

DIOCESE OF JAMAICA AND THE CAYMAN ISLANDS

OPENING SERVICE OF THE 144th ANNUAL SYNOD

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AT THE PARISH CHURCH OF ST. ANN

ST. ANN'S BAY

THE LORD BISHOP'S CHARGE – PART ONE

**THEME: “AFFIRM THE PAST, ENGAGE THE PRESENT AND
ENVISION
THE FUTURE”**

Nehemiah 2:17-18

Then I said to them, “You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us re-build the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace”. I told them that the hand of my God had been gracious upon me, and also the words that the king had spoken to me. Then they said, “Let us start building!”

The Book of Nehemiah provides us with a glimpse into a particular period in the life of the Old Testament Jewish community when they found themselves in a situation in which their land was invaded, some exiled under Persian control, while the homeland lingered in ruin. In the passage from which the text comes, Nehemiah, an exile, emerges as a sole figure who, on learning of the plight of his people back home, experienced in his person the corporate pain and distress of his people, and so we are told that he “sat down and wept, and mourned for days”. The historian very quickly provides us with an insight into the interplay between his faith and his understanding of the fate of his people. Nehemiah understands the situation facing his people in the context of his relationship with God as part of the covenant community, and so the text tells us that his weeping and mourning over the plight of his people were accompanied by “fasting and praying before the God of heaven”.

Let us put a bit more flesh on the situation. In the year 445BC, Nehemiah, who lived in Susa, one of the three capitals of the Persian Empire, received a discouraging report about the physical condition of Jerusalem. Nehemiah was deeply moved by the reports and engaged in various acts of sorrow (weeping, mourning, and fasting) during which he confessed his own sin and that of the people. Noteworthy for our purpose is the starting point of his mission for the restoration and rebuilding of the life of his people. It began with a confession of failing and complicity, albeit by one who takes on something of a corporate personality, confessing the sins of his people, even when they were not yet ready to do so. Nehemiah carried a burden for his people which affected his very disposition. Nehemiah’s condition was observed by the king, whom he served as cupbearer, and with disclosure of the cause of his distress, and divine guidance, he was allowed to go and attend to the condition of his homeland.

In undertaking this mission, Nehemiah seeks to engage God regarding the plight of his people. He first calls to mind the experience of God within the life of the people of the community of faith. He recounts the nature of God as one who is not only awesome and great, but one who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who are faithful in keeping his commandments. Nehemiah clearly sees the situation in terms of what may be perceived as an absence and inattentiveness of God to the plight of his people. So he pleads with God to “let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant...” Nehemiah acknowledges

that it is not because of God's failure why the people are facing this situation, but the sinfulness and unfaithfulness of the people with whom Nehemiah identifies himself. Like Moses while leading the stubborn children of Israel through the wilderness, Nehemiah reminds God, that these unfaithful and sinful people are the ones he has chosen, and appeals for mercy on their behalf. So he prays:

“Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favour in the presence of this man.”

So it is in the context of his relationship with God that he discerns his call to champion the cause of his people, and in which he finds the source of sustenance and the strength that he would need for such an undertaking.

The fact of Nehemiah's status as an exile on a mission to inspire and to transform the situation and plight of his people in the homeland should create an interesting diversion for us as we are quite ambivalent as a Nation, and as a Church, as to the role of Jamaicans of the Diaspora in the matter of nation-building, beyond seeking their money for investment purposes or for keeping the money transfer train going.

We in Jamaica may not be a people in exile, notwithstanding the significant numbers who constitute the Diaspora, dispersed across the globe but, as a nation living in the homeland, and as a Church we find ourselves in a strange place in which the landscape smacks of dereliction and degeneration, and it appears that signposts we have known are nowhere in sight, and the familiar markers have been removed. So, the message coming through, and the cries that go up daily, is that our “walls” have been breached and there is need for a realistic assessment of our situation, for visionary leadership, and concerted action that will lead to rebuilding and reconfiguration of institutions and structures and, among the people, a moral, social, political, economic and religious transformation which will make for the restoration of a sense of community, integrity and wholeness. The recent unprecedented statement by the three leaders of the nation, the Governor General, the Prime Minister, and the Leader of the Parliamentary Opposition, issued on February 28, 2014, calling for a moral re-awakening of our nation is the clearest indication of the derelict state of the walls of our city and temple.

