wrong with the understanding of what

it means to be human and to be a part of a community whose foundation is the common good.

The prevailing philosophy of the market place as articulated by many spokespersons is that government must play a marginal role in the ordering of society and allow the Private Sector to take centre-stage. But we cannot surrender the control of our national life to any single interest group. And, in addition, in many instances advocacy of this position is merely a rationale for the ongoing inefficiencies and cronyism which attends the operations of many public entities, which, if operated on principled lines, can be just as productive and efficient as private entities. So, we must be concerned about what seems to be the guiding principle among some of the leading institutions within the business sector that constant increases in profits and efficiency is the end to which investments are made, and in order to ensure this kind of return, workers must no longer be guaranteed basic benefits such as pensions, health insurance and vacation, but must be employed as contract workers in institutions in which managers are paid excessive salaries and profits grow exponentially each succeeding year. Trade Unions must not allow this violation of our workforce to take place, and those responsible for governance under any Party banner must ensure that there is morality in the way business is conducted in this country. To my mind, there is a level of anger, sense of alienation and disaffection among workers and citizens at large, which will not be prepared to be disregarded or be treated as mere statistics on the margins of society forever.

Allow me to highlight one issue of recent occurrence which points to the challenge we face in terms of our moral decadence. Some weeks ago, the nation witnessed the spectacle, if not the tragedy of a public discussion of the issue of the release from prison of music produced by someone who is incarcerated for murder, and who has since been elevated to a further level of celebrity status. Since his conviction, his repertoire has included lyrics which are not suitable for mention in this context.

Quite a furore was created when one female political leader was bold enough to suggest in the public arena that his music should not be allowed air play while being an incarcerated convict and furthermore, given the nature of the lyrics produced. The response was a very loud silence from national leaders and the public in general, while in social media one response was that this female political leader who dared to mention the issue should be raped to teach her a lesson.

I have researched some of the lyrics which have come from this artist and after looking at the lyrics for Closed Casket and Lipstick, all I can say is that we are at a very low ebb in our moral grounding if these are the things we want our children to be singing and the source of popular entertainment in a society that already has one of the highest levels of murder in the world, and which has seen a significant increase in the violence directed against women and the sexual abuse of our children. Sadly, this society seems to have reached a point at which we can have no meaningful discussion and dialogue around the issue of morality. So

as a society we can dismiss all engagement of morality, social order, and legal issues by simply saying “Man must eat a food”.

I know that there are those who will see this as an attack on popular reggae and dancehall music, but there is a wide range to the lyrics found in these genres, and we have found it possible as Anglicans to include lyrics from these genres in our hymnody. Undoubtedly the lyrics which I have highlighted not only represent the challenge which we face in understanding and appreciating our humanity, but they also advocate the denigration of our humanity, gender, sexuality, community, and even elevate violence to a status of reverence, if not fear, and is being promoted by segments of our society, including leaders in various spheres, as representative of our culture.

When therefore we gather as pastoral leaders, and lay leaders, as we are now constituted as a Synod, what then are we to make of the situation and how do we move on from here? Earlier, I made mention of our Clergy Conference. Not only did we have a spirited Conference but we explored ways in which as bishops and other clergy and churchworkers we can be instruments of this transformational change in the exercise of our Mission in this Diocese. Today, I want to extend that circle, because, in a real sense, when we meet as a Synod, we meet as the most representative leadership and decision-makers within this Diocese. Accordingly, I invite us to reflect on the theme: **The People of God: Called to Transformational Mission.**

The sense of urgency and the call to action in the exercise of the mission and ministry in the life of the covenant community of the Old

and New Testaments is nothing new. Indeed, it is often in the midst of situations of challenge in the life of the nation and the faith community that God calls, commissions and empowers his leaders and people for action of a transformational nature. It is with this conviction that I invite us to consider several texts, primarily those which have constituted the readings for this service.

