

Living by Faith in Challenging Times

Living by faith in challenging times seems to be the message being suggested by the writers of all three readings for today. In the book of Wisdom, in particular, the writer seems to be saying 'God will take care of us' despite the challenges which confront us from time to time. 'God will take care of us' are the words people of faith seem to have kept on their lips as they confronted the challenges posed by those who sought to ridicule them. This level of ridicule reminds me of an experience I had a few years ago. I was at the Church office in the cure I once served. I had just completed counseling a young man who was living with AIDS. A member of the Church came to see me just as Andrew (not his real name) and I emerged from the office. Just as I extended my hand to shake the member's hand she pulled away and said she came to see me, however, upon seeing me in the company of Andrew she said she does not wish to see me again. Additionally, she said she will never return to the Church office as she may have to sit in the same chair in which Andrew sat and she does not want to be contaminated. Though the member of the Church was a Christian I felt just as ridiculed as the person of faith in the book of Wisdom. Nevertheless, I also felt God will take care of her, of Andrew and me.

'God will take care of us' seemed to have been bad words for the people who were taunting the people of faith at the time the book of Wisdom was written. Written around the second century before Jesus was born, the book of Wisdom reflects a people that were maturing in their faith. They were at a point of transition in their journey of faith. Their ancestors had been though quite a bit. They were at one time slaves in Egypt. They were later forced into exile in Babylon and lived in that foreign territory for about 70 years. In the context of the reading the political climate was uncertain. Pompey was moving steadily throughout the Mediterranean area and claiming territory after territory. Most people, including the Jewish nation that was a subject people, were not quite sure how the future

would unfold. Yet, it sees the writer had a word of encouragement for the people of God. God will take care of you he seems to be saying.

In my weekly meeting with Andrew this was the message I was basically sharing with him: 'God will take care of you.' I was mindful at the time (this was in early 2000) that while medication meant people could live for a long time with AIDS, it was very important that Andrew maintained a healthy emotional, physical and spiritual life. Andrew was not a Christian. I met him through two members of the Church who decided on their own to sponsor his medication. This was the period just before the government decided to cover the full cost of the medication for those living with AIDS. At present (2015) the government of Jamaica cannot cover the full cost of the medication for all those who need it. Only about 80% of those in Jamaica who need medication for AIDS will receive it. The other 20% are given pain killers and other medication to keep the comfortable until they die. Whether they are on medication or not the message to all those who are infected or affected by HIV and AIDS is that God will take care of you.

It was no light thing for the writer of the book of Wisdom to suggest that God takes care of God's people. The message of the resurrection is at the heart of what the writer of the book of Wisdom wanted to convey to the people of God. Remember this was 200 years before Jesus was born. Yet, it was from then that a doctrine of the resurrection was being formed in the minds and hearts of the people of God. It is this doctrine of the resurrection that Jesus took as his own, he built on it, taught his followers about it and it was finally manifested in his own life when God raised him from the dead. Here we should note that the teaching concerning the resurrection started in Egypt. Remember that Jesus spent at least two years of his life in Egypt. His parents must have come into contact with this teaching on the resurrection and passed it unto their son. He took this message of the resurrection and taught his followers that at the heart of this message of the resurrection is the fact that God will take care of them.

For the Egyptians, and no doubt for Jesus, the meaning of the resurrection is that nothing in this life has the final say in our lives. St Paul puts it this way, "neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities nor things in heaven nor things on earth can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38-39). The message of the resurrection is that the people of God will have to encounter various challenges in their lives; nevertheless, people of faith are assured that challenges do not define who we are, rather, it is the message of the resurrection, rooted in the fact that God takes care of us that is the road map for guiding the people of faith. It is this guiding principle that I took with me as I met with Andrew week after week to assure him that he is not alone in his journey. Week by week I assured him that the God who created him will not abandon him despite his own feelings of loneliness and abandonment. Week by week he reported on his encounter with people in the community who beat him, spit on him and insulted him. Apart from his mother, who sadly died before him, even his family members wanted nothing to do with him. Listening to his story it pained my heart to hear what Martin Luther King Jr describe as 'man's inhumanity to man.' It suggests the need for prophets of compassion to be able to assert that God cares for people.

