

Homily by the Most Reverend Patrick C. Pinder
Archbishop of Nassau
On the Occasion of the Red Mass
St. Francis Xavier Cathedral
Nassau, Bahamas
Sunday January, 9, 2011

Readings:

Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7

Acts of the Apostles 10:34-38

Matthew 3:13-17

Honourable Prime Minister, Your Lordship, the Chief Justice and your fellow Justices of the Supreme Court, Madam President and Justices of the Court of Appeals, Honourable Attorney General, Other Members of the Judiciary, Director of Legal Affairs, Director of Public Prosecutions, President of the Bar Association and Bar Council, Members of the Bar and Legal Profession, Beloved in Christ all:

It is my great pleasure to welcome you to this cathedral for this celebration. On a fixed day early each year we gather to invoke the guidance and blessing of the Holy Spirit upon the members of the legal profession. This is an expression of seriousness with which the Church regards the role you play in maintaining the order necessary for us to live as a community. Our celebration today takes place on the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord. This feast itself is an occasion for ceaseless thanks and celebration. Next to the celebration of the Paschal Mystery at Easter, the Church holds most dearly the Feast of the Birth of Christ at Christmas.

The Christmas Season ends with the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord. It follows the Solemnity of the Epiphany, when our Lord is revealed as Messiah, sent to redeem us all regardless of race and nation. This “shining forth” of Christ is given special emphasis when Jesus is baptized by John.

Most Christians can repeat the Father’s declaration at the baptism: “This is my beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” (Mt. 3:17) But how many truly understand the

significance of what took place when Jesus was plunged into and rose from the waters of the Jordan on that fateful day?

What was prophesied and prefigured concerning the Messiah came to fulfillment in the waters of the Jordan. This is the first time that scripture records the three persons of the Trinity so clearly revealed. Here is the Father whose voice is heard declaring the divinity and sonship of Jesus. The dove which comes to rest upon the head of Jesus is the presence of God the Holy Spirit and His contact underscores the Father's declaration.

For us, Christians, baptism effects a cleansing from sin and a rising to new life in Christ. It should also encompass a change of lifestyle. Our openness to this grace should cause us to become more Christ-like as the days of our lives unfold. But the baptism in the Jordan accomplished so much more.

Through his birth, Jesus made a precious and indissoluble link between heaven and earth. This was our incorporation into the family of God. Before this admirable exchange at the incarnation, God seemed to be the stern overlord, who meted out an exacting justice and harsh punishment. When we come to share in the divine life, he becomes our Father to whom we can take our concerns and find love, forgiveness, mercy and grace. God the Holy Spirit now dwells within us as comforter, guide and advocate. By this indwelling we have access to a new and fuller life, characterized by joy, wisdom and peace.

That extraordinary moment at the Jordan establishes an intimate relationship between humankind and the Holy Trinity. In Christ and through him we share in His death and resurrection and all its incalculable power.

In celebrating the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, we should also be reminded of our vocation and our mission. Jesus confirmed His vocation and mission on earth in being baptized by John. It was only then that he began His public life that would lead to His passion, death and resurrection. Following His resurrection Christ missions His apostles: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."(Mt. 28:18-20)

Notice what else this passage says. It begins: "All power in heaven and earth is given to me." And the Great Commission ends with a wonderful assurance: "and behold I am with you always, until the end of the age."

Two thousand years later, the command and assurance are still very much in effect. Although the task of bringing light to the nation is a fearsome responsibility, we can still call to our aid a power greater than any other. The promise of His continued presence with us is as vibrant today as when Christ walked among us. We who are baptized in Christ are His 21st century disciples. Like the apostles of old, we too are commanded to go forth and to show forth Christ and all he stands for. Each one of us is so commanded.

We are aided in our work for peace and justice by the institution of earthly laws. Laws provide the foundation and structure that enable us to lead orderly, productive and even pleasant lives. We do well to appropriate the need for and the importance of laws at a very personal and profound level.