In the Book of 1 Kings, and particularly that section which begins at Chapter 16, there is the presentation and assessment of the reign of King Ahab of Israel. Ahab is assessed to be just about the worse king Israel has seen, guilty of perpetuating a rival sanctuary to that in Jerusalem, and in marrying a pagan wife, Jezebel, who introduced him and the people to the worship of Baal (foreign gods). In addition he was also guilty of sacrificing his first born son, human sacrifices being repugnant to God, and hence the faith of Israel.

The writer of the book then introduces Elijah the prophet into the picture, who views the leadership of Ahab as one which has served to undermine the foundations of Israelite society, thereby creating a crisis for the nation and their relationship with God, and so he predicts that there would be disastrous consequences, in the form of a devastating drought which would afflict the land. Now, we need to note that the notion of “alternative facts” is not the creation of the Trump administration, as those who wield power usually have a different narrative from those who would “speak truth to power”. Thus, Ahab would have none of Elijah’s assessment of the state of Israel under his leadership. Having predicted the drought and, aware of the monarchy’s perception of truth and his response, Elijah receives a word from the Lord to flee the land in light of Ahab’s adherence to

“alternative facts” and his rejection of Elijah’s version of the facts. However, after a while God sent Elijah back to Samaria to meet with Ahab.

When the meeting takes place the differing definitions of “facts” and “alternative facts” come into sharp focus. When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, ‘Is it you, you troubler of Israel?’ So, according to Ahab the facts point to Elijah as the cause of the nation’s problem. In response, Elijah offers a statement of the facts - “I have not troubled Israel; but you have, and your father’s house, because you have forsaken the commandments of the LORD and followed the Baals.” As is the case in our contemporary world, you need hardly guess whose version represents the facts and whose the alternative facts. Ahab is then instructed to gather the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel for a resolution of the question of who and what represents ultimate truth/facts. The outcome is that the truth which Elijah represents triumphs over Ahab. What follows is a cleansing of the land of apostate elements through a blood-letting experience which, through our Christian lenses, we find hard to justify as action decreed by God, although it is not unlike action undertaken by religiously committed persons through history and in the contemporary world while invoking the name of God. With the land cleansed, as it were of this pagan and corrupting force, Elijah announces the end of the drought.

In the meanwhile Jezebel, Ahab’s chief surrogate, to use a popular contemporary expression, learns of the activities of Elijah in killing the prophets of her god and declares that “So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this

time tomorrow". And, if there is one thing we have learnt about surrogates over the last few months, it is how loyal and deadly they can be in defense of their leaders. So, here in 1 Kings 19: 9-18, there is the account of Elijah on the retreat running scared from Jezebel and wallowing in self-pity and a sense of isolation, as if fighting the battle for God on his own. Having fled the land during his first confrontation with the powers of the day, Elijah resorts to the same strategy when threatened by Jezebel.

That the experience takes place in the wilderness is significant given the symbolic role which the wilderness has represented in the religious pilgrimage of the people of God through the ages - a paradigm for a dry and barren physical place as well as the barren and dry state of one's soul. He sees no way forward and is convinced that he is the only faithful servant of the Lord who is left. He assumes that where he is, God is absent or does not understand. And yet, God is present and with a mission to be undertaken, and to which Elijah must address himself.

So we read in 1 Kings 19:9-10:

Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" <sup>10</sup> He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

There, in the wilderness in Horeb, he has an encounter with God which changes his perception of reality and the direction and understanding

of his mission in going forward. What is interesting is the mode within which he encounters God, not in earthquake, fire, or whirlwind, but in silence. We may not experience anything as earthshaking as these disturbances of the natural order, and we may not even be able to keep silence as a Synod, but I want to believe that through our synodical process we may be able to hear the call of God to transformational mission in this Diocese and nation, and be responsive as in the case of Elijah, who responded with obedience and undertook the mission to which he was called of God.

As the narrative proceeds we see how God's presence becomes manifested in the midst of that situation in which Elijah is prepared for further mission through various expressions of nurture and empowerment in the provision food – “get up and eat” – sustenance for the journey. What we have here is another manifestation of that symbolic interplay between food and drink and the undertaking of the mission of God expressed in Scripture. We in our time have been entrusted with the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist in which we are sustained by the food and drink of the Body and Blood of Christ as the means of grace for the effective undertaking of the Mission of God.