Let me quote from that statement in case we have not read it or paid attention to the significance which it holds for us:

"Today, the leadership of this nation calls on all Jamaicans to come together and make a concerted effort to take back our island from the grip of crime and the shroud of negativity."

"We ask that each and every Jamaican reflect on where we are as a people and how far we have fallen from the values and traditions which our forefathers held as sacred."

"Jamaica is passing through a moral crisis such as we have never seen before. Most of us are still reeling from the shock of the heinous crimes committed against our people, young and old alike, babies and young children, pregnant women, as well as fathers and mothers from all across this land. It is clear that hatred, heartless vengeance and evil have so taken control of a few of our people that they murder and abuse their brothers and sisters without a second thought. No place is held sacred as they commit these dastardly acts, even on Church premises. To these criminals, even their own life lacks value and meaning".

While the call by these national leaders has gained little traction, the nation has had a rude awakening to the seeming entrenched dance hall subculture which is driving many of the values informing the behaviour of our people in the wake of the verdict and sentencing in the Vybz Kartel case. And while we may be in a state of incredulity regarding the values being espoused, we must ask ourselves whether this is a manifestation of a serious case of alienation and estrangement from what is supposed to be representative of mainstream society and its values, including those of the Church.

Perhaps Jeremiah's judgement pronounced on Jerusalem may be true of us today as we accommodate ourselves to the realities around us:

Are they ashamed of their detestable conduct? No, they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush. (Jeremiah 6:15)

In commending certain initiatives taken by the Church and enlisting a more far-reaching engagement by the churches, our national leaders urged that "our efforts move beyond the precincts of our churches into every section of our island to break down every barrier created by thought, religious belief, political persuasion, economic standing, gender or age".

In taking note of this call by the leaders of our nation for greater involvement by the Church, I want to cite also a comment from one of the leaders within CARICOM. In a recent CARICOM document calling for A Regional Dialogue among Faith Based Organizations in the Caribbean Community which was held in Antigua and Barbuda, on the 17 February 2014, Prime Minister Baldwin Spencer, of Antigua and Barbuda, pointed to what he identifies as disturbing trends in Caribbean society in the following terms:

There has been a steady decline in ethical and moral standards within the Caribbean. Teenage pregnancy, truancy, increase in crime and violence, increase of guns on the streets, gangs, the abuse of the Internet, the prevalence of pornography and in general

an upsurge in youth deviant behaviour have ushered in a culture that has challenged the traditional value system and norms held in the Community.

Accordingly, he called for the Church and other Faith-Based Groups to *“forge efforts in our pursuits. .. [as] the church can help strengthen the moral fabric of society and does have a role to play in building a robust Caribbean Community. Hence, within the context of the STRATEGIC PLAN, there should be a Section to reflect the relevance of the church and religion in building a modern Caribbean civilization”*.

We must be careful, however, in the way in which we understand and exercise the mission and ministry of the Church in relation to such calls for the exercise of greater influence on the life of the society and in our understanding of the nature of the Church. It is frequently asserted that the Church is the moral conscience of the nation, placing it in the position of a moral watchdog, which, while comforting to many, may be compromising of the very nature of the Church. The Church is called to be first a body which reflects its nature and calling from God to be a holy people, before it takes on such a role in relation to the society. And in the exercise of this social responsibility we must ensure that we not get trapped in the role of reactionary critique of everything in the life of the society, without being able to offer positive direction and affirm those developments which are worthy of affirmation.

In this regard, we need to take a second look at what has been communicated regarding the matter of the Flexi-week to the society. There are clear benefits to be derived from the further implementation of legislation which allows for modifications to employment and labour relations in our society, if we are to seize the opportunities for further development of our people and our economy. What the Church must ensure is not just the maintenance of the status quo, where its interests are concerned, but that there is always provision for the protection of the rights of citizens, employees and employers alike, and when there is conflict, that there is in place the appropriate mechanism for mediation and the settlement of disputes, so that justice will be done.

