

# Spirituality and Justice\*

Presented by

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**The Frank Collymore Hall  
Bridgetown, Barbados**

**Date: Wednesday, 7<sup>th</sup> May 2014**

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\*This Paper was presented by the Right Honourable Sir Dennis Byron, President of the Caribbean Court of Justice at the Eight Annual Memorial Lecture in honour of The Rt. Excellent Sarah Ann Gill on Wednesday, 7<sup>th</sup> May 2014 at the Frank Collymore Hall, Bridgetown, Barbados.

## **SPIRITUALITY AND JUSTICE**

### **Introduction and Protocols**

I am indeed honoured and pleased to have been invited as the Guest Speaker for the 8<sup>th</sup> Annual Sarah Ann Gill Memorial Lecture. Admittedly, preparation for this lecture reminded me of my upbringing as I grew up in a Methodist home. My father was a local preacher and I used to listen to him as he rehearsed his sermons for Sunday Morning Worship. Something has probably rubbed off on me. And for that reason I make the point that we live in a diverse world where concepts of justice and spirituality are essential to humanity irrespective of religion, race, colour or gender. The most basic ethical and spiritual dictates are known in every part of the world and are found in all of the known religions. As an example I refer to a universal legal principle - the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that all men are created equal and the other the universal spiritual golden rule - “Do unto others as you would that they do unto you”. These are both representative of the whole of humanity and draw us all together as we aspire to use their mandates to be better people and to make the world a better place.

### **The story of Sarah Ann Gill**

The woman we honour tonight is Sarah Ann Gill, a national hero of Barbados.

Her story is set during the period of colonialism and slavery in Barbados at a time when women and people who were not European were treated as inferior. The Methodist Church in Barbados became a voice in the movement for the abolition of slavery, and came under violent attack by the colonial authorities and the white rulers of the society of the time. Sarah Ann Gill, showed

what could happen when spirituality and justice intersect. When the chapel was destroyed, and the minister and his wife fled the island for fear of their lives Ms Gill defiantly opened her home for worship. She was threatened and prosecuted, charged with holding illegal meetings and harbouring guns and ammunition in her home. Can you imagine her courage? Women had no political status and racial abuse was rampant but she refused to be silent in the face of injustice.

The story has a happy ending for on June 25, 1825 The House of Commons in England declared that ample protection and religious toleration be secured to all of His Majesty's dominions. Today the St. James Methodist Church still occupies land acquired from her.

John Wesley, founder of Methodism, is said to be the first Christian leader of world renown to take a decisive stand against slavery. He encouraged Methodists to use their collective power to bring about radical social change. His faith moved him to believe that people should live with a primary regard for others and their welfare because Christ commanded "to love your neighbour as you love yourself." It was his personal commitment to God that caused him to work among the neglected and needy. One of his most famous aphorisms sums up his attitude towards life and his approach to challenge negative forces among us. He said:

*Do all the good you can,  
by all the means you can,  
in all the ways you can,  
in all the places you can,  
at all the times you can,  
to all the people you can,  
as long as ever you can.*

There are two lessons from the story of Sarah Ann Gill and the life and work of John Wesley that are relevant to our discussion. The existence of a moral consciousness and the taking of personal responsibility can motivate the correction of society's wrongs even when the institutions set up to uphold justice fail to do so. And secondly it must be recalled that at that time Christianity was upholding the very practices of slavery, colonialism and racism which it condemns today, demonstrating that what is, is not always what is right. This demonstrated that societies need to evolve in what John Wesley described as radical social change. Thus concepts of morality have evolved in time. This is a relevant thought today as our societies are having to grapple with changing values – a case in point, being issues surrounding gender equality.

### **Definitions of Justice and Spirituality**

It is difficult to find universally accepted definitions of justice and spirituality. There is a sense that these are concepts which are or should be instinctively appreciated. People cry out for justice when they suffer wrong. Justice is often understood as what is done in courts and judicial tribunals. The most common image of Justice is a woman with three symbols: a sword symbolizing a court's coercive power; a human scale weighing competing claims in each hand; and a blindfold indicating impartiality. Justice is often explained in terms of concepts of moral rightness based on ethics, law, religion, equity and fairness. It is also explained in terms of the process or result of using laws fairly to judge and resolve disputes. It is often explained as the opposite of injustice, which is generally understood to include social and economic inequalities, discrimination and oppression based on race and gender and politics, violence, dishonesty, corruption in governance, environmental abuses and so on. It seems clearly understood that

while justice has a side that is based on retribution and vengeance, it also has a side that is compassionate, and restorative of principles of equality and fairness, rectifying the wrongs suffered by the more vulnerable of our societies and ensuring that everyone gets their due deserts and rewards.

