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CAN JAMAICA BE RESTORED?

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Over thirty years ago the Jamaica Council of Churches and leaders of the Church in Jamaica had the courage to respond to a time of national crisis and joined forces with others to stage the first National Prayer Breakfast. It was the church's attempt at fostering a climate of healing, reconciliation, and national unity in a country that was in a state of undeclared civil war. Little could

they have imagined that this event would have continued and be necessary thirty years later. As brief, limited and imperfect as this event has been, over these years it has helped to create some recognition of the need for leaders across all sectors in the nation, to come together at the beginning of a new year to spend time in reflection, prayer and fellowship. Leaders need to pray and be prayed for as they face the enormous challenge of leadership and bear the burdens of office.

ONE BLOOD

What has been the message of the National Leadership Prayer Breakfast over these years? There has only been one message. If we are to survive as a nation then national unity and the integrity of the nation must take centre stage. It must be top priority in policy-making and governance. It must be top priority in our leadership behavior. We must unite as a people or continue to hemorrhage the goodwill that is ours. Amidst all our divisions and our unrelenting tendency towards disunity, the very survival of our collective lives in Jamaica is at stake. For, as one of our more conscious entertainers puts it, *'the whole a we a one blood'*. Junior Reid says "You could a

come from Rema or from Jungle, you could a come from Firehouse or from Tower Hill, 'one blood', 'you could a come from up town or out a town, from Hannah Town or round town, 'one blood'. You could be a Bobo Dread or a Niyabinghi, 'one blood'. Too much fussing and fighting, everyday, Tribal war. Blood".¹ To that we say, Amen! That's what the church has been saying these past thirty years and more. Our unity is an imperative as much as it is a challenge.

CHALLENGE FOR LEADERS

We meet at a time of extraordinary challenges for leaders. Here in our own country and throughout the world, the demands and complexities of the decisions that leaders are called upon to make are perhaps more overwhelming than ever before. There are no easy choices. No easy answers. These are extraordinary times. And extraordinary times demand extraordinary leadership, the kind of leadership that experts, like Peter Drucker, define as that which 'lifts people's vision to higher sights, raises people's performance to a higher standard, and builds personality beyond its normal limitations'. For some leaders the challenges and outlook for this New Year 2010 are daunting. Even those who normally are optimistic by nature and personality are not so buoyant at the prospects for this New Year. Our leaders in the public and private sectors, and in communities across Jamaica, are under enormous pressure. So too, are the people who look to leaders for direction. Many are fearful and worried. Some have lost their jobs, their livelihoods and life savings, even their homes and personal assets. Families are suffering. These are perilous times. So what do we do? How should we respond? How should we prepare ourselves to face

¹ Junior Reid, 1989

whatever further challenges that are sure to come our way this year and in the years to come?

WE CAN ...WITH GOD'S HELP

The theme for this 30th Breakfast is 'With God, we will overcome'.

This is not a

theme of undue optimism. It is not a theme that invites positive thinking regardless of the circumstances and realities that we may face. Instead, it is a theme, based on the Judeo-Christian faith that calls for sober reflection. It is a theme that expresses confidence in the power of Almighty God. It is a theme that challenges us as leaders to know the basis on which we can expect to rise above and triumph over whatever the tasks and challenges that confront us, as rise we must. For, things cannot continue as they are without the most disastrous consequences upon the people of this nation.

With this in mind, I bring you the encouraging words of a Hebrew prophet of the seventh (7th) century BC, the prophet Habakkuk. As a minor prophet in ancient Israel, little attention has been given to the life and message of this prophet. Habakkuk lived at a time when he and his people were faced with national crisis. His nation was under siege in all directions, politically from the invading forces of the Babylonians, economically and morally from its own internal forces. The presence of evil, injustice, and oppression was overwhelming. Habakkuk agonized over this problem and asked, how long must this continue? He knew the challenges and the difficult prospects facing his people. As a confessing Jew he even questioned his God as he took issue with Yahweh. In the first chapter of his prophecy Habakkuk asked, 'How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. The law is

paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted (Hab1:1-4). And yet, despite these depressing circumstances, Habakkuk ends his prophecy with these amazing words, “Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights” (Hab 3:17-19). This minor prophet was a man who refused to give in to despair. He refused to give up hope. His prophesy ended as a prayer that expressed a strong and deep faith in God. He concluded that confidence, courage, and trust in the Sovereign LORD are the way to face and overcome the crises that life brings upon us. Only by this way would his nation overcome. In his prayer he affirmed that even if the whole economy collapses, even if the agricultural sector on which so much of life depends should fail, he would still stand on his confidence and trust in the power and sovereignty of Almighty God. Habakkuk’s prophecy is a testament of faith and hope. It is a challenge to commitment, especially for leaders, and a call to action by all. This is the word I believe we need at this time. ‘With God’s help, we will overcome’.

