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**THE  
RECEPTION OF  
THE SERMON  
ON THE  
MOUNT IN A  
CARIBBEAN  
CONTEXT:  
MATTHEW 5:4**

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### **Introduction**

The Caribbean consists of a diverse grouping of countries made up primarily of islands and includes a few mainland territories, which together may be categorized linguistically as Anglophone, Francophone, Hispanic and Dutch-speaking. Its history is closely connected to the transatlantic slave trade and our rich and diverse cultures are reflective of the territories from which our peoples originated. Furthermore, our identity and self-understanding have been greatly impacted by these origins. The Caribbean shares a unique horizon in the history of influence of the Sermon on the Mount. A full study would be required to explore the reception and actualization of this portion of the Scriptures in the history of the Caribbean from the coming of Christianity to the Caribbean through the European colonizers up to the present time. This period covers over five centuries of history including colonization of Caribbean territories, slavery, indentured labour, postcolonization and neo-colonization.

Bob Marley's song "Zion Train" in which he wrote, "Don't gain the world and lose your soul, wisdom is better than silver or gold" stands within the history of reception of Matthew's Gospel (cf. Mt. 16:25-26). Marcus Garvey's typological reading of Matthew 3: 1 in the face of social injustice is insightful:

If the enemy could only know that Marcus Garvey is but a John the Baptist in the wilderness, that a greater and more dangerous Marcus Garvey is yet to appear, the Garvey with whom you will have to reckon for the injustice of the present generation.<sup>1</sup>

The writer of the 1968 reggae song "The Beatitude" sung by The Uniques, reflecting on the hurt of fellow Jamaican brothers, who he judges to act wickedly, and what he perceives as the strength of the wicked brother, recounts the beatitudes on the meek, poor, and merciful, appealing to God not to forsake him. He reworks the beatitudes on the poor and meek so that the kingdom is promise to the meek and the poor shall see God. The writer's selection may be a reflection that he sees himself as meek, poor and merciful and his desire to know mercy, see God, and possess the promise of the

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<sup>1</sup>Robert A Hill, ed., *The Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, vol. 5 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 313.

kingdom in the face of social injustice. For the writer, it is the poor rather than the poor in spirit who shall see God, providing hope and significance to the poor of his community.

Gregory Isaacs in his struggle with poverty sang a song entitled “Blessed are the Poor” and Bob Marley sang the number “Judge Not” stemming from the prohibition in Matthew 7:1. In Messian Dread’s song “wolfes” the wolf in sheep’s clothing perform “dirty works,” while the sheep of the good shepherd “see reality.” In the song a connection is made between the saying on the wolf in sheep’s clothing and the good shepherd of John 10:11. Moreover, the wolves are not merely teachers or speakers but they are also doers. The boastful speech of the wolves and their actions are the fruit. For the songwriter the sheep must be careful who they trust in the world. In modern scholarship there have been suggestions of a literal reference for the sheep’s clothing in the background of the text. The song “wolfes” provides one such literal connection; the dreadlocks. The wearing of dreadlocks is an outward sign of identifying with the ‘sheep’ and so serves as the outward mark of deception. The parable of the two builders features in the song Love is the Light done by Horace Andy and Big Youth where it serves to reinforce the exhortation to do what is right guided by the light of love.

The Scriptures have provided Caribbean music and reggae in particular with a landmine of content in its expression. The Sermon on the Mount has featured in this trend and continues to exert an influence in its own right on the self-understanding, moral outlook and actions of Caribbean people struggling with the existential realities of life within the Caribbean context. The reception of the Scriptures remains, in the main, unexplored territory in Caribbean scholarship and therefore remains a wide open field for major contributions to theological and biblical studies and Caribbean theology in particular. This paper seeks to make an entrance into a very complex field of study by illustrating how a single verse of Scripture in the Sermon on the Mount has influenced readers in a particular Caribbean context. Much space has been given to analyzing the history of effects of the Sermon on the Mount on the early church. It is, therefore, appropriate that a case study of how this works in a modern Caribbean context also be engaged. This allows for our unique horizon in the history of influence of the Scriptures to be explored and also serves as a demonstration of how contemporary readers of Scripture in the Caribbean can do so with a historical consciousness of the interpretation and actualization of the same text in the ancient church. That is to read with an understanding of our own place in the history of influence of the text and how that history has impacted on our encounter

with the text. Moreover, it validates both the ancient reader and the contemporary Caribbean reader as it brings both parties together at the same table, from different contexts, to enter into a conversation on the canonical text. That is to read, think, and experience with the ancient writers but with a full acknowledgement of the realities that make up the Caribbean.

Another important justification for the study of the influence of Scripture on modern Caribbean society is that it allows us to reflect on the impact of the Scriptures. One can examine both positive and negative impact that provides important insights beneficial towards facilitating more a constructive employment of the Scriptures in building more equitable and just Caribbean societies. The paper explores the reception of the second beatitude in Matthew's series, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Mt. 5:4) in the Evangelical Church of the West-Indies in St. Lucia. This verse has been selected primarily for two reasons. First, the beatitude is very open and allows for an inclusion of all sorrows in the world. In that sense it allows much scope for a reflection on the oppressive realities that have faced and continue to confront Caribbean people. Secondly, the history of the Caribbean people up to the present has been marked with persistent mourning situations. Such mourning includes the displacement of individuals from the African continent through the transatlantic slave trade, the subjugation of the indigenous Caribbean people, and the oppressive conditions faced by indentured labourers from Asia. These mourning situations have had a profound impact on Caribbean realities and in a sense gave way to new mourning situations. One can, with good reason, say that as a Caribbean people we have experienced great sorrow and yet continue to demonstrate remarkable resistance and resilience. In light of this, the verse captures much of the emphasis of Caribbean theology and serves as an ideal platform on which to engage in reflection of Caribbean reality in light of the Scriptures. The verse speaks with a great degree of relevance and potency to Caribbean realities and struggles and provides much hope for those who mourn. Important for us here is examining how the key words 'blessed', 'mourn' and 'comforted' are interpreted. Furthermore, we will also look at the understanding of timing of the promised comfort and assess the usage of the text within the church in focus. A reading of the text, which takes into consideration the unique circumstances of the Caribbean region, will be presented also. This is done with the understanding that Caribbean people from a position of our unique location and self-understanding form part of the rich history of influence of the Sermon on the Mount but also that we have been influenced by that history as our horizon has been shaped within a wider web of a history of influence that goes way back into the