But what can we say about the reality and experience of our people at the grassroots levels in our “Jerusalem”? While the Parliamentary debate on the Anti-Gang Bill was on course, the Daily Gleaner of Tuesday, February 18, 2014, shared with its readers research findings conducted in inner-city communities targeting at-risk youth. Here are some highlights:

Of the 97 youth from a single inner-city community surveyed, nearly half have already been to jail or prison, one-third have come into contact with guns, and more than two-thirds have been affected by gang violence in one way or another.

51 per cent of the youth grew up in single-parent households, while 54 per cent dropped out of school for lack of money and/or violence/fighting.

Another 40 per cent cannot read or write well, 72 per cent have no formal skill training, 85 per cent have seen persons with guns in their community, and 32 per cent have access to guns.

Fifty-five per cent of the 97 youth have friends involved in gang activity, while 52 per cent have family involved in gang activity.

Seventy-three per cent lost at least one friend to gang violence, 69 per cent had a family member killed by gang violence, 27 per cent admitted to having been involved in gang activity, and 41 per cent had been incarcerated at least once.

It was also pointed out that similar data exist on several other communities in Kingston, Spanish Town and, increasingly, rural towns like Savanna-la-Mar.

In another Report carried in the Jamaica Observer of April 9, 2014, Senior Superintendent Steve McGregor, is reported as saying that “criminals locked in a bloody feud in West Kingston are using boys as young as 12 to carry out their deadly attacks in the area...We have had reports that the men involved in this feud are using youth as young as 12, 13 and upwards to carry out these deadly attacks.” He added further, “the boy killers are fearless and had no respect for age or gender”.

In light of this kind of data, we take note of the passage of what has been dubbed the Anti-Gang Legislation, and express the hope that the implementation of the powers conferred under this Legislation will be carefully monitored, and will lead, not just to reports of statistical reduction in criminal activities, but a real improvement in the relationship of hostility and alienation which exists between many of our youth and the institutions of the State and society as a whole. Because, if this does not happen, then the legacy which we shall be bequeathing to the next generation shall be of a horrific nature.

But what of the interplay between institutions of the State and the citizenry? Given the tendency to ignore the voices of our own people when we speak on national issues and, given the partisan political fashion with which we discuss most issues as a nation, let me cite a perspective from an external source. A lead article in the Sunday Gleaner March 2, 2014 included the following comments:

In its 2013 country report on human rights practices, the US State Department says unlawful killings and the violation of citizens’ rights by the security forces were among the most serious abuses in Jamaica.

The report also cited what it describes as Jamaica’s overburdened, under resourced and ineffective judicial system, violence against and sexual abuse of children, violence and discrimination against women and trafficking in persons as other areas of concern.

However, it was the issue of extra-judicial killings that dominated the report on Jamaica.

But do we need external voices to tell us these things and to use their leverage to get us to take corrective steps?

At an International Conference held recently in Grand Cayman, and sponsored by the University College of the Cayman Islands, under the theme, ***Towards a Corruption-Free Caribbean: Ethics, Values, Trust and Morality***, and attended by an international gathering, including several of us from Jamaica, it was observed that even when the justice system works, prosecutions for corruption have focused on the activities of lower level members of the Constabulary Force and lower level staff in the Public Service. Somehow, we are supposed to believe that there is some kind of glass ceiling, and corruption and cronyism stop with the lower echelons of society. The same issue arises in the dispensing of Justice, as there are serious questions being raised as to whether some of the judgements dispensed in the Courts are bolstering the confidence of the people of this nation that there is equity for all before the law. If changes are not made with urgency, even at the level of addressing perceptions, the system of justice as a measure of the health of a nation and the vibrancy of its democracy will be seriously undermined.

What is evident in all of this is the discontinuity between who we have been as a people, our moral values, and our social organization, and like Nehemiah's situation of old, seem to be pointing to a multi-faceted problem of identity, community, and governance. There is this strong sense of protestation that this is not who we have been and are as a people, and that something is amiss, and the "walls" have been breached.