JAMAICA UNDER SEIGE...ON WRONG ROAD

Like it was in Habakkuk’s time, our nation too is under siege. Jamaica is no longer at a crossroad. It is going down the wrong moral and spiritual road. We have taken a turn down the wrong road that leads to the undermining of all efforts at nation-building. And none of us, like Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor, can wash our hands and proclaim our innocence. This is not the time for futile debates about whose fault it is, whether it is government’s fault, or the church’s fault, or the private sector, or the trade unions’ fault, or

the fault of parents and family life. We are all at fault. We have all watched, witnessed or participated in the disintegration and destruction of the moral fabric of the nation. All of us must accept responsibility. Our youth have lost their innocence. What is reported in the media about the behavior of our youth on the public transportation system is nothing short of a national disgrace.² The level of violence in schools is a loud and clear message that something has gone wrong in our society.

JAMAICA - TRIBALIZED

But equally, the behavior of those in leadership and positions of trust, both in the state and in civil society, sad to say, is less than exemplary. Most often it is not something of which we as a people are proud. Our economy and society are on the edge of a precipice, just a short distance away from major collapse. We have tribalized our politics and witnessed the effects of tribal politics on the people across Jamaica. We have tribalized everything, including our culture and our entertainment. Communities are being torn apart and our people are divided. Even the Gospel of Jesus has been tribalized. The landscape of our country is littered with record-breaking numbers of churches, as if St Paul was not at pains to point out that there is only 'one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all'. (Eph 4:4-6). We have got to get our act together as a people. Thank God for the new signs of unity and working together among our churches and among the leadership of the umbrella groups. This is a good sign. It must be encouraged. The demanding mission of the Church at present and in future requires it.

² Tyson, Esther. 'Transportation Centre: Blessing or curse?' Sunday Gleaner, 20 Jan.2010

JAMAICA A ROGUE STATE?

Some are now wondering, is there any hope of recovery, any hope of redemption for Jamaica? Can Jamaica turn itself around? Is it too late for the nation to find its moral purpose and turn itself around towards real hope for a prosperous and sustainable future? Confronted by the Goliath of a problem called 'crime and violence', many leaders and people of influence are asking, are we on the verge of becoming classified as a rogue state, a state that is lawless, ungovernable and out of control?³ Why should a little country like ours of 2.7 million people have some 268 gangs with over three thousand members operating in 16 of the 19 police divisions?⁴ According to the Ministry of National Security, a Gang Threat Assessment Survey reveals that these gangs operate prominently in the Corporate Area, St. James, Clarendon and St. Catherine. They have international connections and figure prominently in murder for hire, human trafficking, prostitution, kidnapping and firearms trafficking as well as cyber crimes. There are powerful external and internal forces that are besieging Jamaica, trying to capture the Jamaican state and bend it to their own private wills and agendas. Will they succeed? If it is not yet too late, we must act before it is too late. What must we do?

As leaders in the nation in all spheres of life, we need to rise up and face the challenge before us. This challenge is much more than economic. There is a real battle for the hearts and minds of our people. We need some Davids among us to take on the Goliaths in the name of God and in the interest of the welfare and well-being of the people. We need every Jamaican who is proud of his/her citizenship, who is willing to fight for the preservation of the

⁴ *The Gleaner*, February 22, 2010.

integrity of this piece of God's creation, to join the fight against evil. We will never succeed if we are divided and confused about the moral principles that should govern our public and private conduct, principles of decency, honesty, justice, fairness and respect in our dealings with one another, love for God and neighbor. We will never succeed if we continue to harbor and nurture feelings of hatred and bitterness towards one another, especially among those in positions of leadership. We will never succeed if we seek to destroy one another, thinking that that would make us get ahead and advance our leadership position. We must unite.

WE CAN'T HAVE IT BOTH WAYS

As leaders of the nation, and as citizens of this country, as parents, teachers, administrators, church members, church leaders, civil servants, members of the private sector, and public sector, as ordinary citizens, vendors on the streets or in the marketplace, I say to you, it is time for change to put Jamaica on the right road to a more peaceful, law-abiding, and caring society. The problem is, we have been trying to play it both ways. As a people we must understand that we can't have life both ways. We can't on one hand scream 'we want justice' and, on the other hand, seek to pervert the course of justice by our corrupt behavior in seeking to bribe the police, the jury, or any other representatives of the court, or protect and harbor those among us who are determined to live a life of crime. Life does not work that way. We cannot expect government to deal with the corrosive and vexing problem of corruption on one hand, and on the other hand, we ourselves encourage corruption in our personal and corporate dealings. We cannot have it both ways. We cannot demand more from our over stretched law enforcement and security personnel, on one hand, and at the same time undermine and decry the work of those men and women in the security forces who take their job 'to serve and protect' seriously.