To say God cares for people cannot just be words; it must be accompanied by action. I recall a conversation I had in one of the focus group discussions I conducted in preparation for my dissertation. An Anglican who was working as a public health nurse outlined the challenges she faced as a person of faith working with the Ministry of Health in Jamaica. These three challenges caused her great distress. As a person of faith she wondered what her Anglican Church would think of her if they saw her meeting with sex workers and men who have sex with men, talking with them about safe sex and the need to use a condom. She wondered how realistic some of her fellow Church members were as they made pronouncements concerning these 'dirty, good for nothing people.' She was not aware that there are both those who were incensed by actions such as these and

those who had a heart and are in support of her actions. People on both sides would confess the fact that God cares for people.

Apart from her faith she worked for the government. The government is concerned with keeping public health in check. Yet, on the other hand, because of public pressure the government has to keep in pace laws which criminalize sex work and sexual intercourse between men. Public health workers are faced with a real challenge. They need to help keep public health in check but at the same time they cannot give the impression they are breaking the law or supporting those who do so. She and her colleagues often worked by night to educate and sensitize MSM and sex workers concerning healthy living. Night after night she and her colleagues have had to run from the police as they are often mistaken as practicing in the sex trade. This is particularly so as they cannot identify themselves as government workers breaking the law. Here is an example of a woman of faith working with the government and having a real conflict of living out what it means to say 'God cares for people'.

Not only is she a person of faith and a staff member of the Ministry of Health, she also lives in Jamaica. In Jamaica people have mixed views concerning those who engage in the practice of sex work as well as MSM. If we were to take a survey in this congregation we will likely end up with the national average which suggest that 80% of the population are not in favour of these lifestyles. With that said, the question is, how should Christians, like the nurse mentioned earlier, respond to those who feel they need to engage in such lifestyles? We can say they should be left to their own devices. This would mean exposing the entire population to serious public health concerns. We could say the only interaction we should have with them is to tell them to stop what they are doing. Those with children know very well we are not always successful with negative reinforcement without incentive to do otherwise. Then there are those who will say these are the last days and we should expect these things to take place. After all, the books of Genesis and Leviticus and Paul's letter to the Romans speak volumes condemning

such practices. Using these references should be enough to let these people know we do not condone their lifestyles. Making such pronouncements by themselves does not address the fact that there are people who choose to live this way and there are others who accept such practices as a lifestyle. How are we to proclaim the message that God cares for all God's people in such contexts.

Pastoral care and ethics are two challenges which beckon the Church in the Caribbean to act from a position of faith in response to HIV and AIDS. Faith in God and love for people has been the practice used by the Church throughout the ages to proclaim the fact that God cares for all people. The Church proclaims God's unconditional love for all people and especially the poor and most vulnerable. Stephen Pattison (1988), lecturer in pastoral studies, describes this approach to pastoral care when he says, "pastoral care which takes the social and political dimensions of human existence seriously should probably adopt a bias to the poor in the pastoral situation" (p.103). The poor in the Caribbean are those living with or affected by HIV and AIDS. A Church of and for the poor and most vulnerable is required to embrace a social and political stance which indicates that God cares for people.

Ethically, the Church in the Caribbean, and all religious groups by extension, are challenged to value the lives of all people. John Wilkinson (1988), lecturer in Christian theology, recommends a principle based approach to the practice of Christian ethics. Adoption and practice of the golden rule, love your neighbour as yourself, is an important testimony concerning the need to value people for who they are and not what people think they ought to be. By practicing the golden rule it is possible to love and value people like Andrew even when members of their family abandon them. Though HIV is becoming far more acceptable as a chronic illness, high levels of stigma and discrimination still pose challenges for the practice of pastoral care. It is difficult to affirm God's care for people in such context, nevertheless, the task of engaging in pastoral care and Christian ethics as useful tools to engage Caribbean reality is still a necessity.

In the final analysis, two things are critical if religious institutions are to successfully challenge the HIV epidemic in the Caribbean. The first is effective leadership designed to combat actions such as that which was displayed by the Church member mentioned earlier. The second is a combined pastoral and ethical stance which will focus on Gods care for all people. This stance must be accompanied by policies and programmes which affirm people's value, irrespective of age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and religious persuasion. Everyone is made in the image of God so people like Andrew deserve respect and love.

References

Pattison, Stephen (1988), *A Critique of Pastoral Care*. London: SCM Press Ltd

Wilkinson, John (1988), *Christian Ethics in Health Care*. Edinburgh: The Handsel Press