early church’s reception and actualization of the texts found in the Sermon. A major factor in this web that we speak of is the influence of the North Atlantic missionary on the interpretation and actualization or non-actualization of the text. It is also with the understanding that one is dealing with a complex web of the history of the influence of the Bible as texts influence how other texts are interpreted and realized in the thoughts and actions of any people.

The analysis is based on responses obtained from church leaders of the Evangelical Church of the West-Indies, St. Lucia. These leaders are pastors, elders, and members of church boards of the various local churches. The reception and actualization of the text by the leadership of the church serves as a robust indicator of the influence of the text in the wider church organization and also reflects how the text will continue to exert influence in the church.

Table: Demographic data

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Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Sex Female	4	15.4
Male	22	84.6
Age 30 and below	0	0
31-49	14	53.8
50 and above	12	46.2
Ministry Experience 1-5	1	3.8
6-10	5	19.2
11-15	4	15.2
16-20	5	19.2
20+	11	42.3
Total	26	100

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The church in keeping with trends within the wider Caribbean has a largely male leadership responsible for providing oversight and decision-making. This is further reflected in our church’s General Council meetings, which are largely attended by men with very little participation by women at the highest level of decision making for the church organization. The underlying influence is the general belief that God has chosen men to lead and, further, to preach. The table above provides the demographic data collected from the participants in the survey.

### Reading and Preparation

All the participants in the study indicated that they had read the second beatitude, Matthew 5:4. This is not surprising for persons who fall within the evangelical tradition, which places a great emphasis on the Scriptures as the Word of God essential for faith and practice. The Bible continues to play a central role in Christian ministry and believers are regularly encouraged to read the text therein as part of their Christian devotion and the maintenance of a healthy spiritual life.

The reformation thrust initiated by Martin Luther to make the Scriptures more accessible to the common person had taken root in St. Lucia and the Caribbean among protestant churches. By the time the work was started in October 1949 to establish the Evangelical Church of the West-Indies in St. Lucia the first believers were given access to Bibles for discipleship and spiritual formation. In contrast to this, the Roman Catholic Church established in 1719 as a result of the French influence and which in 2010 constituted 72.5% of the country's population<sup>2</sup> continued to deliver the mass in Latin. It was not until the approval of the Constitution of Sacred Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium) in 1963 paved the way for the epistle and Gospel for the mass to be read in the vernacular.<sup>3</sup> Even with such allowances and the eventual delivery of the mass in English, large proportions of the population spoke largely in St. Lucia Creole. This would have been and continues to be an influential factor in the ministry of the Evangelical Church of the West-Indies in St. Lucia, but for those who were able to read there was already greater access to the Scriptures in comparison to followers of the Roman Catholic Church.

With the general accessibility to the Scriptures from the early beginning, there has been the underlying assumption that all believers can read and understand the text of the Bible. The result is a high level of self-confidence among the leadership about its ability to interpret and appropriately apply the text of Scripture. This confidence is also reflected in relation to the reading and actualization of the second beatitude. Close to seventy percent (69.2%) reported that they would need little to no help in preparing

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<sup>2</sup> J. Gordon Melton and Martin Baumann, ed., *Religions of the World: A Comprehensive Encyclopedia of Beliefs and Practices*, 2nd ed. (California: ABC—CIIO, LLC, 2010), 2504.

<sup>3</sup> "Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy-Sacrosanctum Concilium," Vatican, 21 November 1964, accessed 24 March, 2016, <http://www.vatic.va>.

to use this text, the majority (61.5%) indicating that they would need little help. There is a tendency of oversimplifying the tasks of reading, understanding and application of Scriptures in general. The level of expertise may not always be consistent with this level of confidence.

### **Prior Influence**

A small percentage (7.7%) of the respondents indicated that they had not read material on the text or heard something about it. The greater majority reported that their understanding of the text had been influenced by something they had read or heard, with 65.4% indicating a moderate to great level of influence: moderate (38.5%), great influence (26.9%). A much smaller percentage (26.9%) admits to little influence on their understanding from prior exposure to commentary or exposition on the text. In the case where there is no prior outside exposure to the text, the literary context of the Bible is expected to play a greater level of influence on a reader's interpretation. The reader's interpretation of other text using similar words becomes one of the major lens through which understanding is formed. For those with little prior exposure to prior interpretations this will work to a lesser extent.