They are out there fighting bravely against the evils of crime and violence in our society. We cannot have it both ways. We cannot block roads and 'bun tyre' whenever we feel aggrieved over an act of injustice in our community, and at the same time fight against the police and against the forces that seek to bring justice, peace, and security to our communities. We cannot on one hand abuse and abandon our children and at the same time expect them to be our future. Life does not work that way. Unless we unite on the moral principles and the moral foundation that should govern a nation and lead to the well-being of the people, principles of integrity, equitable and distributive justice, concern for the poor, the destitute, and the most vulnerable in our midst, we will never overcome.

LEADERSHIP MATTERS

This is why leadership matters. I think it is now abundantly clear that Jamaica needs fundamental change. Jamaica must change course and turn in a new and more positive direction or we will all perish together as fools in paradise. Jesus said, unless you repent, you too will all perish (Luke 13.3). Where is the leadership for change to come from? Should it come from the legislative agenda of Government? Should it come from the programs and leadership of the Church? Should it come from the dynamic cultural life of the nation or from our institutions of learning? I say it has to come from all of the above. It is time for each of us to step forward and become leaders of change and transformation in our society. It is time that we open the space for new and younger leadership to emerge. They can help us find the way forward. And this is why I affirm and congratulate our Governor General, Sir Patrick Allen, for his 'I believe in Jamaica campaign' to inspire new hope for this country, particularly among the younger generation. I believe this is one of those programs that can help us turn the page in our history to a new

chapter of hope and inspiration. We must listen to our younger leaders. They too have a role to play in shaping the change we need. But how will this happen? What do we need to do to make that change? Do we have what it takes to truly liberate ourselves from the crises that we are in and put ourselves on the path towards a better future? I think we have what it takes. We are not short of ideas. We have an excellent national vision outlined to take us to the year 2030. We have the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to benchmark our annual progress to the year 2015. We have Political Manifestos, Corporate plans, community action plans, and a new fiscal plan to engage our people in all aspects of our life.

HOW HABAKKUK SAW IT IN HIS DAY

The fact is, the vast majority of Jamaicans are decent, law-abiding citizens who deeply desire a better Jamaica. The question facing us as a nation is how are we to achieve this better Jamaica that we desire? This requires a strong commitment from each of us to be part of the change and transformation we long to see. This commitment arises from our confidence, courage, and trust in the Sovereign LORD that the prophet Habakkuk speaks of. We long to see Jamaica become a country where there is respect for one another, where there is more caring for one another, where each looks out for the other, a place of justice, truth, forgiveness and peace. We long to see Jamaica become a country of real freedom and transformation, human flourishing and productivity, economic development and spiritual vitality.

CALLING OUT THE ARMY OF REFORMERS

For this to happen we need an army of people who are prepared to stand up and join the brigade for change, people who are willing to make a difference right where they are. We need citizens who are prepared to sign a pledge to join in the fight against evil, to be a

peacemaker in the home, the community, and at the workplace. We need citizens who are prepared to renounce old habits and the old politics of division that destroy instead of build. We need citizens who are prepared to reconcile, forgive, and unite with their neighbor, instead of seeking revenge and retaliation. We need leaders that will help Jamaica turn the page and write a new chapter in our politics and governance, in culture and entertainment, in our treatment of one another, and in the preservation and development of our communities, including our treatment of the environment.

Can your leadership make a difference this year? For that to happen, I urge you not to give in to cynics. I urge you not to give in to despair. You can make a difference if you are prepared to take steps to trust in the Sovereign Lord, to set aside and renounce those old ways, those habits and behaviors that have kept us back and undermined our potential as a people. The old politics and the old habits have been around too long. Today, I challenge you to make that commitment to change.

PRAYER FOR RENEWAL

Habakkuk's prayer included a prayer for the renewal of his nation. With the strong heritage of his people in mind, Habakkuk prayed, 'Lord, I have heard of your fame. I stand in awe of your deeds, O Lord. Renew them in our day. In our time make them known. In wrath remember mercy'. (Hab 3:2). If ever there was a time that Jamaica needs to be renewed that time is now. This is the forty-eight (48th) year of our Independence and the one hundred and seventy second (172nd) year of our Emancipation. Soon we will be celebrating our 50th birthday, our Jubilee, as an independent, sovereign nation. Jamaica's Jubilee will be the same year and at the same time as the London Olympics of 2012. All eyes will be focused on Jamaica. The whole world will be cheering this country. The question for us is, will we be worthy of the respect of the

world? Often it seems that we are lacking in self-respect. It is time to grow up. As St. Paul says, "When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me." As we move closer to age 50 it is time to renew the nation. If we want every Jamaican citizen to feel that they belong here, that they have a role to play in the restoration and development of the fabric of this nation, if we want to increase the productive capacity of our people and get ourselves out of this economic mess that we are in, we must seize this moment. We have an opportunity right in our hands at this time to turn Jamaica around. We had this opportunity in 1838 and we failed. That failure led to the crisis of 1868.⁵ We had this opportunity in 1962 and we failed. That failure led to the crisis of the 1970s. God has given a new opportunity in 2012. We must not fail again. We cannot let this opportunity pass.