As a Church, we know this to be true of ourselves as well. The latest national census data tell a story regarding the religious landscape of this country and our place in it as Anglicans, not unrelated to what our own internal Ecclesiastical Returns have been telling us for some time. It is a picture of decline in those expressing affiliation with the Diocese, decline in active membership, the ageing of the congregation, a failure to attract new members and to gain the involvement of a significant cohort of young people. While at the same time the ranks of the un-churched are swelling, and growth is being reported among some of the newer churches, with a proliferation of churches emerging across the island. In this context we have to do our own critical analysis, asking fundamental questions about our identity and mission as Anglicans within this society.

We are in no doubt about the fact that as Anglicans we are an authentic part of the Church catholic professing the orthodox Trinitarian and Christological faith of the whole Church. Looking to the past, we take great pride in our contribution to this nation and our witness to the Gospel, albeit with checkered moments of unfaithfulness, but what does this definition of

our identity mean in terms of the witness, work and service to which we are called in today's Jamaica?

Additionally, there are questions regarding our life together as a Diocese, whether there is a sense of a common bond; whether we can articulate a shared vision for ourselves in going forward; and determining the structure of governance which can express our peculiar character as Anglicans and which will help us to achieve the vision which we have for ourselves of a preferred future.

Against all of this background, I want to invite us to explore the biblical text before us this afternoon to see what insights we may gain about how we may engage the challenges that are before us in a way that can rally us around a common identity which is informed by our history, our present predicament, our vision for the future, and a way forward to achieve the same.

In Nehemiah we see a man who is away from the harsh conditions under which the people of his homeland find themselves and who has made it well for himself, enjoying the life of the king's court, but who continues to feel every ounce of his people's pain, suffering and shame. One of the reasons for this, I want to propose is that, while he himself was not in the destitute and demoralized condition of his people, he was still being very realistic in his assessment of himself. He knew that a slave by any other name is still a slave, and therefore, he was at one with his people. While we like to think that the major problem of the Caribbean is that of political leaders who are removed from the realities of the people, I would like to suggest, that one of the most basic problems confronting us in forging a common strategy in confronting our nation's problems, is the extent to which those who have achieved some measure of success understand themselves to be removed from the rest, while failing to realise that they are only slaves enjoying of the benefits of the kings beneficence.

A second thing I want to suggest about Nehemiah as we experience him here is that he was realistic in his assessment of the condition of his people. He keeps his ears to the ground and he gets the latest word about their situation, and, when he actually gets back to his homeland, he makes a personal check to ascertain the veracity of what he has been told. Here I believe is where we have a credibility gap. What is the true state of the walls of our Jerusalem and our temple? As we assemble as a Diocese we must ask serious questions about the state of life in our congregations and our diocese, and the level of effectiveness with which we are engaging in the mission and ministry which God has entrusted to us as Anglicans in this nation.

The same question must be asked of our nation. Under successive leadership of governance we have continued in a state of fantasy and unreality concerning the extent to which we could continue to live with the debt to GDP ratio which we were incurring year by year. Notwithstanding the voices from within, it took the International Monetary Fund to invoke the

rules governing reality assessment to get this nation to wake up to the suicidal path on which we were proceeding. Yet, even now, there are voices which would like to spread confusion and to declare that it is the IMF which is responsible for the problems we are experiencing.

When Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem he made no announcement of his presence but went and inspected the walls and the gates of the city and the Temple by himself. Having done so, he then summoned the officials of the Jewish community and told them about the nature of his mission, the derelict condition of the walls of the city and the Temple, and its demoralizing effect on the people and their relationship with God. He knew that he had to share his vision with the people in order to bring about a buy-in that would lead to the necessary transformation. The text suggests that the people immediately accepted the proposal from Nehemiah. It should not surprise us to see people readily responding to visionary leadership and zeal when they are included in the process of decision-making.

Taking a critical look at ourselves as a Diocese can be a daunting experience, just as the prospect of change and the embrace of a vision of an alternate future can be a hard sell. Likewise we need hardly rehearse the path to the signing of the agreement with the IMF and the ongoing efforts of the government to keep the country on track with its agreement in a context of cynicism, skepticism, and opposition regarding this economic pathway, and its ability to take us out of our current quagmire, and propel us on a path to growth.