The primary agents of law enforcement are not the police or the courts, but ordinary citizens in their proper civil demeanor. It is only when failure occurs at this level that such other institutions as the police, the courts and the penal system must be pressed into service. It is important, then, for us to realize that the abandonment of civility initiates a continuum of lack of respect for law and order. It breaches the respect we owe to our neighbours. It can lead and often does lead to more blatant criminality.

Civility is not just about being nice. It incorporates mutual respect. It speaks to our respect for individual differences. It speaks of respect for boundaries. True civility prompts us to protect the rights of others as fiercely as we protect our own. Civility is the glue that binds us as individuals into a well-articulated and functioning community. Ultimately, civility is the fragile line that separates us from chaos. The practice of civility hallmarks the life which is informed by the example of Christ.

Whether you belong to the law and justice fraternity or any other way of life, the same basic principles apply. The courts have much to do with protecting fundamental rights and freedoms in this land—and so do each of us as individuals. The manner in which we fulfill our roles is of greatest importance.

It is good that the scriptures provide us with insight and inspiration for our practice, whatever it may be. Let us consider for a moment what Peter says in the Acts of the Apostles: “In truth, I see that God shows no partiality. Rather, in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to him.” (Acts 10:34)

In our mission, we are not to be motivated by favoritism of any sort. Doing good must be the compass by which we navigate the challenges of our sojourn in this world. Our mission must always be geared towards healing, rehabilitation, restoration. We will not always enjoy success, but we must always intend it.

The Prophet Isaiah makes our mission in Christ even clearer: “I, the Lord, have called you for the victory of justice....” (Isaiah 42:6) Achieving the ‘victory of justice’ is the responsibility of us all. By your vocation it is your prime directive. As our emissaries of law and justice, you also have a powerful role to play in nation-building. In our civic persona, this may be the most challenging, yet most important contribution we may ever have to undertake.

Isaiah says: “I formed you, and set you as a covenant of the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring out prisoners from confinement, and from the dungeons, those who live in darkness.” (Isaiah 42:6c-7)

Blindness, of course, is far more than a matter of irises, retinas and optic nerves. By the same token, captivity is not only a factor of iron bars and chains. Certainly, darkness today extends far beyond the confines of dungeons.

As we look around us today, many Bahamians are continuing to be blinded by greed and various other unbridled appetites. Many have chosen a focus so narrow that it can only capture an image exclusively of self. Many have become captive to malice. Be assured, too, that no dungeon can be darker than the prison forged by fear, vice or unrestrained desires. Ought we not to raise the issue as to why so many of us gamble and so few of us save? Ought we not to be troubled that so many of us depend on luck rather than planning, hard work, self-discipline and sacrifice then leaving the rest to the grace of the Lord to secure our future?

Every other day, it seems, individuals and groups are claiming our attention, filling public spaces and various media, supposedly in the cause of rights, entitlements and freedoms. Yet, despite these movements, ostensibly in the interest of the common good, civility is losing ground in our islands.

Now, why is this? Can it be that despite the claims of community and nation-building, many of our actions uphold, not the common good, but narrow sectional interests? One is left wondering—are we, as a people, becoming more and more resistant to any form of discipline, whether legislated, personal or spiritual?

Faced with challenges, we do a great deal of finger pointing and the fingers nearly always point away from self. It's the 'bad boys' who are responsible for the unraveling of Bahamian society. It's those foreign nationals. It's women who work outside the home, women who are too ambitious. It's teen pregnancy and single-parent homes. It's the government. It's this or that political party. It's curry favour. It's the rich; it's the poor. It's white people; it's black people ... and the list goes on.

Let's be honest with ourselves. Let us dare to drink again from the font of truth.

Great silk cotton trees grow from the most insignificant seeds. The wisdom of the ages teaches us that a little mistake in the beginning can lead to a great error in the end. Anyone who commits what seems to be the smallest of incivilities contributes to what now appears to be a worldwide march towards chaos. It certainly seems to be so in our Bahamian community. Whenever our self-centeredness in any form causes us to fail to align our will with that of Christ, it is then that we fall short of the glory of God. It is then that we plant a seed for infamy.