So now in the strength of the empowerment and sustenance which God supplied, Elijah was entrusted with a Mission which was transformational and subversive of the status quo and which could possibly have cost him his life as it involved initiating leadership change. He is to go and anoint kings of Aram and Israel, and as successor prophet, Elisha. And if you think that there was danger in anointing the kings, think of the reaction of all the prophetic hopefuls who saw themselves by-passed in the selection of Elisha. So much for the politics of the community of faith!

All this action on the part of Elijah as commissioned by God was intended to give shape to the future direction to the life of the nation and its relation to God as a godly people. Additionally, it was a profound lesson to Elijah that in undertaking God's Mission, it is not about a numbers game and what the size of the cohort looks like. Notice that the assurance given to Elijah that he is not the only prophet left comes almost as an addendum to the commissioning to the mission from God.

There is a book written by the Biblical scholar, Walter Brueggemann, and entitled, *Truth speaks to Power*, in which he speaks to the way in which the faith commitment of the people of the Judeo-Christian tradition expresses a counter-cultural perspective in speaking to those who occupy the positions of power within the society and which helps us understand the differing perspectives between Elijah and Ahab, and to inform our own engagement of power in this country. Here is a rather pithy comment from Brueggemann:

The occupants of power are, of necessity, always seeking out versions of truth that are compatible with present power arrangements. Conversely, outsiders to present power arrangements are always proposing a counter-truth that will permit and legitimate counter-arrangements of power.

What is the truth to which we may wish to speak to power in our society today? The primary issue has to do with governance and the building of national consensus around the major issues of importance to us as a nation. This would include such things as Education, Health, Crime and Violence, Economic Development, and what has been dubbed in the past, Values and Attitudes for the creation of a society of equity and social justice, civility, discipline, positive and wholesome relationships between men and women, the creation of positive family relations, the nurturing of individual and corporate responsibility for

the building of community and nationalism, and a reversal of the trend toward individualism and withdrawal of recent years. In short, it means that as a nation, the focus on economic growth and prosperity must be in the context of a framework which speaks to the complexity of human beings and human society, if there is to be healing, the affirmation of our national identity, and the experience of wholeness among our people.

I was reminded in a most vivid way in recent weeks that one of the obstacles which we have to overcome in building national consensus is that of our history in which we embarked on the creation of divisive institutions, such as political parties, from as far back as the 1940s, before we had developed a national identity as Jamaicans, which was symbolized in 1962, the reverse of the path pursued by many modern nations of Western civilization.

Thus, the long-term vision of a cohesive and united people around a common identity was effectively derailed. One effect of this is that today the society has become polarized, and so people are not trusting of the system of governance, and furthermore, anyone who speaks on national issues is identified as being of one particular political persuasion or the other.

In this regard I want to raise two issue of current concern. The first has to do with what has become normative for the various governments to use the funds of the National Housing Trust for budgetary support. It is perhaps fortuitous that the word “Trust” is part of the designation of that institution. The institution was set up as a way to facilitate housing solutions and to assist contributors to acquire or to improve on their housing. The reality is that the country stands in need of approximately 20,000 housing units per year, a level not yet attained in the life of the institution, and in a context in which squatting continues unabated. To

change the rules governing the operation of the Trust is not only a violation of the trust which people invested in governance in the past to fulfill the intent of the fund, but it leads to a deepening skepticism and loss of trust in governance on the part of citizens.

So in the same breath, to announce that all surpluses of public entities will now be managed by the government and will be done with transparency, does not generate confidence in the minds of people. In this regard, I would caution the government against any move to extend the definition of public entities for this purpose to include church, trust and government-owned educational institutions which have been building up funds through various fund-raising activities for developmental projects, and now to treat these funds as money available for government management as announced for other entities.

Those of us who have connections to Pension Schemes recall the promises of the 90 day turn-around windows that were supposed to allow for a quick refund of withholding taxes and are still waiting several years and several governments later for the refunds to take place. The history of governance does not generate confidence in initiatives that may be presented as being in the interest of the national good.

