

Renewal and Transformation for LIFE!

Let us hear and heed the Word of God as found in the Gospel of St. Luke, reading from chapter 6, verse 46, through 7:10 [read, preferably NLT or NIV translations].

“Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and do not do what I say?” That question is as pertinent and troubling today, here in Cayman, as it was when Jesus first asked it in Israel. However, we much prefer to debate questions like this, which hit at the core of the problem amongst the Church, the Christian movement, by looking at the situation *elsewhere* in the world. But we are not going to do any good sitting here in Cayman, or in Jamaica, discussing and shaking our heads about the decline of the Church in Europe, often ignoring the effective work they are still doing. For there is still the faithful remnant helping to spread the Gospel; and who actively “see” Jesus in the hungry, the thirsty in far off lands without access to clean water, the homeless; and they respond. Instead, if we *really* want to do what God in Christ said we must do, we need to face Jesus, as His disciples and followers around Galilee had to do that day, and hear Him saying directly to *us*, “Why do you keep calling me Lord, Lord, when you don’t do what I say?”

We have to pause, as the thinking people in that crowd that day had to pause in their listening and praising and arm waving and “amen-ing” which they thought constituted worship and learning. Pause, and be jolted back to the stark reality of that question.

And if our Church’s prayer for “Renewal and Transformation for LIFE” is to make any difference, we have to realise that Christ’s question strikes at the very centre of it all. If I were using video this morning as I talk to you, I would show the word LIFE with the two letters in the middle *magnified!* Picture that image for a while. “If” “do” “one of the smallest words, but one of the *biggest pivots* in the Bible. “If you believe, you will be saved.” Jesus used it a lot, very pointedly. “If you do not believe that I am He, you will indeed die in your sins.” (John 8:24) “Now that you know these things, you will be blessed, *if you do them.*” (Jn 13:17) Jesus never mixed His message. He did not promise that *everyone* will be saved. Only those who believe “*if you believe.*” And He emphasised that whether you *truthfully believe* is shown by what you *do* “not just by *saying* it, not by *calling* Jesus Lord, not by *knowing* what He said we must do “but *if* we actually *obey* and *do* it.. In St. John chapter 15 alone, Jesus filled the famous vine and branches explanation with that inescapable “*if.*” “If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. *If* anyone does *not* remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers.” There is no neutral middle ground in which to hedge our bets!

And Jesus was making the same point as God had told the Israelites thousands of years previously, when they were dithering in that desert between slavery in Egypt and the abundance of the Promised Land. There God said that He had placed before them the stark choices of *life* or *death.* *If* they followed God’s instructions on how to live right, with God *and* with each other, they would enjoy the life ahead prepared for them in His love. *If* they chose not to obey God’s directions, they would destroy both lives and souls. Just as Jesus stressed in the analogy of the vine and the branches. If they did not grow the way God had said they should do, dealing justly and mercifully with each other, there would be no good fruit for anyone to enjoy.

If they did not allow the precepts of God to *prune* their behaviour and keep them from shooting off in all directions, luxuriating in their wild growth without bearing *good* fruit for one another, and taking away the space that other branches need so they too can get some light, they would become unproductive. That would lead only to withering and death without salvation. I think we all see that many people here in Cayman today still do not believe that precept. Life is for basking in the lushness of whatever we can get. Who cares about leaving some room, some opportunity, for those down below to also put their heads up and get the chance to bask in some sunshine and bear some fruit? And as we read through the Old Testament we can hear the *pain* in God's heart as He tells the people He does not want *anyone* to die, and urges them to choose *life* instead, life *abundant* and life *eternal*.

