

Sermon for the Bicentenary of the Diocese of Barbados

Psalm 67: Verses 6 & 7: “The Earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, has blessed us. May God continue to bless us; let all the ends of the Earth revere him.” (Words from the NRSV)

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in the Lord, Dear fellow citizens of the Kingdom of God, and Beloved saints of the Anglican Church in Barbados, Greetings! What a pleasant joy it is to be with you on this historic and festive occasion, where we are gathered together as one great family of disciples to remember, to rejoice, to revive, and to rededicate ourselves and our sacred story towards the fuller flourishing of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who is Lord of the Church, as well as towards rediscovery of what it means to be Christians who happen to be Anglican, rather than as Anglicans who happen to be Christian.

Our Anglican heritage is firmly rooted in that Judeo-Christian tradition that has not only grounded our memories in the One, True, and Living God, but has more remarkably embraced the meaning of Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord, and has enabled us to be empowered by the Spirit of God to bear faithful witness to God’s mercy and saving grace, God’s majesty and sovereign love, together with God’s faithfulness and steadfast presence, particularly over these past two hundred years as a Diocesan family. In my view, nowhere is this reality better expressed in Sacred Scripture than in Psalm 67, from which our text is taken today. Let us briefly enwrap ourselves into the mystical music of this sacred song, which is at one and the same time, an act of praise, a movement of prayer, and a clarion call for more fervent and faithful witness and service.

Psalm 67 is a beautiful piece of biblical literature that is essentially a prayer for God's mercy, for God's blessing, and for the spread of God's saving presence and power across the whole world. It opens with a request for God to be gracious and to make His face shine upon us. This is indeed a petition for God's favor and presence. It expresses the earnest desire for God's ways to be spread abroad, all across the world, and at this time particularly in our Beloved Nation of Barbados.

The psalm yearns for a Nation in which all persons will not only offer perpetual praise to God, but that they might also come to recognize God's justice and His sovereign guidance. We notice in this Psalm that sense of joy and celebration, with the radical hope that we will all be glad and sing for joy. The psalm ends with a hope that Barbados will yield its harvest of righteousness, and that God will continue to bless all His people. In that way God will be worshipped, adored, obeyed, and be powerfully present throughout the whole of our Nation.

My Dear friends, it is true to say that this psalm reflects a universal scope of God's mercy and blessing that unconditionally extends to all of humanity. Psalm 67 is a constant reminder of the inclusive nature of God's love and the global reach of His saving power. It demands an authentic response of praise and joy, a life of gratitude and genuine worship. All of this is due to our loving and gracious God who continues to bless and guide His people.

In sum, then Psalm 67 is a prayer for God's blessing, and it points us to a prophetic vision of a Nation united in praising God. It is a call for all of us as faithful Christians to seek God's favor, not just for ourselves, but for the entire world, so that all may come to know, and rejoice, and bear witness to God's invitation, to God's salvation, and to God's call for radical rededication. What then is the nature of such a Call?

Allow me to suggest, that as we meet to recount where we have come from since 1824, and how we have been blessed in so many measurable ways, we might do well

to focus some reflections on three main dimensions of the growth and sustainability of Anglican Worship, Anglican “Workship” (that’s my special word for this sermon!), and Anglican Witness. The dimensions to which I refer encompass the two centuries of the Anglican Story in Barbados, even though we dare not forget the checkered history and social inequities that created many systemic and structural infelicities out of which the Anglican Church was either unable or unwilling to evangelistically extricate herself.

The First Dimension was the *Movement of the Spirit of God* in the Church despite, and in the face of, the many social, cultural, political, and institutional challenges and deficits that accompanied the proclamation and practice of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Second Dimension was the *Momentum of the Anglican Church* in carrying forward God’s Mission in proclamation and protest, in education and illumination, in edification and consolidation, and in emancipation and social amelioration.

The Third Dimension is what I have chosen to call *The Miracle of the Gospel* in bringing to fervent life and sustaining witness the saving and sacramental mysteries of Christ among the faithful members of the Church, whether corporately, institutionally, or personally. The miraculous nature of the Gospel of Jesus Christ has enabled the Church to embrace the magic of modern technology, to be militant in her struggle against the many forms and faces of evil and structural sin, and to expound in her own ways, however fertile or feeble, the meaning of human life in all of its fullness. This has surely been in keeping with the mandate which Jesus himself pronounced in John Chapter 10 and verse 10: “I am come that all may have life and have it in all of its fullness.”

The Movement of the Spirit in the Church in Barbados has been evident in several ways for the past two centuries. There is sufficient evidence in the Barbados Anglican Story to suggest that even if Anglicans were not always led by the Spirit, the Spirit of God still possessed the Church as the Body of Christ, the Spiritual Community, in the face of the many assaults against human dignity, human decency, and human flourishing. “The gates of Hell have not yet prevailed”.

The Momentum of the Church has been marked by the innumerable ways in which Barbadian Anglicanism has been the bedrock of the intellectual development, the progressive amelioration of social and economic opportunities and advancements, as well as the stable and steady engagement of the populace in the civic processes of responsible and enlightened citizenship, colonialism notwithstanding.