The main factor impacting on the understanding of Scripture within the ECWI at the early beginning and for much of its history was the North American missionary as pastor and scholar. These missionaries trained at North American seminaries and bible colleges, under the influence of European and North American scholarship, interpreted the Scripture for the people and instructed them how to live out the implications of the text in the Caribbean context from a North-American perspective. Ashley Smith notes:

Caribbean historians, political scientist, sociologist and economist are all agreed that what they refer to as “missionary” Christianity has been a major factor in the reinforcement and perpetuation of the domination of the non-European Caribbean man by his brother from the European continent, Great Britain and North America.<sup>4</sup>

A close companion of the missionary scholar was the bible commentary. Instead of empowering leaders in reading strategies to meaningfully engage the Scriptures, commentaries were provided as the easy tool to gain understanding. Despite the great benefits that those commentaries written by European and North-

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<sup>4</sup>Ashley Smith, *Real Roots and Potted Plants*, rev. ed. (Mandeville, Jamaica: Eureka Press, 2002), 10.

American authors provide, a major drawback was the disempowerment of the Caribbean readers to interpret the text for themselves and to arrive at meaning for today from a Caribbean perspective. Today, this trend continues largely unabated as Caribbean leaders, speakers and writers continue to depend in large part on these same commentaries for understanding rather than coming into a dialogue with them. The results are that the voices heard in our pews continue to be the voices of foreign interpreters and the lack of engagement of the Scriptures with the situation and circumstances of the Caribbean region.

### The Meaning of Blessed

The most frequent response among the leadership (69.2%) reflects an understanding of the word ‘blessed’<sup>5</sup> to mean that one is in a state of joy, happiness and/or favour from God. However, the remaining respondents provided responses that describe being blessed in terms of eternal life and covenant obedience, an attitude of heart (hope, peace, and assurance), reward for doing good, spiritual ability to prosper and even in terms of one’s character, being compassionate. The word  $\mu\beta\lambda\upsilon\sigma\tau\omicron\varsigma$  is used 158 times in 32 different forms in the *Novum Testamentum Graece* and the LXX (*Septuaginta*) and carries the sense of being blessed, fortunate, or happy usually in the sense of being a privileged recipient of divine favour. The word is typically used in relation to individuals in a particular state or circumstance except in the Pastoral Epistles where there are two references to the divine person (1 Tim. 1:11, 6:15). The Scriptures also make reference to a “blessed nation” or “blessed people” or “blessed children.” It is sometimes used in the sense of being held in honour or to speak well of or praise. In that sense it is also connected to the more commonly used word  $\mu\beta\lambda\upsilon\sigma\tau\omicron\varsigma$  (verb,  $\mu\beta\lambda\upsilon\sigma\tau\omicron\varsigma$  sÉ) translated as blessed in many instances and used often in relation to God. The word  $\mu\beta\lambda\upsilon\sigma\tau\omicron\varsigma$  is related to one’s state of existence or living condition and covers every aspect of one’s life including the sociological, psychological, political and economic dimensions. The blessed have a favoured existence in favourable circumstances. However, the mourning situation in the second beatitude is far from favourable. The disciples are not blessed because of their situation but because of what they will receive precisely because of the situation they find themselves in,

<sup>5</sup> See now the insightful piece by G. Lincoln Roper, *Who God Bless No Man Curse: The Blessings of the Blessed Life*. Kingston: Jugaro, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Bibleworks 9 search 6 (Ps. 33:12, 88:16, 144:15; Pr. 20:7; Malachi 3:12) 7 Used in 804 times in 84 different related forms in the Greek New Testament and Septuagint database of Bibleworks 9.



comfort for mourning. The blessed in the text are those marked out to be recipients of divine comfort in lieu of their suffering. They stand to be fortunate recipients of God's comfort in the midst of mourning and ultimately can expect a total reversal with the realization of eschatological hope in the full establishment of the kingdom of God.

If we allow for the word to be used in the sense of being happy then the beatitude in essence would declare a people happy who are experiencing sadness. The blessed ones are happy despite being in mourning because of their experience and hope of divine comfort. Though this is not impossible, the greater emphasis seems to be on being blessed because of the comfort they have already been earmarked to receive. Even with the usage of fortunate or favoured the paradoxical nature of the protasis of the beatitude is not lost; those who face misfortune are declared fortunate and those in unfavourable circumstances are declared favoured.

The makarism takes seriously the mourning situation and promises an appropriate and favourable response of divine comfort and in so doing serves as a word of grace and encouragement for a dispossessed people facing oppression and suffering. Their situation is not to be ignored, but rather it invites a liberating and empowering response. Those who mourn need to be comforted! They are blessed in spite of the situation because they stand to be beneficiaries of the comfort of the kingdom of God. The beatitude calls for a reordering of one's outlook by shifting one's focus from the situation to the promise and in so doing nurtures resilience through hope. It also acts to empower its hearers by changing their perception of themselves: they are the blessed ones, the truly favoured and fortunate ones with whom the Lord stands.

### **The Meaning of Mourning**

Among the St. Lucian leaders studied, mourning is most frequently (52%) interpreted as being in a state of sorrow, grief or suffering loss. However, some (16%) read mourning as the experience of remorse for sin demonstrated through repentance. This understanding in the history of interpretation can be traced back all the way to Clement of Alexandria and Origen and is likely to have been introduced within our sphere of interpretation by North-American pastors and exposure to biblical commentaries.

An interesting statistic in the data is that 12% of respondents understand mourning in terms of the experience of persecution,

suffering and even torment for the sake of Christ.<sup>7</sup> Believers are understood to be in mourning because they endure suffering and hardships because of one's belief and decision to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ. What is even more interesting is that the leaders who hold to this view are from three different local churches in different geographical zones of the country. It is not immediately clear what the commonality is with these interpreters but it is highly probable that these readers fall within a common history of interpretation rather than independently understanding the text in this way without any influence in their historical horizon. The readers share in a common history of interpretation, commentary tradition or common biblical instructor. The rest of the respondent (16%) are willing to see mourning in the general sense of sadness, the feeling stemming from experiences of difficulty and great challenge. The experience of mourning is even linked to agonizing over oppression and feelings of enslavement.