How do we as individuals and a church engage these and other issues of national import? Here I speak of church not just in a denominational sense but as constitutive of the whole people of God within the church catholic. Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, in his book *Being Disciples: Essentials of the Christian Life*, has some profound words for us, which can serve as a guide to the task of engagement of power in our present national context:

“Churches and other faith groups might be called the trustees or custodians of the long-term questions, because they own a vision of

human nature that does not depend on political fashions and majorities...

A healthy democracy, then, is one in which the state listens to the voices of moral vision that spring from communities that do not depend on the state itself for their integrity and meaning.

... the Christian disciple is not seeking to make the state into a church, but is proposing to the state and to the culture in general a style and direction of common life – the life of the Body of Christ – that represents humanity at its fullest.”

And in a succinct fashion in which he captures the Christian contribution in the public sphere, Archbishop Rowan advances the argument that the church “is a voice that questions from a wholly different perspective, the kind of perspective that cannot be generated by corporate self-interest. It is a conversation partner, and what has sometimes been called a ‘critical friend’ to the state and its laws; it questions the foundation of what the state takes for granted, often challenging the shallowness of a prevailing societal morality; it pushes for change to make the state a little more like the community that it is itself representing: the kingdom of God. It does not make the mistake of talking as though politics could bring the kingdom of God into being on earth, but it continually seeks to make the promise of the kingdom more concrete and visible in the common life of human beings, private and public”.

If there is one message which comes through from this insight into the call and mission of Elijah, and the perspective offered by Archbishop

Rowan Williams, it is that **Fleeing, as Elijah attempted, is not an option for the people of God in face of the call to exercise the Mission of God in a time of challenge, even if it involves speaking truth to power.**

Transformational Mission demands no less of us at this time.

In the second reading from the Act of the Apostles 1:11- the resurrected Jesus has been preparing his loyal band of Twelve to become the leaders of his mission in the world. He has been with them three years and has been preparing them by his teaching, his incarnation of the very principles which he taught, and by sharing his very presence with them, and by his various sayings as to what would be the nature of his Mission as Saviour through his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, and his gift of the promised Holy Spirit. He has sought to re-build their confidence, sense of community, and their understanding of the mission to which they were being called, following their collapse and desertion of him at his crucifixion, through his several post-resurrection appearances in which he symbolically fed them with food as recorded in the various gospels, and by his breathing on them of the Holy Spirit, as recorded in John. He also assured them that the mission was not just one in which they would be left on their own, as he assured them that he would always be with them.

Now the moment for the departure of the risen Jesus has come, and for the mission to be entrusted to their hands, and what do we find? Like Elisha watching his master Elijah being taken up in the skies, and who was distraught and angry, the safe world which he knew in the constant company of his master having been shattered, it was only in the expression of his frustration in his use of Elijah's mantle, that he came

to realize the power in his very hands and the mission which awaited him. So now these disciples of Jesus are caught in a similar posture of anxiety, and the shattering of a world they had known in the company of Jesus, staring in the skies, hoping that they could bring back a moment and an experience from the past in which Jesus was physically with them. And so the angels, the messengers of God, addressed them:

“Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

One biblical commentator captures the situation in somewhat comical terms by putting it this way:

Why are you standing here staring and open-mouthed. You saw Jesus ascend into heaven. Well, God will bring him back when he is ready. In the meanwhile, don't just stand around in awe. Get on with it! Get on with the mission to proclaim the gospel and to transform the world to which you are called. And God will take care of the rest.

Our Lord had made it clear to his disciples that there was a world hungering for the message of the gospel but that the labourers were few. His early ministry, limited by time and space, and only physically touching the lives of a limited amount of persons, was only a demonstration of what awaited the disciples and the church that they would lead. The extent of the hunger for the gospel which awaited the ministry of the Twelve was made evident in the movement and spread of the church as we have it recorded in subsequent chapters of the Acts

of the Apostles. No doubt, the Twelve probably looked at the task that was ahead of them and found it somewhat daunting, as they were deeply aware of the pockets of opposition that they would face among their Jewish brethren, the threat to their lives which faithfulness to the mission would involve, and the adventures they would have to make outside of their comfort zone and familiar territory. And yet, these feeble men, like you and me, when they stopped gazing in the sky, hoping to recapture a moment and relationship from the past, were able to have such an impact on a world hungry for the message with which they were entrusted, that today there are over 2.3 billion Christians across the world, not to mention those of past generations and eras.