From the exponential planting of churches under Bishop Coleridge, and the progressive reforms in Education and relief of the poor under Bishop Mitchinson, and the racial barrier breaking initiatives of Bishop Bree, all the way to the ordination of women by Bishop Brome, and the eventual separation of church and state, with the Anglican Church Act of 1969, the Diocese of Barbados has made valiant efforts to carry out the Mission of Christ in the struggle against racism, classism, social and economic inequality, political domination, and human immorality.

The Miracle of the Gospel has truly been the hallmark of the Church in Barbados. God has done great things through the Church in Barbados. There are so many miraculous ways in which the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in Worship, Social Work, and Courageous Witness, has been resistant to the forms of evil (be they social, structural, systemic, or cultural) that have manifested themselves throughout the years under the guise of development,

or modernization, or civic progress. Yet the Gospel of the Kingdom of God has been so ingrained in the life of the Church that it has been resilient in the five Gospel pathways:

(1) She has kept the Faith.

(2) She has practised the art of Forgiveness and Reconciliation.

(3) She has been incessantly engaged in Feeding the people of God with the Bread for living, and the Bread of Life.

(4) She has sustained the Fellowship of Believers as the Beloved Friends of Christ.

(5) She has advocated for, and defended the Freedom, of all God's people to become fully human, as the vision of God demands.

My Dearly Beloved Saints of God, as we reflect again on the words of our text in the light of our celebrations today, let us hear again those empowering words of the Psalm: "The Earth has yielded its increase; God, our God has blessed us. [*And blessed us abundantly in that we are still standing*]. May God continue to bless us; let all the ends of the Earth revere Him. [*Revere him by not standing still but moving forward through the power and guidance of the same Spirit of God that has brought us this far on our way; with the Momentum of God's Church that quickens our pace and strengthens our advance; and with the Miracle of the Gospel that accomplishes awesome things for the praise and glory of God.*]

How then do we go forward into God's glorious future as pilgrims along the Highway of Jesus Christ our Bless Lord and Saviour? How do we as Clergy and Laity, as congregations and organizations, as administrators and volunteers within our Anglican family? I invite you to reflect with me on three areas of visionary mission and effective ministry that might help in some way to bring about the revival

and rededication to which we would commit ourselves this day, this year, this historic moment in the life of our Church.

It seems to me that the Church of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ is a Called and Covenant Community of believers that must remain faithful in these essential marks of its existence. Not only must she continue to live into her distinctive marks of Oneness, Holiness, Catholicity, and Apostolicity, that are enshrined in our Creedal Confession of Faith, and to give practical expression to our established Five marks of Mission, but the Church must also be ***Faithful to God as a Worshipping Community.***

In the history of Judaism and Christianity, the Worship of God has been the most fundamental of all religious practices because in worship, believers acknowledge God as the sole Being who is worthy to receive glory and honor and power: *“for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.”* (Revelation 4:11) The writer of Hebrews states: *“through Jesus let us continually offer up to God the sacrifice of praise, that is the tribute of lips which acknowledge its name.”* (Hebrews 13:15)

In Christian worship the focus is primarily on God, the source of all that is good, wonderful and holy. As Christian believers, we offer our acknowledgement of God as wonderful, marvelous, and adorable. However, there are believers who acknowledge God, but somehow, they place their emphasis on the benefits we receive in worship. There are indeed benefits, but our focus should be on God, on God alone. A hymnwriter captures this beautifully: *“My God, I love thee; Not because I hope for Heaven thereby, // Nor yet because who love thee not are lost eternally; // Not for the hope of gaining aught, not seeking a reward; / But as thyself has loved me, O ever-loving Lord. // So would I love thee, dearest Lord, and in thy praise will sing, solely because thou art my God, and my most loving king.”*

Secondly, the *Faithful Church must be the Christ-like Instrument of Faith Formation*.

St. Paul addresses the members of the church at Galatia in these words: “*My little children, for whom I am in pain of childbirth, until Christ is formed in you.*” (Galatians 4:19) Paul’s emphasis is on growth in Christlikeness.

Pursuant to the recent decision of the Provincial Synod mandating Baptism as the gateway to Holy Communion, Barbados and the other seven dioceses of the province are faced with a moral obligation to provide adequate “feeding experiences” for all the baptized to facilitate “their growing up in every way into Christ.” Each diocese must therefore ensure that at every stage of personal development, from infancy to adulthood, adequate provision is to be made for the promotion of growth in the knowledge and understanding of Christian faith and practice. The church must therefore become more intentional in the promotion of Christian character formation. Each parish should seek to provide training for people to assist in faith formation and provide adequate funding, inclusive of available technology. This should most certainly involve Youth Empowerment, Lay Ministry, Organizational Upliftment, Clergy Refreshment, and Moral Enrichment at all sectors of our common ecclesial life as a community of ongoing formation, that strives to reflect its own Christlikeness.

Thirdly, *God’s Faithful Church must become the Moral Conscience of the Nation* to confront the Five Major Evils of our times: Greed, Sexual Depravity, Abuse of Power, Corrupt Communication, and Cultural Decay.

