

WITH RIGHTS COME RESPONSIBILITIES
PRESENTATION MADE TO THE ST JUDES ANGLICAN CHURCH
PATRONAL FESTIVAL 2000
ON FRIDAY, OCTOBER 27, 2000

I consider it a distinct privilege and a pleasure to join you here at St. Judes this evening to share in your week of celebrations. More so, I welcome the opportunity to speak to you on what I consider to be a most appropriate theme.

Seventy- two hours ago, as I preoccupied myself with the celebrations to mark Teachers Week 2000, I never for a moment conceived that I would be called upon to be here. However I see this as another opportunity for me to contribute to the educational upliftment of members of this society, and by extension to their wholistic development.

Before proceeding further, let me thank Rev. Maxwell for consenting to have me here this evening, as a replacement for Ms. Sandra Mason who was originally slated to address you. Unfortunately she had to leave the island urgently on Government business. It would be remiss of me if I failed to acknowledge the confidence that Ms. Mason, my colleague on the National Committee for Monitoring the Rights of the Child has placed in me, in having recommended me as her replacement.

It is my understanding that during the course of the week, you have been blessed with some excellent presentations. It is therefore my hope that at the end of the evening that the quality of my presentation would have met with your expectations.

In setting the framework for my presentation, let's first establish that rights and responsibilities are associated with persons of all ages. I associate these two

elements with the well-known cliché, 'from the womb to the tomb'. Hence rights and responsibilities will feature wherever man exist on the planet earth.

We must also start on the premise that with rights, automatically come responsibilities. There can be no denying that a high premium is placed on defending and protecting whatever rights man perceives he has, as determined by convention and or law. In my opinion it would seem that the same high premium is not placed by man in meeting the expectations of society, which it determines as excepting our responsibilities.

In thinking of responsibilities, some might even venture to categorize them as impositions, simply because of the demands they make on the individual. It might be logical to conclude that responsibilities are more graciously accepted, and mean more to many, when there are clear signals that benefits and rewards are to be achieved.

In searching for an answer as to how people view rights and responsibilities, I sought to play a little mind game as I prepared myself for this exercise. I therefore wondered what the response would be like if I posed an open question to the audience as to... 'What does each individual consider as his/her rights as a citizen of Barbados? Something tells me that I could expect a multiplicity of responses to that question. More so than anything else, I anticipated that each individual would see it as part of his/her responsibility to remind me of their constitutional rights.

If on the other hand I were to posed the question of 'What are your responsibilities as a citizen of Barbados? ... I suspect that the responses would be slow in forthcoming, as most persons would stop to ponder over the question, as if it was the most difficult ever posed.

In this contemporary era, it has not become uncommon to hear almost every individual, group or organization, speaking to the question of its rights. What do we really mean when we speak of 'our rights'? According to the Oxford Universal Dictionary, our rights are simply our entitlements. In layman language, that is, what one is lawfully due. A more academic definition would refer to rights as 'A set of conditions which govern aspects of human behaviour to enable development, and the maintenance of life.'

Although both definitions reflect what our rights are, the latter seems to gel with the school of thought, that rights within our society emerge out of our convention or traditions. It more or less highlights why the socialization process becomes important in maintaining the pillars on which the society has been built. It is through the process of inculcation that the norms, mores and folkways are safeguarded, and that our value system and unwritten rights are preserved.

As a christian society, there is an acceptance and appreciation of the fact that there are some God given rights, such as the right to life. This apart, it ought not to be missed that some rights are procured through the enactment of law. This means that regulatory systems of control are brought to bear. Our rights however don't stand alone, for it should be clear that if we have the right to life, then equally so, there must be the responsibility to preserve it. In the regulation of society, our perceived rights in life are controlled by the call for accountability, as determined by the Ten Commandments in the Bible.

In moving to establish a link between rights and responsibility, I call your attention to the definition for responsibility. The Universal Oxford Dictionary defines responsibility 'as being accountable for one's action'. A broader definition refers to responsibilities as 'the discharge of rights through social, economic and political organizations, which seek uphold them.'

This suggests to me that people in society, express their stated rights by way of their actions. This being the case, it seems logical that each individual should be responsible for his/ her actions.