Our Diocese is being summoned to embark on a visioning process in pursuit of a preferred future. And as we come to this Synod, we are being challenged as to whether we are prepared to take significant steps that will lead to creative changes and forward movement in the life of the Church, or whether we go back home, at ease with what we have always known, and with the balance with which we are comfortable.

It is clear that there were persons opposed to the mission led by Nehemiah, including those who did not belong to the Jewish community, but for some reason, had a lot of influence on public opinion. They began to ridicule the project:

What are these feeble Jews doing? That stone wall they are building – any fox going up on it would break it down.

As the work progressed, so did the opposition. Various missions of disruption from without were planned. The power of disruption from within was even more threatening to the fulfillment of the mission. The Jewish community began to lose morale and began to feel overwhelmed by the immensity of the task. We need hardly wonder what this may be saying to our nation as we push toward debt-reduction, and as a Church as we work toward the pursuit of a vision of a preferred future. Perhaps negativity can be just as crippling and debilitating as the physical and material conditions.

The Jews not resident in Jerusalem began to encourage those who lived in Jerusalem to leave, and for those who had come to participate in the mission to return to their places of exile because of the perceived danger. To be an exile and a slave in another man's land is being presented by them as a better option. Can we not hear the echoes of those voices which tell us that Independence for Jamaica was a mistake, and that we should go back to Britain, at least if we can't, let us hold on to the Privy Council.

Nehemiah was not daunted by the negative responses that surfaced, as he knew that, if the work were of God, God would see to its completion, and so he was able to respond to those who raised their song of discouragement:

I answered them by saying, "The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it."

So he urged the people to stay and to fight, and came up with a creative plan to ensure that every citizen became involved and that the task was completed. He knew that all hands had to be on board for the project to succeed, spectators sitting on the sidelines and waiting on others to take corrective action cannot accomplish the task. It is for this very reason that the visioning process currently being undertaken by this Diocese is not about the Bishop, Church House, the Diocesan Council and Financial Board, or even the members of Synod. It is about the active involvement of every congregation and its membership. The same is true about our nation's confrontation of our debt-ridden situation and the moral, religious, and social crisis confronting our nation. It is not just about a Prime Minister, Minister of Finance, Minister of National Security or a Commissioner of Police. It requires the collective effort of all of us to take back our society and to set it on a path of moral and spiritual re-awakening and economic growth.

As if that were not sufficient problem for Nehemiah and the people of Jerusalem, the people were soon overtaken by a severe famine. They found themselves having to take out loans to purchase food for their survival, but were soon unable to meet the payments and resorted to offering their sons and daughters as pledges for loans. This could very well be a news report capturing something of Jamaica's situation in the context of the current agreement with the International Monetary Fund, and our worry as to what it would mean for us if we were hit by a hurricane during the life of the IMF stand-by loan facility, even as it speaks of the situation facing local congregations in fulfilling their obligations to the Diocese, and as a consequence, the Diocese's challenge in meeting all its obligations in a sustainable manner. Members of the Israelite community soon found themselves in serious problems as they were not able to redeem their sons and daughters and were getting into serious debt with their fellow Jewish money lenders. Nehemiah had to have some really strong words with the Jewish moneylenders to get them to release their fellow Jews from some of the debt.

Nehemiah again turned to his faith in God as a source of guidance. So he chided those responsible, urging them to walk in the fear of the Lord. I rather suspect that Nehemiah was not too polite in the words he had for them. The reality is that in this case moral persuasion worked. In sealing the arrangement to which the moneylenders had agreed, Nehemiah had a word of threat and judgement to offer:

I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, "In this way may God shake out of their house and possessions anyone who does not keep this promise. So may such a person be shaken out and emptied!"

It should not surprise us that in a context of famine and economic distress fellow citizens were making use of the opportunity to exploit their less fortunate brothers and sisters for economic gain. As a nation which has gone through several hurricanes and their aftermath, as well as the experience of the 1980's when certain imported foodstuffs were in short supply, and salt-fish and flour were married to items that traders could not sell, and in the context of the free market where there seems to be no such thing as morality and personal responsibility, market forces can make some strange things happen resulting in soaring bank accounts for some and a corresponding deprivation for others.

