

Occasion of Sunday before International Human Rights Day

December 7, 2014

7:30 a.m.

Christ Church, Vineyard Town

Sermon: Fr. Sean Major-Campbell, Anglican Priest & Advocate for Human Rights

Text: “We have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth” Isaiah 64:6.

We are in the liturgical season of Advent. It is a time when the lessons and collects, often invite us to rid ourselves of anything that leads to unrighteousness and injustice. It is our prayer that even as we celebrate human rights on this second Sunday in Advent, churches throughout Jamaica will become more sensitized to the awareness of human rights and justice concerns.

The text I find most fitting today is set in Isaiah 64:6 “We have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.” I will not attempt to do a rendition of what that this would sound like in the Jamaican Language.

The text is actually set in the first lesson for the first Sunday of Advent, but I found it helpful in grounding our reflection in current realities.

A Lament

Isaiah 64:1-9 is actually set within a communal lament in 63:7 – 64:12. God is given praise for God’s mighty acts of deliverance; but there is concern that God has left the people due to their disobedience, and so 64:6 calls for God to tear open the heavens and come down. There is a strong sense in which God is also being blamed for the people’s sin, since it is because God is absent why all this sinning is taking place, according to this lament at least.

The people have failed to seek God, but instead they blame God for God’s supposed absence, and proffer this as a reason for the unrighteousness that prevails.

In terms of the psychology of laments, they often lean heavily on the pains and concerns of the complainant. They are often heavily one-sided. This is why it is so important that a Commission of Enquiry is objectively facilitated.

The laments in Isaiah recognize that there is a problem. They however blame the problem on the absence of God. And then they partly accept that their righteous deeds have become like a filthy cloth; before suggesting the blame for God!

Laments in general cry for justice and for a fair hearing, while anticipating tangible interventions for those who consider themselves to be wronged.

The Lessons

The lessons at Advent tend to sound rather strange and out of this world. The literary style is largely informed by apocalyptic imagery. That is, images which grab the imagination, through the use of dramatic cosmic events, and various natural phenomena.

The apocalyptic literary style gets your attention by speaking with such references as to the sun being darkened, the moon giving no light, and stars falling. It is a way of saying, "Listen now, you are about to hear something you need to hear."

At Advent time, the prophet uses imagery which many of us continue to look at through the eyes of our Sunday School days. Some have grown to romanticize this image – "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand over the adder's den."

I do not want to frighten anyone; but if I may share with you, I do not expect any time when I will literally see the wolf living with the lamb. I do not expect to see a leopard lying with a kid unless they are dead. I most certainly do not expect to see a calf and a lion together or to see these being led by a child. The only place I would anticipate these scenes are in works of art!

Does this mean that I believe that something is wrong with the message of the prophet Isaiah? A resounding no! The problem lies in the interpretation. You see my sisters and brothers, friends all, the wolf, the lamb, the leopard, the kid, the lion **are you and I.**

These various animals which live together in the age of peace are Christians and Atheists, conservatives and liberals, lettered and unlettered, JLP and PNP, human rights activists and human rights abusers, church and state, gay and straight, mother and father, police and civilians, rich and poor, Kingston College Old Boys and Professor Carolyn Cooper! It is all about living together in peace, in spite of the differences in our nature.

Do we realize that the first quarter of this century in Jamaica, is being characterized by quarrels concerning human sexuality, women's reproductive rights, and religious confusion? Do we realize that many well intentioned members of the church do not sufficiently understand the issues, and often it is easier to just jump on a band wagon in an effort to appease the appetite to feel as if one is doing God's will and mission, and work?

“We have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.”

And so we now have a very divided and fractured Jamaica. Out of many, we have one confusion! You know the Isaiah image also refers to the nursing child playing over the hole of an asp, and the weaned child putting its hand on the adder's den. Both the asp and the adder are snakes. No parent would even want to see this in a dream.

Asps and adders are venomous snakes. However the image of a time of peace is made even more potent in illustrating how the time of peace will be such that even that which is expected to create pain, and death has become docile, calm, safe. John the Baptist in one of the Gospel readings at Advent, refers to these venomous adders with the use of another word used to describe them – ‘vipers’. How interesting, the vipers for John the Baptist are people. “You brood of vipers! Who

warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" And he was speaking to the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Many of the influential and so called learned persons in the halls of power in this country are a brood of vipers, religious though they may be. In the Bible, the snake is not only a symbol of deception. The snake is also a symbol of healing. The snake is also a symbol of wisdom.

Jamaica is not short of persons with the ability to heal and inspire. But like the Pharisees and Sadducees, many like vipers, wait coiled in silence. They wait to strike but never to be an agent of healing and wisdom.

These vipers, like those addressed by John, take great pride in their religious heritage. John rubbished any claim to declare that they have Abraham as their ancestor, since God can raise up more children to Abraham.

What matters is the fruits that we bear.

The essence of the message is that God cares about those who suffer injustice and persecution. The message at Advent also notes that worship without justice is dead! In the Church we have tended to do a good job talking about justice and praying about it. But the time has come for us to understand that "We have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds have become like a filthy cloth."