Luz proposes that mourning should be interpreted in view of Isaiah 61:2-3 in the sense of all the sorrows in the world.<sup>8</sup> Carter<sup>9</sup> takes a similar stance and sees the mourners as the poor who lament under the oppressive rule of imperial powers such as Babylon and Rome and suffer the pain of injustice. Carter describes the world of Matthew's hearers/readers succinctly as one marked by:

(1) vast societal inequalities, economic exploitation, and political oppression, (2) a status system [that] generally honoured wealthy, powerful, Roman and provincial males, and despised those of little power, wealth and status, (3) pervasive displays of Roman power and control, including military presence (and deterrence), and taxation, (4) no separation of religious institutions and personnel from socioeconomic and political commitments, (5) imperial theology or propaganda, and (6) obvious signs, sounds and smells of the destructive impact of the imperial sociopolitical order structured for the elite's benefit:

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<sup>7</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *Commentary on Matthew* (Grand Rapids Michigan: Baker Academics, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 193-194.

<sup>9</sup> Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Socio-Political and Religious Reading* (New York: T&T Clark, 2004).

poverty, poor sanitation, disease, malnutrition, overwork, natural disasters (fire and flooding) and social instability.<sup>10</sup>

In such circumstances, one can easily see how a word on mourning finds great relevance, meaning and applicability. A people who are least likely to be called blessed are declared such in a grave situation of oppression, suffering and sadness. Far from grieving over their sins, these people grieve as a people who long for a day of deliverance and change of fortune. If we allow that they grieve over sin, it would be the sins of injustice, oppression and religious abuse that they are learning to resist as survivors of a system of domination.

### **The Comfort**

Comfort for some (10.5%) means no more sorrow in reference to the realization of the eschatological vision of the writer of the Apocalypse of John: “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Rev. 21:4, NIV). A total reversal is anticipated with the coming of the kingdom. For others (31.6%), comfort means experiencing the peace of God. When believers in the Caribbean church speak of peace it is usually communicated in terms of the emotional tranquillity that one experiences in their inner life, but what is more important is that it is grounded in one’s understanding of God and a deep appreciation of His work in the lives of believers and an intimate experience of the Divine Presence in reconciled relationship. The idea here is one of God in the midst of the mourning situation and which has a profound impact on one’s mental and emotional state of being. This understanding of peace allows persons in difficult and trying situations to maintain a sense of victory and wellbeing. Ladd puts it this way:

In the same way peace is not primarily emotional tranquillity but a term encompassing the salvation of the whole person. The “gospel of peace” (Eph.6:15) is the good news that God has made peace with humankind so that we may now have peace with God (Rom. 5:1). Peace is practically synonymous with salvation (Rom. 2:10) and is a

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<sup>10</sup> Warren Carter, “Matthaeian Christology in Roman Imperial Key: Matthew 1.1,” in *The Gospel of Matthew in its Roman Imperial Context*, eds. J. Riches and D. C. Sim (London: T & T Clark International, 2005), 150-151.

power that protects people in the inner beings (Phil. 4:7) and that rules in their hearts (Col. 3:15).<sup>11</sup>

Some leaders (26.4%) expressed that the comfort spoken of in the text alludes to a change for better. The idea here is that one is comforted through improvement in the situation that causes mourning. A significant percentage of leaders (31.6%) understands comfort as receiving encouragement. This encouragement is understood as being provided through the presence and working of the Holy Spirit or through one's encounter with the person of Jesus Christ through faith.

The idea of comfort is largely influenced and shaped by the wider literature of the New Testament. What we see is a reading of the text within the literary milieu of other Scriptures and not exclusively within the context of the Gospel of Matthew or the Sermon on the Mount. As a Caribbean people in the church setting, the reading of Scriptures in isolation from other Scriptures or as literary units is a foreign concept relegated to the academic guild. It is just not part of our experience. Our hermeneutic remains one primarily of using Scripture to interpret Scripture as the Bible is typically viewed as one homogeneous text that uses words with the same meaning across the various books of the Bible. Although this is not in keeping with modern scholarly exegesis, it does have a rich heritage in early church hermeneutics.

### **The realization of the Promised Comfort**

In keeping with a general understanding of comfort in the here and now, almost half of the church's leadership (46.2%) interpret the comfort will be actualized on earth without any mention of comfort in the heavenly reign. Among these some simply stated 'On earth' (7.7%), while others (7.7%) envision comfort after the mourning situation during one's earthly existence. The larger proportion of those who understand the comfort as realized in one's earthly experience (30.8%) indicated that one receives the comfort spoken of in the beatitude at the moment of trusting in Jesus.

The position that the text promises comfort in the here and now receives further support among those who understand the comfort to be realized both on earth and in heaven (30.8%). This means that 3 in 4 persons in the church interpret the comfort as having an earthly fulfilment. Yet still there are those (23.1%), in keeping

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<sup>11</sup> G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed; ed. Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 534.

with contemporary scholarship, who view the comfort as eschatological in scope and in so doing indicated that it will be realized in heaven without any reference to comfort on earth. They read that the promise of comfort will be realized when Jesus returns and the kingdom of God is fully established (Luz, Gundry, Carter). Along with those who indicate both an earthly and eschatological fulfilment, a total of 53.9% of the church's leadership understand the promise as having a dimension of fulfilment in the eschatological kingdom.