Greed involves a selfish insistence on having or acquiring more without regard for the welfare and impact on other members of society. It conspires with economic corruption to render the abject poor even more abject. It also involves a denial of the

inherent worth and value of every human being made in the image of God and bestowed with God-given worth and value. St Paul in Philippians 4:11-13 provides a Christian alternative to greed: *“I have learned to be content with whatever I have.”* The negative impact of greed involves an overemphasis on materialism in the pursuit of human goals. The church must demonstrate its opposition to greed in every form as it seeks to promote a more Christ-like society.

Sexual Depravity is a sure and vexatious evil towards the intrinsic worth and dignity of our humanity. Our Creator God has made us human beings as both moral agents and sexual beings and, as such, God’s loving will must determine the responsible and responsive context for participation in sexual activity. The so-called modern sexual revolution emphasizes the freedom of human beings to engage in sexual activity without restraint. In addition, the sexual revolution has resulted in an overemphasis on sexual activity that has impacted almost every department of life. Consequently, the world faces challenges to stable family life – increase in divorce and disruption of home and the seeds of human flourishing. The sexual freedom movement is given strong support in the public media and in the entertainment industry. The challenge of the church is to remain faithful to the biblical teaching and practice.

The Abuse of Power continues unabatedly. Throughout human history, some human beings have demonstrated a strong desire to act in unjust ways towards others, and to deny others of their God-given human dignity. Particular attention is drawn to the political arena where the urge to dominate is so prevalent, where the concerns of special interest groups are addressed without reference to the pursuit of the Common Good. The Christian model is given in Jesus who *“came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.”* (Mark 10:45). The abuse of power is one of the most dehumanizing forces in human society, leading to atrocious

demonstrations of our inhumanity towards fellow human beings. The negative impact of the abuse of power is evident all around us, not least in the rise of domestic violence, and in the deterioration of family relationships. The Faithful Church, as the community of believers, gathered around Jesus, must demonstrate Christlikeness as it seeks to advocate and militate against domination and dehumanization in every form.

Corrupt Communication thrives on falsity, fakery, and malicious fiction. There is ample and widespread evidence that demonstrates an assault on truth in human relations. We note the increase in the deliberate circulation of false information and, in some circles, the calling into question the reality of the truth. Technology has proven itself to be both a good servant and an evil agent, and the words “Hack” and “Spam” have now become household snares. In the Passion narrative of John, Pilate’s question to Jesus was: “What is truth?” This question came in response to Jesus’ statement: *“For this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.”* We would do well to embrace continuously the petitions in the Collect for the Feast of St John the Baptist, where we call upon God to help us to follow John’s example to: *Constantly speak the Truth; Boldly rebuke vice; and patiently suffer for the Truth’s sake*. Dear Sisters and Brothers of Christ, not only must we as a Church strive to sustain the highest levels of Integrity, Transparency, and Equity, but we must also leave no stone unturned to demonstrate our radical and unconditional commitment to a pattern of leadership and exemplary fellowship that is as effective as it is liberating, as energizing as it is transformative, and as trustworthy as it is Christ-centered.

Finally, when we purview the Evil which I have chosen to describe as ***Cultural Decay***, I cannot help but recall those opening words of Oliver Goldsmith’s famous poem which go like this: *Ill fares the land, to hastening ill a prey, // Where wealth*

accumulates and men decay.” Now, while it is true that his words were addressed to another clime and another time, they echo far beyond their intended reach to us here in the Caribbean region. So many of our precious core values, and strengths of resilient survival, and creative resistance, and prudent emulation, and compassionate concern, and solidarity with the poor, and mutual upliftment, and personal decency, and visions of better tomorrows, and courageous sacrifices, and courageous folk wisdom, all seem to be diminishing.

In their places we see the rise of rampant and uncaring individualism, materialistic patterns of progress, and the surges that both strain our humanity and weary our very souls. We seem to be so unhindered in suppressing our collective and creative human spirit. This is precisely where the opening words of our Psalm today call us back to our basic need for renewal, revival, and a moral and spiritual reset as a Church, as a Region, and as a Diocese: *May God be gracious to us and bless us and make His face to shine upon us, that Your way may be known once again upon the Earth, and your saving power among all nations.*”

And so, Dearly Beloved Saints of God, today we give hearty thanks to the God who has brought us this far on our way for these 200 years as a Diocese – *Still Standing, But not Standing Still*. Let us go forward in the Movement of the Holy Spirit, with the Momentum of the whole Church of God – renewed, refreshed, and reinvigorated, and with the Miracle of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Our Leader and our Friend. Let us redouble every effort and every sinew of our collective will to Teach the Faith, to Preach the Word, and to Heal the Land we love. Let us rally around our Bishop, our Clergy, our Laity, and all our citizens, so that we may indeed give fervent and obedient witness to St. Paul, that Great Saint of the Church, who calls on us: *“As we work together with Christ, we urge you not to accept the grace of God in vain.”* To that God, be honor, glory, dominion, and praise, both now and forevermore. AMEN.