But the Church is not exempt from such dynamics as the economic challenges facing congregations and the Diocese tend to have a disruptive effect on relationships across the Diocese as we each begin to question the value of the contribution of each to the whole, suggesting imbalances and raising questions regarding the integrity of each other.

Nehemiah, having challenged the people to make sacrifices for the common good by redeeming their debt, recognized that he too had to send a positive signal as to what he was prepared to do on his part. It was not enough for him to be the leader of this mission. So Nehemiah took the decision to forgo his allowance as governor because of the heavy tax-burdens which the people were already being asked to bear. But that was not the limit to Nehemiah's generosity and sacrifice. He fed some of the officials from his own resources and even dispatched his servants to be a part of the restoration project wherever they were needed. Leaders need to send a signal which says that they too are part of the sacrifice, part of the project, not from somewhere up there, but on the ground where it hurts.

But Nehemiah learnt that, notwithstanding the purity of his motives, the honourable nature of the project to re-build the walls, and his own personal sacrifice in seeing to the completion of the project, there were those who would try to undermine the work and even threaten to end his life, if necessary. Even the most respected religious leader, the prophet, Shemaiah, could be bought at a price and be enlisted in such a devious scheme. Corruption has been a part of the

life of nations, raising its head even within the religious community when the price seems right, to the one who is willing to compromise integrity and office.

Herein lies also the very threat to the integrity of the life of this nation. Corrupt individuals, through the use and exercise of the power of their wealth, can influence persons at every level of society to compromise themselves in the exercise of their public duty and, in so doing to compromise the very foundation on which rests our democracy and the prospect of growth and development of our nation.

In face of the power of these forces, Nehemiah had to turn once more to his faith in God to undergird him in face of this challenge as he prayed: "But now O God, Strengthen my hands", perhaps making clear to us as a people that the mere establishment of an Office of the Contractor General, the INDECOM, or the passage of pieces of legislation, will not end corruption without the exercise of alertness by the people and a sense of dependence on God to overcome the power of such forces of evil. Perhaps the Minister of National Security's utterance regarding "divine intervention" is not just a statement for partisan political debate.

The good news is that having stayed the course, the restoration of the walls was completed in a record time of 52 days. Not satisfied, the opponents were critical of the quality of the finish, but even they had to concede that its completion in record time was a sure sign that the project was of God and the subject of his guidance. Notice though, that the restoration of the physical walls completed, the dedication of the walls and the temple had to await the fulfilling of a wider project.

In the minds of many, Nehemiah was a builder who accomplished the re-building of a wall. To that extent we could say that Nehemiah's mission was now finished. The truth is, however, that Nehemiah was a reformer, calling God's people back to the basics of their faith and the life of social justice, holiness and righteousness to which they were called into being as a people by God. So now the restoration of the wall was a reality but, the project was not yet ended. You see, the ruined state of the wall was only symptomatic of a greater malady. Not only was there a failure of leadership which led to the current predicament but, there was a breakdown of the religious, moral, and social life of the people. It took the

co-operation between Nehemiah the governor, and Ezra the priest, in rebuilding some physical walls, accompanied by a process of re-building moral, social, and religious foundations and supporting structures, to bring about the necessary restoration of a sense of healing, integrity, and wholeness to the life of the people. And this, I believe, is as profound a statement as can be made regarding the way forward for our nation.

As this nation musters its citizens and national will around economic recovery, and as we as a Church deal with issues of finance and numbers, we need to bear in mind that behind the

immediacy and seeming pressing nature of these concerns there are signs of a profound malady related to the failure to adhere to God's call to the nation and the Church to a life of righteousness, justice, equity, holiness, accountability and stewardship of the resources and the environment.

For us as Christians, it is worthy of note that in the Second Reading for today from 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, St. Paul uses the image of the one body with many parts, pointing to the community of faith as one body because of baptism into Jesus Christ. He points out that each part has a role to play, however seemingly insignificant it may appear to be. By his enlistment of every citizen in the re-construction exercise, Nehemiah was able to restore a city wall. But, more than that, he brought about a renewal and restoration of a faith community. Needless to say, whatever vision we may have for the renewal of this Church will not come about by the efforts of a few leaders or sections of the Church without the full involvement of all who take their baptism into Jesus Christ seriously, as it is that which makes us one body.