### **The Second Beatitude in Caribbean Ministry**

Most of the respondents (80.8%) indicated that they had witness the beatitude on mourning being used in the context of church ministry, hence, only a small percentage of the leadership (19.2%) have not had such an experience. When asked about the way the text had been used, a significant percentage (42.1%) simply stated an agency of Christian education in the church such as bible study, preaching, and Sunday school. However, others provided specific objectives for the text being used that reflect a pastoral emphasis including (1) fostering trust in God and encouragement (21.1%) and (2) providing comfort and restoring believers (36.8%).

Although the majority of the leaders reported witnessing the text being used in church, only forty percent (40%) indicated that they had used the makarism on mourning in their ministry of the Gospel (60% said no). This may very well be an indication that the greater proportion of leaders in the church is struggling to find significance for the text within the context of Caribbean life.

Again, of the number who reported having used the text, one in two (50%) simply stated an area of ministry, for example, preaching to indicate how they had used the text. The main reasons given were: (1) comfort (12.5%), (2) encouragement (25%) and (3) restoration (12.5%). The text for the most part has found application as a text of comfort and encouragement, used to alleviate feelings of grief and distress and inspire believers to press on in the face of mourning situations. Not only is the makarism used as a text of comfort and encouragement, it has been used essentially as a preaching and teaching text. The number of leaders (28%) who indicated that they had heard the text used apart from preaching and teaching is small in comparison with the staggering percentage (72%) who reported that they had not. This is a reflection of the scope of the church's ministry. The ministry of the Gospel for the church in this study is actualized primarily through the preaching and teaching of the church.

Pastoral care in grief situations featured (71.4%) as the main way the text has been used apart from the activity of preaching and teaching. On a smaller scale, social justice (14.3%) and giving of testimony (14.3%) were others means through which the text found application. The thesis that the text is primarily understood as a preaching and teaching text is further substantiated by the fact that when asked about likely applications in ministry, preaching (72%) featured as the number one response followed by evangelizing (24%), song (24%), and drama (32%). Among those who indicated that they were likely to use other methods (16%) teaching, unsurprisingly, also featured. Other avenues indicated for likely application included counselling, community outreach (care centres and advocacy groups), and support groups for persons who are victims of domestic violence and single mothers.

### **Blessed are those who Mourn in the Caribbean**

How one reads and interprets a text is influenced by a complex web of factors including our social location, literacy skills, culture and exposure to the literature of the Bible. For the most part, the average reader in the church has not come to terms with the reading of the text from our social location as Caribbean people. We have largely been shaped by a universalist method of approaching the text that ignores our contemporary Caribbean context as if God is primarily interested in saving us from sin and not so much in the social, economic, gender, ethnic, cultural, physical and political factors that impact on our lives as Caribbean people. Oral Thomas posits that, “Interpreting the reader’s context is as critical as interpreting the biblical text in its context. The latter without the former leads to escapism, docility, and passivity.”<sup>12</sup> Our embrace of Christianity as a private and individualistic faith and our failure to see the Scriptures as actively confronting systems, structures and circumstances in which we live as Caribbean people has only served to maintain the status quo. Ashley laments that:

We have hardly seen mission in terms of the realization of the Kingdom of God or the transformation of society. An excessive individualism, denominationalism and insularity are characteristic of the Caribbean region and truly

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<sup>12</sup> Oral Thomas, “Ashley Smith, Carnival, and Hermeneutics: Reflections on Caribbean Biblical Interpretation” in *A Kairos Moment in Caribbean Theology: Ecumenical Voices in Dialogue*, eds. Garnett Roper and J. Richard Middleton (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick, 2013), 78.

representative of our traditional approach to the mission of the Church.<sup>13</sup>

This state of affairs is further reinforced by the kind of preaching that emanates from our pulpits. Moreover, the tendency to gravitate to preaching on television further exacerbates the individualistic form of Christianity that pervades Caribbean society. Garnett Roper echoes this sentiment of the lack of engagement with the realities of the Caribbean regions when he

contends:

Although substantial parts of the membership of the churches in the Caribbean are led by nationals, and though preaching and testifying and thinking about God have been taking place among them that does not necessarily constitute a theology that is Caribbean or a Caribbean Theology. The preaching and thinking about God in these churches do not take into account, except anecdotally, the matters that are part of the lived experiences within the Caribbean context.<sup>14</sup>

Eric Flett provides an important caution in arguing that an emphasis on uniqueness of the Caribbean is not enough and must be balanced with an equal emphasis on what the Scriptures affirm about the uniqueness of the divine nature and will, and that care must be taken to ensure appropriate dialogue between the two. He cogently asserts:

However, just as important as emphasizing the need to give proper attention to both particularities of context and particularities of divine identity and purpose, is the need to make sure that both are related in a healthy and mutually modifying dynamic. Without a dynamic of mutual modification, where gospel transforms context and context informs gospel, a truly Caribbean theology that enables human flourishing will not emerge, nor will there be a universal witness and reference for any context-specific embodiment of the gospel.<sup>15</sup>

What are the persecutory and oppressive situations that we face as Caribbean people? What are the experiences that constitute

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<sup>13</sup> Smith, *Real Roots and Potted Plants*, 53.

<sup>14</sup> Garnett Roper, *Caribbean Theology as Public Theology* (Kingston: Xpress Litho, 2012), 26.