It really does not matter what the error or indiscipline is. Adopting the law of the gun, cheating Customs, spouses or employers, befouling the air with invective or CFCs, letting relatives or friends slide out of their just responsibilities, turning a blind eye to crime or using our vehicle in antisocial behaviour—it all tends to lead to harm—the harm wrought by the undermining of civil order. When we ignore the claims of civility, we are all equally guilty of widening the gateway to disorder.

If we are truly serious about building a safer and more prosperous society, our notions of rights and responsibilities cannot be mutually exclusive. We cannot have one set without the other. If we truly desire peace in our time and in our land, our approach to rights and responsibilities must be principled. Moreover, we do not have to rack our brains for a method.

The road to peace and order is shored up by the bridge of civility. This concept is not only fully documented in the scriptures but also enshrined in the preamble to a well-known constitution that sheds light beautifully on many of the building blocks of a strong nation. It speaks to establishing justice, insuring domestic tranquility, providing for the common defense, promoting the general welfare and securing the blessings of liberty to those in the present and those who will come after.

These values are wonderfully summarized in the Preamble to our own national Constitution, the document upon which The Commonwealth of The Bahamas was founded and, in theory, governs itself. Our nobly written Preamble suggests that the perseverance of our freedom will be guaranteed by a national commitment to ‘Self-discipline, Industry, Loyalty, Unity and an abiding respect for Christian values and the Rule of Law.’ None of these essentials can be attained without a fierce commitment to the ideals of civility.

If this is indeed the case, can we doubt the source of our growing discontent and social troubles?

All of this means that rights, privileges and freedoms cannot be a one-way street. They cannot be reserved for you, me and our circle alone. They can not only be linked to present comfort while neglecting the protection of the rights of future generations. Rights must be reciprocal; if we are to preserve our own, we must work to secure them for all.

There are three things many of our people have yet to learn. First of all, securing order and the general welfare is not the burden of the government, the police, the courts, the social services and the teachers exclusively. Secondly, we citizens are, in fact, the primary agents in the construction of a strong and principled nation. Indeed, we are the nation. Rights are only gained and preserved by fulfilling the responsibilities that are the chief guarantors and sureties of the rights we crave and hold so dearly. Thirdly, we must accept that personal sacrifice and the postponement of gratification are the foundation and belt course of the edifice of rights.

Sir Edmund Hillary and his guide were the first persons known to reach the summit of Mount Everest. Isn't it strange that Hillary should say: “It is not the mountain that we conquer, it's ourselves.” What he was talking about is the need for personal discipline.

It is precisely this failure to observe and respect boundaries that leads all too many Bahamians to flaunt the nation's laws and the laws of decency.

It is a sad day for this country and for us as a people, when those whose duty it is to love and serve the law are seen to break the law.

The fraternities of law and order are not alone in this regard, however. We are none of us exempt. In every walk of life, in every profession, in every occupation, in every vocation and in many a relationship, we see a falling away, a shirking of duty, an abandonment of vows many have committed to hold sacred.

In the absence of light, there is stumbling, there is failure, there is darkness. It is only when we conquer the egoism and shortsightedness of selfishness that we can become beacons of light and authors of peace among our kin and in our community. Without this sacrifice, we cannot be models for others. We cannot light the way to harmony.

That takes us back to the scriptures and the rights and freedoms established at the foundation of the world. We can only find the ability to sacrifice and the assurance of sustainable rights, justice and freedom in the light of Christ. To fit ourselves to the task of bringing the light of Christ to this nation, to 'fulfill all righteousness' in the likeness of our saviour and to achieve the 'victory of justice,' we too must humble ourselves and be self-emptying as He was. We must first become servants, before we can lead. We must daily recall dying to self and rising to new life in baptism.

We need to find again and to internalize the true meaning of civility and law as the friends and not the enemies of a good life. We must recommit to the victory of justice, fairness, mercy and healing in our official and our private lives.

I pray that during this year of grace 2011 each of you in your practice of law may be sustained by His wisdom, peace and grace. May we all be strengthened to walk more surely in the light of Christ.