Similarly there is no universal definition of spirituality and again there is a sense that it is a concept which should be instinctively appreciated. For some people spirituality is about participating in organized religion: going to church, synagogue, a mosque, etc. For others, it's more personal: some people get in touch with their spiritual side through private prayer, yoga, meditation, quiet reflection, or even long walks. But it is clear that it is generally accepted that there is something greater than the concrete world that we see and inhabit. Something that is divine and Godly.

### **Links between spirituality and justice**

As I was looking for links between spirituality and justice, I came across a Sermon Preached at Foundry United Methodist Church; by Rev. Dean Snyder September 28, 2003. His text was a well-known biblical verse from the prophet Micah 6:8 - *“What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God?”* He explained that it was easy to understand what it means to do justice and to walk humbly with God. But more difficult to understand why the dictate was to love mercy, for it would have been easier to understand if it had been to be merciful. He looked at the teachings of John Wesley and concluded that the social action of human beings is centered in our own experience of God’s mercy for us. Even the most seemingly successful among us has a fault-line within ourselves that has the capacity to

destroy us. It is only God's mercy and the mercy of those who choose to love us that saves us. If we can learn to love this mercy then we can learn to love being merciful to others, not out of a sense of duty or obligation but because we love mercy.

This reinforces the concept that justice is not only about punishment or retribution, it is also about restoring people to right relations with themselves, with other people and with the environment.

### **Our Role Today**

Our world today is plagued with crime and violence and all sorts of injustices. We face devastating social diseases that require a prompt and unified response. Despite significant advances in science and technology we still struggle with issues rooted in ideas of inequality and unforgiveness. Increased poverty, crime and discrimination stem from our failure to see each other as equals, brothers and sisters in the human family and God's children.

We seem to have lost sight of our neighbours in the pursuit of individual dreams, our own advancement and profit. In a number of instances it appears that we have lost our way as one people connected by our basic desires to live happy and fulfilling lives. But there is hope, there is always hope. We can find our way, get back on track and begin to better navigate our collective future. The community is looking to the justice system to resolve these terrible problems facing us all. The socio economic scientists have long been arguing that the first step to a safer world is to help those who are most in need and there is no doubt that the world has the capacity to help. This concept has been universally accepted through the United Nations UN

millennium development goals. These goals include eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, promoting gender equality, combating diseases, achieving universal primary education and indeed addressing the problems that afflict more than half of the world's population. It is worth recalling that the teachings of John Wesley were centered on similar goals. Wesley taught that aside from piety, good works of service were needed in order for sanctification. In these he included: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, entertaining the stranger, visiting those in prison, and visiting the sick or afflicted. Wesley saw love as being the fullest outpouring of mercy as it found its worldly relevance in the command to love our neighbor. He was emphatic about the fact that no matter what we may do or hope to do; man can never make himself just. He can never pardon his own sins or advocate on his own behalf. Therefore any true justice which is to be done will be done on the part of God himself.

### **Solutions**

The typical solutions of economic logic and political concoction to the problems of crime, violence, injustice and poverty are inadequate. The world today cries out for moral and spiritual wisdom that can help us navigate the path to peace, to justice.

The current disorders of society begin with the disorders of the human heart, from which flow destructive choices that unravel relationships. At the same time, the heart is the source from which flows the greatest values and aspirations of human life. Every generation faces the challenge of identifying which principles will ultimately lead to better relationships within society and among neighbours, and reject those that will divide us as a human family. At this time, our focus should include connecting faith with the realities around us if we are to effect

change through transformation of the human heart. Unless we take strong steps to combat the present situation in favour of justice the prevailing unjust order will be strengthened and perpetuated.