The re-building of the Jerusalem wall signaled a readiness on the part of the people for a renewal of the covenant relationship with God at the level of the leadership with priest, governor and Levites working together. But the renewal of the covenant relationship between God and his people, called for an act of national confession. There was no way for them to just pick up the pieces of their national and religious life and just move on as if nothing had gone wrong at the very core of their life as a people. So it is that Nehemiah offers the following prayer:

³² "Now therefore, our God, the great God, mighty and awesome, who keeps his covenant of love, do not let all this hardship seem trifling in your eyes—the hardship that has come on us, on our kings and leaders, on our priests and prophets, on our ancestors and all your people, from the days of the kings of Assyria until today. ³³ In all that has happened to us, you have remained righteous; you have acted faithfully, while we acted wickedly. ³⁴ Our kings, our leaders, our priests and our ancestors did not follow your law; they did not pay attention to your commands or the statutes you warned them to keep."

The text points to the fact that, called together by the *leadership*, there is a renewal of a sense of identity and community among the people with a re-awakening of concern for the less fortunate and marginalized, as they observed their religious activities and festivals. There followed the renewal of the celebration of festivals which they had long abandoned. There is also an act of national confession and a renewal by the people of their covenant with God.

But there were other consequences flowing from the renewal of the covenant. Whereas previously, returned exiles had been encouraged by enemies of Nehemiah and the project of

reconstruction to leave Jerusalem, and for those exiled not to think of returning home, there was now a significant return of exiles with an overflow requiring some to settle outside of the city walls.

Now they were ready for the dedication of the City Walls and for the renewal of the Temple and its place in the life of the people. They engaged their religious devotion and covenant relationship with God with a renewed sense of zeal and a strict observance of the law in ways that today smacks of ethnic and racist discrimination, as they sought to separate themselves from their neighbours in a way that could ensure the practice of their religion with purity and integrity as they understood it.

Reviewing the transformation which has come to the life of this community through this process under the leadership of Nehemiah, we may note that they set out to restore the physical wall of the city, but the undertaking takes on profound dimensions which they never envisaged. A despairing and dispirited people have come together under visionary leadership, to contribute of their individual abilities and gifts; they have resisted enemies within and without; they have weathered famine and economic hardships; they have come together to renew their common faith as a people under God; they have given expression to their concern for the most marginal and needy through the sharing of their resources; and they have committed themselves to a radical adherence to their covenant relationship with God, even while living amongst people who did not share their faith commitment. Is there perhaps the prospect that our attention to the nation's debt-reduction, our economic agenda, can become the occasion for a much more comprehensive moral, religious, and social renewal?

As we gather as a Synod, it is clear that we do so in a context in which there is need for serious reflection and action. The nation's attention at every level is focused on the financial and economic challenges facing us, a reality which cannot be denied, as we are all feeling and living with the reality of the same. The challenges before us may be likened to the derelict Jerusalem wall. And, like the people of Nehemiah's time, there is ample evidence of a greater malady that is consuming our nation at the moral, social and religious levels, and of which our financial and economic focus are only symptomatic.

In what may appear to be a parallel process, our Diocese is facing serious challenges in terms of the diminishing numbers and the consequent diminishing resources available to sustain the work and the mission. And we can sit and bewail the situation, or we can, as a people of faith, be led like Nehemiah to seek God's guidance, and mobilize the efforts of leaders and people alike to bring about a new thing which will see the renewal of our faith in God and our life as people of the community of faith. In a real sense the challenge is whether we want to remain a Good Friday people, bewailing the tragedy of the moment, or whether we want to be a people of Easter anticipating and celebrating the gift of new and transforming life by:

- proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom of God;
- teaching, baptizing and nurturing new believers;
- responding to human need by loving service;
- challenging violence, injustice and oppression, and work for peace and reconciliation;
- and, striving to safeguard the integrity of creation and to sustain and renew the life of the earth.

TEXT:

Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us re-build the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace". I told them that the hand of my God had been gracious upon me, and also the words that the king had spoken to me. Then they said, "Let us start building!"

AMEN.

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