<sup>15</sup> Eric Flett, "Dingolayin": Theological Notes for a Caribbean Theology," in *A Kairos Moment in Caribbean Theology: Ecumenical Voices in Dialogue*, eds. Garnett Roper and J. Richard Middleton (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick, 2013), 55.

mourning for us as a Caribbean people? Who are the ‘mourners’ who are in need of divine comfort and the comfort of the church as the incarnational presence of Jesus Christ in the world? How can the Caribbean church, grounded in the New Testament theology of the Kingdom of God, provide comfort for such mourners in the here and now even as we await the full manifestation of the kingdom of God? To what extent are we willing to allow the text to speak to us in our existential struggles for peace, righteousness and justice?

The approach taken here reflects a willingness to reflect on the text in a way that it is not relegated to the sphere of the church but extends itself to the experiences of Caribbean people in our villages, towns and cities; this ensures that the church remains fully engaged in the public domain and permits the prophetic voice and pastoral heart of Jesus to reach and touch those in our market places and public squares. On the other hand, the approach here takes seriously the witness of the Gospels to the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. It is grounded on the presupposition that the beatitude originates with Jesus, ministered to hearers during his ministry in the first century and was appropriated by Matthew as a word for his community and that this word, which transcends cultural borders, remains a liberating, empowering and transforming influence in the lives of its hearers in their unique social location. The approach also draws on the contributions of postcolonial biblical criticism with its focus on: (1) the politics, culture and economics of the colonial milieu in which the text was occasioned and used, (2) unveiling the biblical and modern empires and their impact, and (3) the freedom of subjected territories, for example the Caribbean in a globalized context.<sup>16</sup>

While not abandoning what Jesus and eventually Matthew sought to communicate through the beatitude, we must be willing to explore various aspects of meaning for us in the context of Caribbean life. Jesus did speak a word to his hearers in the unique *sitz im leben* and so to Matthew who used the sayings of Jesus in his church context. We can allow the text to speak to us in our context as Caribbean people even as it did to the Jews and those after in the history of influence of the text. By maintaining dialogue between our horizon and the horizon of the first readers we ensure that a measure of continuity is maintained in the history of interpretation while allowing the logion to speak to us in fresh, contextually relevant and empowering manner.

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<sup>16</sup> R. S Sugirtharajah, *Exploring Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: History, Method, Practice* (UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 1-2.



Being immersed in the horizon of the earliest readers for ourselves allows us to come into conversation with them and through this engagement we can have an empowering interaction.

One notices how the early church leaders engaged the Scriptures from their own social location and the plurality of ways in which the Scriptures were put to meaningful use to address their contextual concerns and feel empowered to do the same from our Caribbean context. Such an empowerment provides the Caribbean reader, leader, and scholar a voice and a sense of belonging in the enterprise of interpretation. The text works to empower the Caribbean reader in a manner similar to its first hearers but with both commonalities and dissimilarities in our experiences, while maintaining its potency as a word of God to all humanity and particularly to us as Caribbean people in our common state of sin but with contextually diverse struggles for righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. The beatitude reveals a God whose will it is to bring comfort to those who mourn by bringing about a change in the situations and circumstances that cause mourning. Though the future passive suggest deliverance at the time of the eschatological establishing of the kingdom of God with a complete end to oppression and suffering, it should not preclude deliverance from situations of oppression and suffering in the here and now.

Jesus' proclamation through the apostolic witness reveals that the kingdom is already breaking in to encounter, engage and transform situations of mourning in the here and now even as we await the full actualization of the kingdom in the eschaton. This should not be understood as a passive waiting but one of resistive and engaging waiting. The experience of the power of God to bring about deliverance from oppressive influences in the here and now testifies to the final and complete destruction of oppression and suffering that the people of the kingdom presently await in resilient hope.

In fact the stories of healing and deliverance that follow immediately in Matthew's outline: the cleansing of the leper, the healing of the centurion's servant, the healings at Peter's house, the stilling of the storm, and the healing of the demoniacs and the paralytic, all point to the messianic kingdom bringing comfort to those experiencing physical, mental and spiritual suffering. The stilling of the storm, both in its literal and symbolic understandings, provides comfort, hope, and encouragement for a people facing 'the storms' of life. The record of Jesus' testimony in Matthew 11:4-5 also serves as an apt summary of Jesus' ministry of bringing comfort to a people who were oppressed: "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight,

the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor” (NIV).

These acts of healing, deliverance, and proclamation represent activities to free from all forms of oppression and suffering. The poor who mourn lack the currency of belongingness, honour, protection, self-governance, justice, and equitable access to resources needed for a meaningful existence. Burchell Taylor observes that:

The Caribbean reality is characteristically one of systemic poverty—marginalization, dispossession, deprivation, humiliation, discrimination, oppression, domination, and religious indoctrination—meted out to the majority. In all of this, economic poverty is the most powerful prototypical expression of the phenomenon.<sup>17</sup>

This is not unlike the context of hearers in the first century. Though there are important differences in the details of our circumstances in the Caribbean region, we share much in common in terms of our situation with those who first heard this beatitude. Both worlds betray structures and systems that give rise to marginalization, inequality, economic exploitation, political oppression, poverty, class distinction, and pervasive displays of imperialism. Bruce Rogers-Vaughn makes the insightful observation that:

Today’s imperial power no longer looks like Rome (or Bonhoeffer’s Nazi Germany). It is not constrained by borders, nor does it overtly annex lands as in the colonialisms of the past. It is not monolithic but transforms itself to adapt to local cultures. It prefers to control through persuasion and “common sense” rather than direct police or military coercion, though it often resorts to such action of “free markets” or the power of economic elites are threatened. It works not primarily through the direct imposition of one nation on other nations, but through the routine activities of international corporations and financial institutions.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Burchell Taylor, “The Continuing Relevance of a Caribbean Theology,” in *A Kairos Moment in Caribbean Theology: Ecumenical Voices in Dialogue*, eds. Garnett Roper and J. Richard Middleton (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick, 2013), 206.