Righteousness

What are righteous deeds? Obviously, whatever constitutes righteous deeds, would also define the practitioner as one who lives in righteousness. In Deuteronomy 25:1 the advice is, "If there is a controversy between men, they are to go to court for judgment, so that the judges may judge them. Then they shall justify the righteous and condemn the wicked."

A favourite Psalm which many are familiar with is Psalm 1. Well verse 6 states, "For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction."

James tells us in Chapter 2, “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” 14-17

What are righteous deeds? Righteous deeds are those actions which help the less fortunate. Righteous deeds, promote the common good. Righteous deeds include acts of faith and worship. Praying and singing and bible reading and a host of the things we do in church may be considered righteous. But lo and behold, all those righteous deeds have the potential to become like a filthy cloth.

We have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteousness have become like a filthy cloth.

A filthy cloth is ugly. It is repulsive. It is full of germs. It may even have the potential to spread disease causing bacteria. But since it is a piece of cloth, it has the potential to respond to cleansing processes.

Has our beloved Church throughout Jamaica – regardless of titles and affiliations – become like one who is unclean? Or maybe is it that many individuals in the church have become like one who is unclean and their righteous deeds have become like a filthy cloth?

How instructive the prophet Amos is, in noting that God is not pleased with the offerings and the music, and the singing, and the worship that is offered by those who do not do justice! “Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!” (Amos 5:23-24)

If the voices of advocacy and the voices for human rights and justice were as frequent and as loud as the voices of praise and worship in Jamaica, this country would be prosperous in leaps and bounds! But who cares?

Who Cares?

Who cares about persons dying while in state custody?

I do not know who killed Jamaican Citizen, Mario Dean, but this I know – the right to life must be protected, and this is a duty of the state! I do not know who killed Jamaican Citizens - 28 year old Mosiah Morgan of Red Ground in Negril or 20 year old Romario Reid of Hermitage in Bethel Town, but this I know - the right to life must be protected, and this is a duty of the state!

How many of our Jamaican brothers and sisters must die while in the custody of the state – before we make a change? How many spouses in various relationships must die, before we as a people take a stand against domestic violence?

Who was outraged when the Gleaner brought the story entitled, “Uncle from Hell”? Outraged not because the Gleaner brought the story, but because this girl’s childhood was snatched from her nightly and her grandmother knew, but she kept silent.

Something must be wrong with your version of Christianity or God, if you remain silent when you know that a child, any child is being abused and you remain silent. Something must be wrong with you or your version of Christianity, if you are so preoccupied with your favourite political colour, so much that you are blinded to the realities of corruption – but only until it is happening on the other side!

When Christians become so vociferous and activist about protecting two persons from a particular anatomical locale – as in keeping the anti buggery provisions, they remind me of Lot of Sodom. He was such a godly upright man, (wasn’t he?) he was willing to hand over his virgin daughters to strangers, in the interest of protecting two men he did not even know. Was he protecting them for himself? I should think not. Since the culture placed a premium on hospitality. Did he place more value on their posterior vis-à-vis his daughter’s right to life, choice, sexual decisions?

How many Jamaicans realize that a man who rapes a little boy will get a lesser sentence than a man who rapes a little girl? Simply because our laws do not recognize that boys can be raped and this because our laws do not define anal-penile penetration as sex.

Did I mention that Jamaican law is silent concerning any married man who wishes to rape his wife?

Did I mention that where a parent or guardian is molesting a child under the age of 16, a health care worker would have to get the molester's permission to treat the child? Did any church group make a submission to parliament about this?

Did you know that if someone used a mop stick to penetrate your child that would not constitute rape? Did any church group make a submission to parliament about this?

Recently a respectable, Christian woman of high societal repute, commented to me, "Fr. Sean, let me tell you something. I am so afraid of these human rights people." Me: "Really? That sounds like some fear." She: "A afraid, a afraid, a afraid."

Why would a Jamaican be afraid of people who advocate for human rights? Is it because our faith is so empty and lacking and sterile, and our righteousness is of no use? Is it because we lack an understanding of successive governments as agents of human rights? Are we aware of the fact that our first line of defense in terms of human rights ought of necessity to be our political representatives? That is why I felt encouraged when I heard Senator Golding speaking in Parliament on the 'sexual offenses bill.'

Imagine it took a member of parliament versus a member of church to call for the recognition of rape in marriage! I am embarrassed to acknowledge that I saw many Christian maidens in social media opposing the concept of rape in marriage; and this they did with the use of the Bible. One of the strange things about that strange book called the Bible, is the capacity it has to be twisted and contorted for the purposes of the user.

Throughout our long church history in Jamaica, many a black eye, swollen lip, lost tooth, bashed head has been the secret burden of some upstanding women of the church. And while men are also victims of abuse in marriage, since we are on the subject of rape, I made sure to tell my wife, if she ever tries it, I will personally have her reported! I will not stand for it.

The vast majority of us in church and so called respectable society would never lift a finger to hurt anyone. Isn't that true? But beware, we often plant and tend a seed which if watered, bears gossip, character assassination, negative labeling, bullying, stereotyping, condemnation, judgment, and unrighteousness in its various manifestations.