That choice remains set before us today, though so many would like us to believe otherwise. Such people do not seem to have looked at history, either Biblical or secular. Like the Israelites of the Old Testament, every few generations of humans have gone through that misconception that we are so much smarter now, we can do as we please without reference to God's basic precepts for living in community. As the writer of Judges liked to say, sardonically, as he described all those horrible things that people did to one another: "It was a time when Israel had no king; everyone did as he pleased." The British biologist and educator, Thomas Henry Huxley, though he described himself as an agnostic, had observed the fallacy this way: "A man's worst difficulties begin when he is able to do as he likes."

That is, when we *think* we can do as we like. When I was in business, I used to tell my staff that you are *always* answerable to *someone*, no matter how high you rise in the company. Even if you are in business for yourself, with no shareholders above you, you had better realise that you are answerable to your customers, or you won't be in business very long, and to the law, and normally also your suppliers, your bankers, and so on. As Christians we know that, most crucial of all, we are always answerable ultimately to God. The centurion in our Scripture this morning knew quite well this truth, that he was accountable to others. He was used to having people answer to him, do what he commanded. But he pointedly acknowledges up front that in doing that, he knew *he* was under the authority of his own superior officers. And we can see the kind of person he was: a man who *cared* for his staff, his slaves, the Jewish people whom he helped Rome rule over. A person who realised the essential *integrity* of living by the golden rule of treating those under him the way he wanted to be treated by those over him. And a man who recognised the ultimate authority of God and of Jesus over everyone and every thing, even the forces of sickness and death. In other words, he was a good man; and a person who walked in humility with God and other persons, whether accountable *to* them or *for* them or could wield official power over them. And Jesus certainly declared him a person of faith, greater than in all Israel. In other words, he combined the *faith* and the *integrity to live in accordance with that faith*, which Jesus found lacking in His followers that He had shocked with those words: "Why do you keep calling me Lord, Lord, when you don't do what I say?"

And that leads me to the second point I want to make about the "I F" in the very centre of LIFE. In that current Synod theme, the word "life" is given two meanings. The ordinary meaning, as well as an acronym by which we are praying also for Renewal and Transformation for *Liberty, Integrity, Faith and Environmental Stewardship*. Here again, if we do not grasp the I and the F, the *integrity* and the *faith*, we have lost the *vital part*. Without integrity and faith, liberty will become mayhem and environmental stewardship will be, well, really as we see it now, basically -a good thing to talk about as long as it does not get in the way of money!

I am not going to try to argue that without faith you cannot have integrity. That could be a *long* discussion! But I did use some quotes earlier from both Biblical and agnostic observers on the

trouble humans cause when they believe they can do as they please, because they are their own god and there is no one to answer to. Christians must have both; not that we are perfect, but we *must* be *sincere* in endeavouring to *live out* our faith. God will not be fooled; insincerity cannot cloak itself in His grace.

Legendary American investor Warren Buffet states that, "In looking for people to hire, you look for three qualities: integrity, intelligence, and energy. And if they don't have the first, the other two will kill you." We see all the time how much damage a person without integrity can cause his or her employer. And we see it in the destruction of families by an adulterous spouse. In fact, in any human grouping or institution, including politics and the church and in schools and on and on. But when we who call ourselves believers in and followers of Christ discard integrity, we cause even greater damage. Because then the critics rush in to use *our* unrighteousness to try to disprove God and discredit *His* absolute righteousness. This is a major impediment to our ability to attract the new disciples, as Christ commanded us to do and whom God yearns to see saved by faith that is true.

Unfortunately, too often as Christians, no matter how we crowd around Jesus, call Him Lord, Lord, over and over, quote, *and misquote*, His words, sing His praises, dance and wave ecstatically, our lives tell a different story. And so we give room for people to dismiss us by echoing the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, "What you *do* speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you say."

We know that there have always been a lot of people who don't want to hear the good news, the Gospel, because God's kingdom coming on Earth would cramp a lot of the things we like to do. But we have to admit too many times we in the Church do provide them with true fire underneath all the smoke they are gladly fanning around. So they say if what they see us doing is obeying *our* "Lord," then that is drowning out any good news of a God who loves and cares passionately for others, for justice and for mercy and for living righteously, that is, doing the right thing whatever we do.