Let me use a simple illustration to make the point. As we all know, every individual in Barbados has the right to an education, as well as to work in order to support himself and his family. Here we find a school leaver who having left school, enters the world of work, only to be found wanting. This individual infrequently attended school, and exited with no academic qualifications and technical skills. The reaction of the individual to his/ her dilemma is that the world has robbed him of something.

Individuals who find themselves in this position go into a denial syndrome, and fail to take responsibility for their action in not making full use of the entitlement to a free education. They fail in accepting the responsibility for not preparing themselves for the world of work, on the completion of school life. Is it fair then for any individual to blame society for his/her failure?

Using the outcomes of this example as a guide, we should come to recognize that responsibilities emerge out of a frame work of laws and regulations that govern how actions are to be carried out. Often, responsibilities are left to the individual, who may be unaware of what underpins their role in carrying out or maintaining one's responsibility.

If this is applied to what exists in our Barbadian community, where individuals and groups seek to play ignorant of what their responsibilities are to themselves and the wider society, while at the same time passing on the blame for their shortcomings to others, then it is not difficult to understand why there is a social crisis in our society today.

Out of this emerges the issue of the abuse of what is perceived as a given right. The abuse of one's rights can be taken from one extreme to another. There are those who show no regard for hard fought and earned rights, while there are others who believe that because they have a right, that they could exercise it with out regard for our laws, customs or practices, and traditions.

Take for instance the struggles of our forefathers as slaves from Africa to gain their freedom from our European masters, as well as those of our other pioneers who fought to secure adult suffrage, and the independence of our nation. These freedoms gained have given all Barbadians the right to live in a democratic society.

Having therefore secured these rights, we as a people now have a responsibility to defend, protect and preserve them.

When some young and old people alike choose not to exercise the right to vote in a general election, they fail in discharging a responsibility to themselves and to the state by not participating in the collective decision making process, in determining who should govern. It would appear that some of us neither treasure the right that we have, or the responsibility to discharge it.

Earlier I alluded to the fact that in many instances, society takes its rights for granted. As a result, persons in exercising their civic, constitutional, personal and spiritual rights, take a lot of latitude, based on interpretations of the unwritten and written conventions and statutes of law.

Many of the actions on the part of some individuals and sections of our community, come out of their strong sense of belief that constitution of Barbados grants them absolute freedom. Since there is no such thing as absolute freedom, the freedom of each individual is constrained by law. To stress the point, no citizen regardless of age, class, colour or gender is above the law.

Therefore the guarantee of the right to freedom of speech and expression, freedom of association and assembly, freedom of religion and equality before the law, does not justify that one could do as he/she likes, with out regard to how his/her action affects the rest of the society. If this were allowed to exist, then the law of the jungle would apply.

In our homes, schools, churches, youth groups and clubs, workplaces, and even with in the Cabinet and Parliament of Barbados, there are established rules which all persons within that group are expected to follow. In as much that every individual has the right to be a member of a particular group with which he chooses to associate, that individual by the same token has a responsibility to uphold the rules of the group or organization. It should not be ignored that they are consequential actions that are applied when rules and regulations are broken.

What therefore does this mean for the members of our society? It means that every individual has a responsibility to practice being a good citizen. 'What does society expects of a good citizen?' It is expected that a good citizen not only accepts the norms and values of the society in which we live, but also respects the rule of law and order. Consistent with this thinking, it is expected that any form of deviant behaviour that runs counter to what the society accepts as a standard would be denounced.

A good citizen accepts that it is his right to live in a violent, drug and crime free society. Therefore he sees it as part of his responsibility to the society in which he lives to attack this scourge of irresponsible behaviour, but giving support to the police and other legitimate social agencies, who attempt to arrest these forms of anti social behaviour.

It is expected that every good citizen would not exploit the gift of freedom of speech to walk around and use expletives at will, without regard for others. Whilst it is the individual right to drink alcohol... Is this to be taken to mean that the individual has the right to drive on our streets under the influence, without giving due regard for the life of other road users, as well as his own? Is it acceptable that an individual should be allowed to show disregard for the standards of the church and come into the holy sanctuary unseemly dressed, operating under the guise that the freedom of choice to dress within reason applies? I put it to you that in all of these instances, there is nothing to suggest that the right of the individual stands apart from his/her responsibility to himself and others.