<sup>18</sup> Bruce Roger’s Vaughn, “Blessed Are Those Who Mourn: Depression as Political Resistance.” *Pastoral Psychology* 63 (2014):506.

The factors and experiences that constitute mourning for us as a Caribbean people include rising crime and violence, domestic violence and abuse in its various forms, the impact of natural disasters, rising rates of suicide, high rates of youth unemployment, father absenteeism, the impact of tourism on family life, political victimization, the negative impact of globalization and neo-colonial influences. The ‘mourners’ are for the most part women and children who survive the ravages of domestic abuse, our young people who face the paralysis of despair due to unemployment, the farmers who struggle to make a profit as a result of praedial larceny and the unfair ‘free market’ systems of the world, people who are left to pick up the pieces in the aftermath of major earthquakes, tropical storms, landslides and floods without the means to secure insurance coverage, the young boy and girl who must grow up without the love and presence of a parent, the family that hardly gets to spend time together with significant others having to work six night and day work shifts per week in order to provide for their family, those who are left to grieve the loss of family due to crime and violence, and our people who live in the claws of continued imperial forces.

The scope of this chapter does not permit nor require a detailed analysis of the realities that contribute to mourning in the Caribbean but a brief sketch is presented here on a few matters of great concern.<sup>19</sup>

#### (1) High Youth Unemployment

Research conducted within the region shows that the region continues to experience levels of youth unemployment that are among the highest rates reported in the world.<sup>20</sup> In the past two decades, all Caribbean countries have realized youth unemployment rates above world averages with an average youth employment rate for the region approaching 25% and in some territories like Jamaica, Suriname and Guyana exceeding 30% youth unemployment rates. The experience of youth unemployment affects everyone: the individual, the family and the wider society with its potentially dehumanizing impact and increased risk on the individual to engage in socially destructive behaviours and criminal activity, the economic, social and

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<sup>19</sup> See Roper *Caribbean Theology as Public Theology* for a sketch on the challenges facing the Caribbean, 53-69.

<sup>20</sup> “Youth are the Future: The Imperative of Youth Employment for Sustainable Development in the Caribbean,” Caribbean Development Bank, accessed April 1, 2016, <http://www.caribank.org/wpcontent/uploads/2015/05/Youth-Study-Imperative-of-Employment-CDB-2015.pdf>.

psychological strain on the family that provides support for such individuals and the negative economic and social outcomes on the wider societies of the Caribbean.

The church can play a dual role both in terms of helping individuals and their families cope with the challenges of youth unemployment and providing complementary and alternative solutions to the problem. Prayer and counselling support are useful strategies to enhance coping skills among youth and their families and have the potential to mitigate some of the negative outcomes usually associated with youth unemployment. Furthermore, there is room for greater participation in empowering persons through knowledge sharing, skills development and creating opportunities for entrepreneurship.

## (2) Father Absenteeism

The issue of the absence of fathers in Caribbean family is a persistent challenge with far reaching negative consequences on children and lasting consequence on Caribbean societies. Godfrey St. Bernard points out:

In St. Lucia and in Haiti respectively, proportions of 42.8 per cent and 42.7 per cent of all households were estimated to be female-headed in the early 2000s. Given observed patterns in the early 1990s, the prevalence of female headship in the smaller islands of the Eastern Caribbean is likely to continue to exceed 40 per cent.<sup>21</sup>

This is confirmed by the more recent Jamaica Survey of Living Conditions 2012 in which it is reported that, Female-headed households were 45.6 per cent of all households and more than half (26.1 per cent) had an adult male resident. They were comprised of a larger proportion of children (30.4 per cent) and, among female-headed households, those with children and no man present took the largest share (53.4 per cent).<sup>22</sup> Early Childhood development trends reported in the Jamaica Survey of Living Conditions 2012 indicates:

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<sup>21</sup> Godfrey St. Bernard, *Major Trends Affecting Families in Central America and the Caribbean* (St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago: UWI, 2003), 11.

<sup>22</sup> Jamaica Survey of Living Conditions (JSLC) 2012, Planning Institute of Jamaica, accessed April 4, 2016, [http://www.pioj.gov.jm/Portals/0/Social\\_Sector/Executive%20SummaryFinal.pdf](http://www.pioj.gov.jm/Portals/0/Social_Sector/Executive%20SummaryFinal.pdf), xiii.

Although the presence of birth mothers in the home was high (83.0 per cent) for children in the Early Childhood (EC) cohort, less than two in every five children (39.8 per cent) had their birth fathers present. More than a third (37.4 per cent) had no father figure in the home.<sup>23</sup>

These findings are typical of the wider Caribbean region where the majority of children are growing up without their birth father present in the home. The figure is a bit lower when a father figure is considered, but having a foster father is not without challenges of its own. Research has shown that living without a biological father has been associated with negative outcomes for mental health, educational attainment, family relationships, and labour force outcomes in adulthood.<sup>24</sup> The need remains urgent to engage fathers to provide more meaningful presence for their children and preparing young males for fatherhood.