We, in our time, as we look at life in the nation and the church, the challenges may seem daunting. In other words, while we are losing ground, there are some who still want to bask in the glory and reputation of a past age. Our denomination, like many other mainline denominations, have assumed that there will be a constancy to our ministry and the life of the church in which we will minister to the faithful at every stage of their life – baptism, confirmation, marriage, sickness, death- and that the cycle would just continue to be repeated generation after generation. The reality to which most of us have not woken up is that denominational loyalties are no longer binding for this generation. So, many of the children and grandchildren of those who are members of our church today, have located their religious affiliation elsewhere, or in a different understanding and definition of spirituality. This means that people are not just going to flock to us, we must go to them.

In maintaining the posture of sky gazing in the attempt to preserve what was, we lose sight of the challenges of the present context which are confronting us – family life issues, including parenting education; human trafficking; domestic violence; gender violence; abuse of our children; lifestyle diseases; crime and violence; corruption; moral decadence; human sexuality; underachievement of our males at the tertiary level; and the growing social and economic inequities.

Notwithstanding these realities, many of us adopt an individual posture of gazing in the sky, gazing at what was, and at the same time failing to engage the possibilities and opportunities which currently exist, while others embody and advance the sky gazing posture at every Committee and congregational meeting by indicating why every new idea cannot work, or by asking from a detached position, “who is going to do it?”

No wonder the Vision Statement with all its shortcomings challenges us to action as a people exercising “joyful, energetic discipleship ... being an assertive influence for good and justice, always reaching out to engage the wider society through collective and individual mission and ministry, in faith, hope, and charity, welcoming, inspiring, and enrolling new members of the body of Christ as faithful stewards of God’s resources.”

One of the things to which we will be exposed during this Synod is the result of the Mapping exercises being conducted of this nation by the University of the West Indies and which will show us where we are located across the island, the locations of high concentration of certain social problems in relation to the location of our congregations, the demographic shifts which are affecting our congregations, as well as the developing and projected developments across the island which

have serious missionary implications for determining the nature and shape of our Mission in this Diocese in going forward.

Here then is a second principle being manifested in relation to the undertaking of a transformational mission as a people called of God, namely, **Standing by sky gazing in face of the perceived daunting nature of the Mission, and in the hope of recapturing a good thing from the past, will not fulfill the mission to which God is calling the church in this generation.**

Luke 9:57-62

In the reading from the gospel we are presented with what may be called the case of the would-be followers of the Mission of Jesus. They all presented a picture of persons who would like to be a part of the mission, those who can talk the talk, but not ready to walk the walk. So, they all had a ready excuse which they offered Jesus. They each were possessing of a set of priorities which superseded the call to discipleship with Christ and participation in his mission.

“Lord, first let me go and bury my father.”

“I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family.”

For some reason the time was just not right.

Sounds like the Church of today in which there is always a problem when it comes to our greater involvement and participation in the life of the church and the mission of God to the world. It should not surprise us that research on mainline congregations like our own reveal that we are composed in the main of marginally active members with 20 percent of the membership doing 80 percent of the work and giving most of the money.

One of the problems which we face as a nation today is the growing loss of a sense of volunteerism. Very few have any time to devote to projects for the upliftment of people within the nation and the church. These days, many say that they will help but they will not lead, while the first question many ask is “how much will it pay?” So it is that many claim not to have the time for nomination to serve on the Church Committee, to be a Lay Reader, or leader of one of the Auxiliaries within the Church. This is becoming particular marked with regard to persons offering themselves for the ordained ministry. Youngsters ask, “how much will it pay?” While those who offer themselves are being discouraged by parents and significant adults who seek to channel them into vocations where they will get more money, as if that can be the definitive value for vocational pursuit as Christians.