Each individual who considers that he/ she has the right to live to live as he chooses, also has to consider the responsibility he has to society, in demonstrating that be a role model, by upholding the ideals and standards set by the society in which he lives.

In focusing upon the chaos which currently exist in our society, it is not difficult to arrive at the conclusion that much of the disorder that prevails, is directly linked to the thinking which promotes individual and group rights; which more often than not bear any relation to their wider social responsibility.

There seemed to be a great obsession with Human rights, moral rights, political rights, labour rights and things of that nature, which are group or self centred in nature, and which safeguard the interest of a select few.

The current generation needs to develop a consciousness that accountability is also tied to the broad societal rights. It would appear that the responsibilities of the individual to family, community and state have either been conveniently swept under the carpet, or deliberately ignored.

As a people we can hardly ignore the fact that there is a growing imbalance in society, as it relates to the attitude, perceptions, understanding of and appreciation for what are determined as rights and responsibilities. As a matter of fact, these are being seriously challenged in some quarters, based on some new philosophies and ideologies that have emerged. Realistically speaking, the value system of our society as we have come to know it, is now under threat.

Taking an objective look at the transformation-taking place in society, It begs the question...Is it enough to take a cursory glance to simply focus on whether the populace is carrying out its social responsibility in safeguarding the pillars on which society has been built?

I am of the opinion that we are furthered challenged to explore whether society through the actions of its educational and the judicial systems in particular, has not contributed to the declining state of our social fabric by downplaying responsibilities, over the promotion of rights.

In looking at the realities of what is happening around us, it would seem that the state has assumed full responsibility in meeting many of the obligations once assumed by the institution of the family. The actions of the state could sometimes amount to sending mixed signals, which could lead to a matter of complacency on the part of the populace in terms of its dependency upon the state.

One instance of the mixed signals to which I refer, comes out of the support given to the incidence of teenage pregnancy. Following the United Nations Declarations on The Rights of The Child, the state in recognizing the right of every child to an education, has seen it as its responsibility to ensure that

teenage girls who become pregnant while still at school, are not denied the right to pursue their education.

As you are well aware the boys as potential fathers, remain in the safe zone and will continue to pursue their education as though nothing has happened. Those girls who stay on the fringe of the law and become pregnant at age sixteen, and even those who are under the legal age of consent, would readily state their claim to the right to re- enter school.

The state in exercising its responsibility is placed in a compromising position. It has to face up to the condemnation by the church of the behaviour of the offenders, which it perceives as morally wrong. Does the state not have a wider social responsibility? Considering that many of those of child-bearing age are juveniles.... Is the state in turn to be accused of supporting child abuse? This is an assumption I must point out to you, is based on the fact that the fathers are usually adults who are not brought to justice.

It seems more to me that the latitude extended to our youth gives the feeling of comfort and the license for them to continue in their life styles, without having to account for their behaviour. The fact that the state is called upon through its welfare agencies to assist in the financial support of the children, speaks to the irresponsible behaviour of our men, young and old alike, in meeting the responsibility of fatherhood.

The references to which I have alluded, accurately reflect on the indifference that has pervaded our society, with respect to how our people respond to their rights and responsibilities.

Where as the provisions of rights are laudable.... What evidence is there to support the view that we are encouraging our youth to accept some

responsibility for their action? I would argue that we are supporting the development of a social delimma.

In closing, it is clear to me that the society has to make a more conscious effort to demonstrate that it is its brother's keeper. Each and every individual must be called upon to recognize that no man stand on his own, and that what ever he does by way of his perceived God given right, and/or convention or statutory rights, bears a relation to others in society. Our actions should not be directed to offend. Hence in exercising our individual rights, we should demonstrate a sense of responsibility in respecting the rights of each other. I strongly suggest that this is the only way that people will comfortably co- exist in any environment.

A topic such as this one is almost inexhaustible, but I think that I have wet your appetite enough in order to end here.

Let me thank you for your attentiveness, and I sincerely hope that I would have succeeded in stimulating your thoughts during the course of this presentation.

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