### (3) Globalization

The phenomenon referred to as globalization has had a profound impact on Caribbean life especially as it relates to the agricultural sector. Under the Lome Convention and subsequent Cotonou Partnership Agreement sugar and bananas from Caribbean countries were traded under preferential trade protocols until 2008. However, due to litigation by the United States and allied countries with the World Trade Organization special consideration given to small island developing states were rolled back and these countries were left to feel the full brunt of the economic implications of globalization. This leads to a major decline in banana production and exports as farmers could not keep pace with large US corporations and Latin American countries. The Windward Islands banana industry has experienced a sharp decline in banana production and export. The industry saw a decline from about 27,000 farmers cultivating 17,000 hectares, less than 700 growers cultivating a total of about 1,500 hectares. This represents a 97% reduction in the number of banana growers in the Windward Islands and a 91% decline in cultivated lands. This dramatic decline meant that banana exports to the UK declined from 274,000 tonnes in 1992, or 45% share of the UK market, to 15,100 tonnes in 2012, or just 2% of the UK market.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> JSLC 2012, xviii.

<sup>24</sup> Sara McLanahan, Laura Tach, and Daniel Schneider, "The Causal Effects of Father Absence," accessed April 2, 2016, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3904543>.

<sup>25</sup> Winfresh, "History of Windward Island Bananas," accessed April 3, 2016, <http://www.winfresh.net/home/historyof-windward-bananas>.

Thousands of farmers who had been able to support their families and maintain an agribusiness found themselves struggling to stay afloat with many eventually abandoning their fields under less favourable conditions of production and trade. This marked a significant situation of loss in the Caribbean and many have suffered because of the challenges faced in diversifying their business. These farmers are in need of comfort and support to create new opportunities for income in order to support their families. There is a sense of hopelessness and powerlessness to resist the policy impositions of Europe and North-America on local politics. Though independent, we are increasingly losing our right to self-governance as we continue to sign agreements with multilateral agencies. While our brothers from the United Kingdom can resist the impositions of the European Union on their politics and feel empowered to renegotiate terms of the membership in the EU, Caribbean countries like St. Lucia feel consigned to simply comply with terms dictated to us for our continued participation in the global village.

The mourners are not just those in our Caribbean churches but also those in our villages, towns and cities. The concern of public theology, with its push for theology to interact with issues in the public domain of contemporary society, is important if the revelatory and transforming potential of the beatitude will be realized in the realities of the Caribbean context. This stands against the privatization of Christian faith and the emphasis on personal salvation, which are dominant features of Christianity in the Caribbean. Sebastian Kim posits:

There is an urgent need for Christian theology to be actively engaged in conversation on public issues with the understanding that it can offer complimentary or supplementary approaches, and even alternative solutions to very complex issues facing society today.<sup>26</sup>

God is not just concerned about the issues of the church but is equally interested in engaging our world through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Besides, the church in the Caribbean experiences life within the wider context of Caribbean realities and not separate from it. The issues facing the common woman or man in the Caribbean also affect our churches and are issues we cannot ignore.

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<sup>26</sup> Sebastian C.H. Kim, *Theology in the Public Sphere* (London: SCM Press, 2011), 3.

Moreover, we cannot seek to speak just for those in our congregations but rather for all in our Caribbean societies. Our 'preaching' can no longer be geared to the church but meaningfully engage Caribbean reality. It must have in mind as its audience both the congregation and the marketplace even if it is done in the church, but we must also take seriously conversation in the public sphere. Only such an approach will ensure relevance, meaningfulness, practicality and the release of the transforming potential of the Scriptures on Caribbean societies. We cannot be content in just preaching to but preaching with the people of the Caribbean and in so doing engage the average person in reflection on their own reality in light of Scripture with the hope that they may experience its liberating and empowering potential in their lives and situations.

Ashley Smith is right in asserting that "The church needs to address itself to the task of helping the downtrodden people of the region to affirm their human value, develop a feeling of identification and social, national, and regional solidarity."<sup>27</sup> Such a project takes seriously all people living in the realities of Caribbean society and therefore necessitates engagement in both the church and city. We must develop a willingness to reflect on the text in a way that it is not relegated to the sphere of the church but extends itself to the experiences of Caribbean people in our villages, towns and cities and ensures that the church remains fully engaged in the public domain and permits the prophetic voice and pastoral heart of Jesus to reach and touch those in our market places and public squares.

Kim identifies the main stakeholders in the public sphere as: "the state, the market, the media, the academy, civil society, and religious communities."<sup>28</sup> Public life in the Caribbean is dominated by the state, economic concerns and the media. The state is marked by divisive politics, the markets driven by the selfish agendas of the merchant class and our media driven by the agenda of the film industry and Caribbean music, which to a significant extent perpetuates the very maladies plaguing Caribbean society. There is an urgent need for partnerships between the church, centres of theological education in the Caribbean, and civil society using the forum of media to influence the personal decisions as well as the outlook and actions of people in community. The goal is to provide voices for the oppressed, underprivileged and disadvantaged

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<sup>27</sup> Smith, *Real Roots and Potted Plants*, 53.

<sup>28</sup> Kim, *Theology in the Public Sphere*, 11.

people of the region to bring them comfort in the midst of the mourning circumstances. The comfort envisioned is the liberation and empowerment of the mourners and the transformation of their lives.

There is a need for 'voices of comfort' to provide hope for the distraught farmers, those grieving loss through crime and violence, the unemployed and others who suffer the results of injustice in our society. To do so is to follow in the ministry of Jesus Christ in ushering in the kingdom of God in the midst of a broken humanity. Far from taking away from the eschatological hope of the Gospel, present action by the church is energized by this very hope and gives witness to it in the here and now as the church actively rather than passively awaits the full actualization of the kingdom of God.