But the story *cannot* end like that. We cannot afford to continue living in a way that, in the minds of many, discredits the wonderful, redeeming love of God that we truly believe we have experienced. For, as hard it is for many to believe in the true God, for the rest of us that is the easiest part, and we really want it ó at least to get to Heaven when we die. And we readily accept that God is God of grace, Who loves us not because of who we are or anything good we have done or can do, but because that is God's very nature. Where the "doing something" comes in, is after we have believed; the obeying of God because God also loves everyone else. And if we do not do what He has told His followers they should do, other people will not get treated with the care and respect and opportunity that God also wants them to have; and will not get the opening we had to learn of and accept God's salvation. So, what can we do to turn around the story that our lives are telling that is drowning out the Good News? The answer is to live in the *integrity* of our *faith*.

And integrity can be a difficult word. Especially for the Christian. This "love your neighbour" cornerstone of our *faith* tends to give us a lot more stakeholders that *our integrity* must do right for. And though it is probably true that any "right-thinking" person knows integrity when we see it, there is no use relying on it to be something we do naturally, instinctively. In the current issue of Financial World, a Professor Jonathan Perks holds up, not the Roman Officer from today's Scripture, but the British Army Officer as a model that bankers should look to in order to learn, and restore, the integrity that is widely seen as wanting at the top of the world's major financial institutions. He states that the leadership training Officers receive at the Royal Military Academy

aims to instil an ethos of strong *moral integrity*, based on doing the *right* thing. Just as importantly, however, officers should know what *not* to do. That pretty well echoes God's instructions to His followers, in reverse order perhaps, "Stop doing wrong. *Learn* to do right." (Isa 1:16 & 17) God and Jesus and Their great prophets, kings, and disciples stressed repeatedly the need for us to *learn* the right we are to do, and to teach these diligently to succeeding generations. Not to expect to do these naturally, but to *learn* them, *dwell* on these precepts of righteousness day and night so we can be like a tree planted firmly in God and watered by the living waters of God's righteousness.

Professor Perks also refers to a number of attributes he and others developed, referred to as a series of "Q" quotients. Two he highlights are MQ, for Moral Intelligence, a function of our principles, integrity, values and beliefs, and the mental capacity to determine what is [right], and, secondly, SQ, Spiritual Intelligence. He defines SQ as a measure of how we access our deepest meanings, purposes and highest motivations. He has a number of other good pointers on the need to provide *purpose, mission* and *vision*, etc., and sums up that the "Officers are required to factor into their planning how their *actions* will impact on *society*, the *local community*, and the *reputation of their regiment*." He concludes his article with a plea to the financial organisations that they too must remember that "they have a role in keeping society secure and in helping people achieve their dreams and aspirations in the *morally right way*."

Obviously, we who would seek to be the Church have all these responsibilities toward the reputation of our "regiment" and especially its Founder, and to other people, as listed by Professor Perks for both the army officers and financiers. And, in addition, in our case it extends to keeping society secure for not only this world, but for the world of eternal life that God offers in Christ. And so our story cannot end in embarrassment that Jesus has caught us out. Jesus did not ask that question in Galilee that day long ago just to silence the crowd in their meaningless, hollow praise. He continued to work with those disciples and many of those followers, and in the end He commissioned those who remained, despite the straying and the denying and doubting, to carry on the work He had begun. And that is what He wants to do with us who are facing His question today, hear it, be jolted by it; but do not walk away in failure; instead, let it shape our values, our deepest purposes and our highest motivations as we learn to do what is right and then do it, in obedience to the God who is truly our Lord, and the One who saved us.

Merciful God, please grant us the humility, the faith and the integrity of the Centurion who amazed You, so we do not have to hear those fateful words, rejecting our claims to have made You our Lord and therefore our Saviour. Amen