Here then is another principle regarding our enlisting in the Transformational Mission of God - **Excuses or suggestions that the moment is not right or other demands are more pressing at this time will not suffice.** Perhaps this is an Anglican affliction as the Anglican Consultative Council has proposed that across the entire Communion involving more than 80 million Anglicans, the year 2018 should be declared the Year of Intentional Discipleship.

Former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, in his book *Being Disciples: Essentials of the Christian Life* provides us with some short but profound insights into the nature of Christian discipleship, dispelling notions of excuses and half-hearted commitment to the call to participate in the mission of Christ:

- Discipleship is a state of being. It is about how we live; not just the decisions we make, not just the things we believe, but a state of being. In other words, what makes one a disciple is not just turning up from time to time. We all know from experience

those Christians who turn up from time to time in their relationship with God, when it is time to pray about something they want, and then they go about their business until they think they need something more from God.

- Discipleship involves being always in a state of watchfulness and expectancy in relation to Jesus Christ as our Lord is constantly acting in our lives and in our world. So disciples do not live in the past but are always engaging the present and looking toward the future with God in Jesus Christ.
- Discipleship involves active participation in the life of the Christian community in a relationship of both giving and receiving. In other words discipleship makes demands of the individual, something which should resonate with us having just observed the passion of our Lord and his references to the cost of discipleship.
- Discipleship involves following Jesus, and taking up the cross in the form of confrontation of the challenges of life, but also in terms of 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.

So then, transformational Mission happens where people make themselves available to God in Jesus Christ as true disciples, live in the present and its challenges, and are ready to walk the walk in faith and empowered by God in Jesus Christ.

I want to return to the point at which I began in citing some of the things that were highlighted in our Clergy Conference, and to take note of the affirmation that transformational change is intentional and strategic and involves radical alterations in the vision, culture,

structure, and values of a community or organization among other things. And in so doing I want to draw your attention to one more passage of scripture.

In Isaiah 43:18-21, there is this scene in which the prophet is addressing the children of Israel who are in captivity in Babylon, a situation that smacks of hopelessness and despair, and yet he comes to them with a message from the Lord which includes these words – “**Forget the former things... I am doing a new thing**”. It is a word of hope that seems to bear no semblance to the reality of their situation, and in any case, suggests that nothing that is offered now can be compared to the good thing which they had going for them in the past and have lost.

The prophet is fully aware of that human tendency to undervalue the present things, as if the former days were better than these. So in this chapter he delivers an oracle in which he recounts the history of their relationship with God in the past and takes seriously their present predicament brought on by the exile in Babylon. He does this to show that their identity and story are tied in with the identity of God. So, while one cannot forget the things of the past, discernment of the events of the present can reveal that God is supreme, and that He will do a new thing, no way inferior to the things of old.

One biblical commentator expresses it this way:

It is not on the past *as the past* that the prophet wants the people to concentrate. The prophet aims to create an imaginative space in the minds of the people so that their conception of the past can transform their understanding of the present and, thus, the

future: “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” In a seemingly hopeless situation, the prophet calls on the people not to lose heart but to look with anticipation for the signs of God’s approaching redemption, for the “new thing” that is coming - deliverance out of Babylon and safe conduct to their own land.

The prophet is inviting them to enter into what has been called “liminal space”. And what does this mean? The Journal, Psychology Today, offers the following definition of liminal space: “... It is when you have left the tried and true, but have not yet been able to replace it with anything else. It is when you are between your old comfort zone and any possible new answer.” Mission that is transformational is not about remaining in the comfort zone or maintaining the status quo. It speaks about change which is radical and is being driven by the urgency of the situation and moment. And one thing that is apparent in the passages explored is that when God in Jesus Christ calls to Mission he does not abandon, but he empowers and nurtures his people in the execution of that Mission. The challenge for us today as a Diocese is whether we trust God to be faithful to his word and are prepared to venture forth with Him in the Mission to which he is calling us at this time in the life of the church and the nation. Over the next few days and in the coming year we shall see what responses we are prepared to make as members of the Body of Christ to the God who has called us to be a part of his Transformational Mission at this time in the life of the church and the nation.

AMEN.