

A Prayer for the nation at 50

“Do not forget God when you have everything,” is the caption given to chapter eight in one translation of the Bible (Deut 8:11). The Christian Community Bible, published for the Roman Catholic community in the Caribbean, notes the importance of focusing on the purpose of human existence as the community of faith embarks on building the nation as well as the community of faith. Known as the book of the second law, the Book of Deuteronomy was written to remind the community of faith in the 7th century BC, of the importance of not forgetting God.

The book is described as a second law following the books of Leviticus and Numbers. Described in this way, the book of Deuteronomy is designed to outline the details of daily living required by the nation of Israel in general and the community of faith in particular. Central to the book’s emphasis is the fact that no nation or community of faith can afford to live without a sense of vision or purpose.

Such sense of vision is one way to interpret the readings for today. As I indicated in the bulletin, the readings are selected by the Synod of the Province in order to focus the attention of CARICOM nations that fall within the Province. In addition, the readings summon the community of faith to also recognize it too must have a sense of vision as it spreads the message of salvation to all God’s people.

The question is, what does this salvation mean? For the writer of the Book of Deuteronomy, salvation means people's ability, under divine leadership, to survive in the new territory they will occupy. Prior to settlement in the land God gave to them, the people of Israel existed as nomads. They travelled from place to place, largely searching for food for their animals. They lived in tents and carried them wherever they went. They settled in Egypt for some time; however, as a consequence of enslavement they were forced to leave. Having lived in the wilderness for a number of years, the people are preparing to settle in the new land. Fundamental to the new settlement is the capacity to live with a sense of vision and key to this vision is the reality that God provides. Salvation therefore means God provides and the evidence Israel has of such provision is the land they will occupy.

Now, modern readers of the text will question how can one group of people, Israel, deprive another set of people, the Canaanites, of their land and refer to the consequence as God's gift? For some readers and interpreters, the fact that the Canaanites were deprived of their land is an act of injustice and must be condemned at all cost. Writers like the literary critic and author, the late Edward Said, a Palestinian by birth, point out that however interpreters try to read narratives like Deuteronomy, there is no escaping the exploitative nature of the text and the attitude of exploitation it reinforces.

The problem with interpreting a text like Deuteronomy chapter eight is that there is no way of getting out of the dilemma. Both sides of the

debate can provide meaning. On the one hand, there is a sense in which the narrative ought not to be applied uncritically to the present. It is set in the 7th century BC and its context cannot be too easily compared with the present. On the other hand, people of faith can learn from the text, despite its negative outlook, as visioning requires that we take into account things we appreciate as well as those we would wish to avoid. Salvation means exactly that, taking into account things we like and things we do not like, yet using them as potential lessons for the journey of faith.

Having saved Israel from the clutches of slavery in Egypt, God addresses the community, through the words of Deuteronomy 8, to inform them that to pursue national development two things must stand out. First, living with a sense of vision is not a selfish pursuit. To this end, the people of faith are invited to remember that central to nation building and growth in the life of faith is recalling the way God has led in the past.

In the letter to the Hebrews, the writer uses Abraham and Sarah as classic cases of what it means to remember what God has done (Heb. 11:11). Abraham had faith in God to save him from destruction and death after he adventurously leaves home without a destination in mind. God provided for the nomadic Abraham by giving him a family as well as resources to provide for them.

Similarly, as we celebrate the 50th anniversary of our independence, the occasion calls us to cast our minds back and reflect on the path we have travelled to get to this point. Such reflection on the journey will indicate that the path we have travelled to get to this point as a nation has been both good and bad. We have done well, as our athletes have done, and are doing, in London. Yet, there is no overlooking the fact that we have experienced numerous setbacks as a nation and a people. Chief among these setbacks is the history of chattel slavery as well as the lingering negative strands of colonialism.

These challenges have created cynics out of some of us and have led us to believe not much is either happening or can ever happen in Jamaica. Salvation in this context means accepting that the history of Jamaica is filled with both negative and positive experiences. Our purpose as a nation is to take responsibility for what is past and accept that God calls us to use those experiences to build a future that the divine has already designed. To this end, people of faith must accept that God has a plan for this and all other nations. What is required of us is faith to discern the purpose or vision God has for us and to be committed to work with God to realize such a vision. In calling Israel to realize this vision, God says, through the writer of Deuteronomy, be careful not to lose your sense of vision as a community. The way to guarantee this is never to forget it is God who has brought us this far.

A second lesson to be learnt about salvation from the writer of Deuteronomy is that of obedience. In challenging the community of

Israel to obey God the writer says, “Observe the commandments of the Lord your God: follow his ways and revere him.” To obey is to acknowledge and celebrate the central place of law and order in the life of the nation and the individual. For the maintenance of order in the community it is vital that the rule of law be given the prominence it deserves. Some of the best legal minds reside in this country. In the short history of the international criminal court in The Hague we can boast that a Jamaican has graced those benches. At the same time there is evidence, up to recently, that some in the profession are not as honest. As was indicated earlier, the call to salvation requires that we live with both the good and the bad even as we strive to uphold the rule of law. It is obedience to the call of God that will keep us focused on the central place of the rule of law in the country.

Central to obedience as a sign of salvation is the role of people of faith called to follow the ways of God. In this sense, religious experience can be considered an activity. People of faith are not only called to believe in God, we are expected to convert the belief to action that will testify to what we mean by belief in God. The mission we are invited to prepare for later this year is an example of a practical way to express our belief in action. While this is not the only way to express our faith, I invite you to get involved in the mission as, by doing, we will testify to what it means to follow in the way of God or to be obedient to God.

Finally, embracing the way of salvation means not only obedience and walking in the way of God; it also means adopting an attitude of

worship in all that we do. Revering God is the way the writer of Deuteronomy suggests we can point to the reality of salvation. Revering or worshipping God means cultivating an attitude that demonstrates life does not begin and end with us. God is the source of life and all our actions must testify to this fact. At 50, therefore, Jamaicans are invited to observe the rule of law, demonstrate a belief in God by doing things that will help others, and, worship God on a daily basis by cultivating an attitude of gratitude. We have come a long way as a nation. We have made mistakes and we have done wrong. Let us confess our faults and trust God to lead us into the next 50 years and beyond.

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