NEW SPIRIT ... NEW DAY

We must begin to look forward to and prepare for that milestone, that time of Jamaica's Jubilee in 2012. And as we do, we must take into account how good the Lord Almighty has been to us. Over these fifty years we have struggled, we have worked hard, and we have achieved much in our journey towards building the nation we desire. Yes, we have failed in many areas. We have missed opportunities for nation building. But we most certainly have reasons to celebrate our achievements in health and education, in science and technology, in politics and industry, in arts and culture, in our athleticism and the glory of sports that have won us the admiration of the world. Who can ever forget the spirit of deep pride and unity that swept through the nation when Usain Bolt, Shelly Ann Fraser, and our wonderful team of athletes brought the

world to its knees in sheer admiration of Jamaica's excellence in world athletics in Beijing and Berlin? This is the time to summon that spirit and call the people to renewal of the nation. This is the time to move aggressively towards the building of the Jamaican spirit through programs for the upliftment of the poor and the marginalized. This is the time to unleash the vast potential that is Jamaica. If not this time, when? Let us not miss this moment. Let us not lose this opportunity. Renewal must begin right where we are, in our 4-H clubs, our neighborhood watch and citizen associations, our societies and fraternities, our business places, our institutions of learning, our churches, synagogue, mosque, and temple. We must seize this opportunity for renewal of our family life, of ourselves, and our institutions.

As we renew our spirits and ourselves, let us draw upon the inspiration provided by those among us who are making a difference. Like Shaggy and Friends who are making a difference to an institution like the Bustamante Children's Hospital that desperately needs all the help it can get. Like Vilma Clarke, President of The West Green Citizens' Association in St. James under whose leadership that organization made such a difference to the lives of the people of the community through strong defense of their community.

I am so proud of those men and women and young people of the church who, for the compelling love of Christ and their desire to see a better Jamaica, volunteer their time and energy to feed the hungry, rehabilitate those from prison, and spread the good news through their evangelistic activity; those who teach in basic school education for little or no remuneration. When I see the courage and perseverance of these young people in organizations like Hear the Children Cry that is passionate about protecting and rescuing our

children who are at risk, and Little Brothers of St Andrew, that is giving hope and meaning to inner city youths, and many other groups and individuals throughout Jamaica engaged in helping the most vulnerable to gain a grasp on life, I believe there is hope for Jamaica. I admire their dedication. It is a sign of hope that we can renew. But we need to do much more. We need more people who are prepared to volunteer their time and energy towards making a difference. Too much is at stake for us not to make this dedication to each other, our fellow Jamaicans, more commonplace. Is this achievable? Yes, it is.

COMPASSION and SACRIFICE

Just before Christmas we witnessed the most remarkable incident of the year, the crash of American Airlines flight 331 at the Norman Manley International airport and the miraculous survival of all on board. What a miracle that was! The Sovereign Lord had his angel in place. Annette Howard, that brave female JUTC bus driver who, on the night of December 22, witnessed this amazing event while on duty, felt she had no choice but to respond to the cries for help from those frightened passengers who astonishingly emerged from the crashed airplane.⁶ Annette Howard made a difference to what could have been a much more tragic situation. Her response symbolized the true spirit of compassion, self-sacrifice, and service embodied in our people. She has inspired her local community and us by her example. This is the difference of one. Annette Howard is here with us this morning as a special guest of the National Prayer Breakfast Committee. We want to recognize her and say thank you Annette for your inspired example. Annette Howard made a difference. You too can make a difference.

⁶ Dunkley, Alicia. "The hero of AA flight 331," *Sunday Observer*.

Can Jamaica be restored? Yes, it can. With God's help it will. Jamaica can be restored, parish by parish, community by community, if we have leaders and people who are prepared to chart a new future, a future of immense possibilities and hope. Jamaica can be restored if we have leaders who are prepared to lead with clean hands and a pure heart, leaders who lead with integrity and compassion, who lead with strong vision and courage, who lead for change and transformation. God is at work trying to form a nation that will honor him, one in which he will be pleased to be their God. He is in the transformation business. For God's sake, and our nation's sake, let us respond to his call. Let us heed the call for change, in our lives, in our leadership, and in our nation. The question is, will we?