As human beings we are therefore inextricably connected as a family. This interconnectedness is not simply mere co-existence. Irrespective of our station in life, our possessions, bank accounts, influence and power, we must recognize the fundamental dignity and infinite worth of each and every person. This is particularly important in an environment that places great emphasis on the autonomous, independent and self-sufficient individual. We ought to see each human life as profoundly interconnected with others, with ours, in a series of overlapping relationships.

We should all be dispensers of justice, living out what is right and pure in our daily walk. We can all be missionaries in our daily life. It is all too common for us to cast blame on government or institutions or other authorities for the injustices that we see and experience in our daily lives. Although I am not for one moment saying that all the blame is misplaced I want to suggest that we must assume individual responsibility because people can solve many of the problems we face.

People are not only the problem they are also the solution. In our daily lives we can do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God. I can give a simple, hypothetical example. Did you hear of the woman who was complaining that her salary was not paid for three months and when it was investigated it was established that her papers were languishing on the desk of the officer whose duty it was to process them? That person suffered injustice, but it would have been



unnecessary if the official was infused with the spiritual quality of loving mercy, because that attitude would have prevented the suffering caused by his delay. I could go on with examples, but each of us suffers every day because of incidents like that. The point is that many of the injustices suffered on a daily basis originate from disorders of the human heart. Simple spirituality can improve the way in which the vulnerable are treated and help to make a just society.

You may expect me to concentrate on the judiciary. But to do so would spoil my point. We cannot afford to perpetuate the idea that appointed judges in our various court houses hold a monopoly on administering justice. Each member of society has innumerable opportunities to stand up for equality, to actively create and maintain healthy relationships by being just and loving mercy. This behaviour will help to bring relationships into right order and peace and justice will result. I am pointing to everyone wherever or whoever, obviously including the judiciary, if we did justly, loved mercy and walked humbly with our God the world would be a better place.

This is universal. It spans across religion, class, ethnicity, and race. At its core spirituality speaks to how we live out what we value most. It is our real and irreducible inner, sacred experience that invites increased consciousness and responsibility for ourselves and for others, and in particular with how we respond to the most vulnerable members of the human family.

Justice cannot be done where inequality, discrimination and partiality exist. So, even in our roles in what is considered to be secular jobs, we can live out principles of our spirituality. Herein

lies a solution to the many challenges and conflicts we face today. We all have a role to play in the forward movement of our communities and our region. Sarah Ann Gill risked her life to fight for what she considered to be the just result in her situation. At great personal expense, she left us a legacy and an example of what using our faith can do to achieve justice in our society.

### **Conclusion**

Applying ideas of justice and loving mercy can help us to wade through the deep waters of poverty, crime and discrimination we have currently found ourselves in. They can achieve clarity of goal and a map for progress even in the midst of conflict and tension. This may become burdensome and onerous. There will be times when we become weak under the strain of doing what is right. However, we must never forget that the benefit to be gained from our collective effort to build better relationships with each other far outweighs the loss that will result from our inaction. It is my hope that we will search deep within ourselves and muster the courage needed to boldly act and speak out against those social plagues hovering over our society and truly, in that way our spirituality may help to realize that ideal we desperately need and desire – justice.

How do we relate all this to the Caribbean Court of Justice (“CCJ”)? Indeed the point is already made. Our destiny in the Caribbean Community is linked to the regional integration movement. If we could only see our governments as institutions and not as political parties it would advance our discussions enormously and help our people to realize that the benefits of the integration movement cut across party lines and belong to the community as a whole. In this context it was our governments who had the vision for a common market and single economic space to foster

our economic development and social stability. They saw the CCJ as an integral part of the institutional structure to achieve their goals. They implemented everything necessary to legitimise its operations, they funded it in perpetuity and they are facilitating its daily operations. It would seem appropriate that the people who stand to benefit from the full adoption and operation of the Court should make it clear that they are interested in having the benefit of the services it has to offer. This is not the only social and economic issue on the table, where the voice of the people needs to be heard. I think that the lessons from the struggles of the person who we honour tonight, Sarah Ann Gill should guide us. Let faith coincide with conscience and by steadfast conduct point the way to give justice with the love of mercy as we walk humbly with our God.



**The Right Honourable Sir Dennis Byron**