Too many of us hold contempt in our hearts for others who seem different from us. Who am I to tell any woman that she must find me sexually appealing simply on the basis that I am a member of the opposite sex?

Tell me:

Do you have to be a divorcee, to understand that divorce has been a blessing for some persons and that some persons in the church actually need a divorce?

Do you have to be gay, to understand that gay people continue to be the objects of stigma and discrimination?

Do you have to be a woman without a child to understand that we still have persons in our midst who speak disparagingly about a woman who does not have a child?

Do you have to be a woman who has suffered the torture of rape, to understand that it is grossly inappropriate to make jokes about a woman being raped? I am encouraged by persons like Senator Mark Golding, Minister of Justice, whose reasoned responses to the sexual offenses bill, remind us that all is not lost.

Do you have to experience ChikV to realize the challenging scenario it has been for many? Try telling someone who has had some of the worst effects of Chik-V that – ‘it is not a big deal, all you need is some panadol.’

Do you have to be a child who is being molested, to understand that many children in Jamaica are being failed by us adults who do not believe they should be told about the realities of sex and the use of condoms?

Do you have to be a woman who has struggled with the challenging decision to have an abortion, to understand that this is never an easy decision?

Do you have to be a woman to understand that the sexual and reproductive rights of women must of necessity be protected?

I love sex-workers. Jesus said, “tax collectors and sex-workers are going into the Kingdom ahead of you.” While it has never appealed to me to get into sex work, I must tell you, on the ‘day of reckoning’, I want to be in the group with the sex workers. I want to be in that group where people are in no pretence about their status as persons in need of the love, and grace, and compassion of God.

Advent is also a time, when we prepare to celebrate the incarnation – the coming of Christ into embodied human experience. Yes we prepare to celebrate Christmas, but beware of the temptation to remain stuck with the image of baby Jesus in the crib. Maybe some of us idolize that image from childhood because it recalls a happy, feel-good, feeling.

This year, as we prepare for Christmas, revisit the image of the God of justice whose prophet reminds us: What does the Lord require of you? Micah reminds us: “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” Micah 6:8. Let us beware Church of acting unjustly, hating mercy, and walking haughtily without the presence of God!

I think these words of prophecy speak so potently to what we need in the world. However it is important to note that the scriptural texts of various religious traditions tend to be used largely by the adherents of these various traditions. And this is where the Universal Declaration of Human Rights comes in very handy.

This Declaration does not derive the status of being wholesome based on whether it comes from the Bible or Quran, or Torah or Gita etc. It is sacred simply because it serves the interest of all humanity!

Let me say something here that will not go down too well, but I believe it to be the truth. As special and unique as the bible is, it is not the instrument that will most likely reach people with the message of human rights and justice. Most of the supposed followers and users of the Bible are not even using it effectively anyway.

Every Jamaican should familiarize himself or herself with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

You see the UDHR, transcends all cultures, nations, religions, and peoples. Everyone stands to benefit from this instrument which opens with the words, “Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world.....and it goes on after the pre-amble to say, “Now, therefore THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY proclaims THIS UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.”

I will read only Article 1. All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Let the Church rise up and empower the people with the knowledge of their rights and responsibilities as human beings and citizens.

Let the Church acknowledge with the people that we have not been fulfilling the work of righteousness which is living rightly with God and people.

I share some words from the Lord Bishop of Jamaica and the Cayman Islands: *“Many Jamaicans make corruption a partisan political issue, which one party and its followers use to gain political mileage over against the other. Indeed, in what is of the nature of an oxymoron, it often becomes a kind of comic circus of a tragic nature, by which following a general election, millions of dollars and creative energy are put into investigations of the outgoing political party by the incoming one, in one of the most wasteful exercises, achieving nothing of consequence at the end of the day.”* Our Bishop also notes, *“...corruption is not just about politicians and public servants. For many Jamaicans, corruption is a kind of conversation piece for the veranda, as it is deemed not to have anything to do with us but with the politicians, public servants, the “big man” and the party “faithful.” Corruption is something which involves members of the society at every level. Yes, when citizens pass cash to a policeman to avoid getting a ticket; do not bother to have the car go to the examination Depot to have it passed for a certificate of fitness, but send along some extra cash with the papers; or when one purchases goods from persons who are not legitimate and boast of the bargain price, they are complicit in the corruption in society.”*

I share these words from our Diocesan Bishop, because many of us who do lovely things, and practice many righteous deeds, have become like a filthy cloth, simply by not being agents of what is just – some of the times. Righteousness is about a right way of living. That right way of living is not even limited to being religious. **We see that it is possible to be religious and still not be agents of justice!**

Will you become an agent of human rights and justice beginning today?

Maybe we should ask our Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition – to seriously reflect before sharing their Christmas and New Year messages this time round; to beware of yielding to the temptation to give jingle bell messages, when the people continue to cry for justice. You are to be our first defenders of human rights. We are not interested in how either of you dance or how eloquent your promises. Just be the agents of respect for every Jamaican, and be the agents of change! The same applies to churches and the leaders of churches.