

**The Sermon
Preached
by
The Right Reverend E. Don Taylor
at
The Memorial Service**

**on the occasion to mark
The First Anniversary
of the death of**

**Professor the Honourable
Ralston Milton (Rex) Nettleford, OM, OCC, FIJ
(February 3, 1933 - February 2, 2010)**

**at
the University Chapel,
U.W.I. Mona Campus
Sunday, February 6, 2011
at three thirty in the afternoon.**

A year has gone already, since we met in this very Chapel to celebrate the life of our friend, Professor the Honourable Rex Nettleford. How well, we recall the many tributes offered by Jamaicans from every walk of life, the accolades from men and women throughout the Caribbean and the Americas, and indeed the many expressions of admiration, gratitude and respect from every corner of the world. The unending expressions of gratitude for the many gifts which this one life has offered to so many has hardly ceased, each one, in its own way, giving a glimpse of the many and varied facets of this noble life.

Lest the swiftly moving flow of life dims our memory too soon, this first Memorial Service has been arranged to keep us ever mindful of this important son of Jamaica. We have had a year to ponder the wealth of ideas which he has left us, and generations yet to come, as his noble legacy. We have come to remember! Lest we forget! The younger members of our nation, who as it were, are only just coming to encounter the stature of Professor Nettleford, frequently seek me out to ask questions about him. They have never met him personally but, eager to learn about this giant, they would ask me.

“Is it true that he was a great preacher like Dr. Martin Luther King?” In response I would say to them:

“I have heard him speak eloquently, from many religious platforms with great spiritual fervour, and not infrequently, some in the audience have shouted **AMEN**. On more than one occasion, the last being at the funeral of Ambassador Keith Johnson, at St. Andrew Parish Church, I remarked to Professor Nettleford, after both he and I had spoken, that had he entered the Priesthood, he would be wearing a Miter today. His remark to me was, “Don It would not fit me. You have the head for it, so you wear it. I prefer to sit in the pews, and at times dance in the aisle”. A school boy at Central Branch All Age School once asked me:

“Was he really an African Prince?”

My response was, “He was indeed a noble son of Africa, and he was regal in stature and a Prince among men”.

As I reflect on the questions and statements which have been directed at me with

reference to this great man, the relevance and the abiding truth of the question raised in the Letter to the Christians at Rome, come flooding into my mind.

Romans 8: 35, 37-39

[35] Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? [37] Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. [38] For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, [39] Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

For those of every generation, who leave their mark on society, **memorials** are important and necessary. Too soon we tend to forget their vision, their words, and their passion for a better day. Memorials remind us of them. The sting of death and the ravages of time frequently weaken and even destroy that sense of proximity which those of us who knew them personally, feel strongly. The Christians in Rome, surrounded by persecution and a longing for the return of Jesus Christ to vindicate their cause, felt the absence of this proximity. It was to this experience that the writer addresses himself.

The death of a loved one; one who is close to us, one with whom we have shared ideas, laughed, danced, sang, played and prayed, and even one with whom we have disagreed and quarreled at times, creates an experience of **SEPARATION**. In all these associations, bonds are constructed, relationships are strengthened, love is experienced, faith and trust are renewed. The **SEPARATION** from one who has personified these experiences, causes pain and suffering. Very often, to ease the pain of separation, we allow ourselves to forget the experiences. This reality of the effects of separation makes this event this afternoon all the more important.

The Death of Professor Rex Nettleford has galvanized the creative resources of many. This may appear for some a formidable wall that separates our past from our future, and we could easily let this happen. Our text addresses the

unbreakable relationship between the human life and the love of God, a relationship which not even death can destroy. The ache or void which we experience from our human separation through death, always finds a renewed life and sense of fulfillment in Jesus Christ. This passage speaks to the enduring quality of God's love for us and His desire that we appreciate this connection and express it in our every day relationships.

It is easy for us to be daunted by the enormous contribution made to the life of our nation by the outstanding gifts of any National Figure especially one as eminent as Professor Nettleford. For some of us who stand in the immediate shadow of his life, the future may look more empty, rather than more full of promise. Our text which reminds us of our abiding relationship with Jesus Christ, opens for us a rich promise for the future. There are great possibilities ahead which nothing can destroy, not even death. Men and women like Rex Nettleford empower our future. He epitomizes the kind of future which may be secured by every Jamaican youth. How greatly he changed our country for the better! He opened up all kinds of avenues for those who come after him. Fortified by the assurance of the love of Jesus for us, every child can grasp the possibilities and make a difference.

Today, Jamaica struggles with the task of educating her children. Rex personifies a value which we can and must grasp. He cared for every aspect of life which sought to demonstrate an appreciation for the integrity of each individual life. This effort was even more important for a small, young, and not affluent nation, like Jamaica.

Let me now touch one aspect of Professor Nettleford's life, about which he said very little. This grows out of my numerous conversations and consultations with him over a period of more than forty years. It pertains to his own personal relationship with Jesus Christ. He was not given to parading his religious faith on his shirt sleeves, and for some this indicated an absence of any Christian appreciation and commitment. We first encountered each other when as a young priest I consulted him on assisting me to bring a Jamaican flavour to my

small but rapidly growing congregation at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin on Molynes Road. I had taken one faltering step in that direction by substituting a hymn of Jamaican origin which spoke of *“Star apples purple dyed, with leaves of bronze and green, with ackees scarlet hue, gay citrus gold is seen”*, for *“He sends the snow in winter the warmth to swell the grain”*. I was immediately reported to Bishop Gibson, the Lord Bishop of Jamaica at that time, who was told that I needed psychiatric help because I presumed to rewrite the venerable *Ancient and Modern Hymn Book*. When I sang the Jamaican hymn to my former Headmaster, he smiled and challenged me to go away and find some more hymns like that. Thereafter I became a student of Rex Nettleford who then over the years took time to share with me, the impact that the church made on his life as a young Altar Boy at the St. James Parish Church in Montego Bay. We talked about the important part which his Christian upbringing and education made in the shaping of his life. He expressed to me his growing dis ease, as he grew older, with our failure as the Church to make our Liturgy more expressive of our Jamaican way of life, and the history out of which we have emerged.

Prompted by his insights he guided me in my appreciation of the Church which we both love and cherish. When I suggested on many different occasions that he become more identified with his religious roots he would respond that he wanted the freedom to retain the dignity and beauty of Anglican life and worship with his insatiable thirst for music and dance and rhythm. He coined the term

Anglican Revivalism. He said once: “The Church of England in Jamaica has not yet realized the promise of becoming the Church of Jesus Christ in Jamaica. I found this both humbling and informative. He had great faith in the potential of our generation to bring about that change and he made himself available to help us do that. I once suggested that he consider studying for Holy Orders. His response was that the Church needed an informed and troublesome Laity to prompt the Clergy who like me are so often confined by hierarchy and tradition. Only a few months before his death I challenged him to put his deep faith into practice by pursuing a life of sacramental participation in the Church. His response was, “I am considering worshipping with you at the Kingston Parish

Church, just give me some time". My own personal estimation of his faith was that it was real and it was informed. By God's grace he continues now to pursue that faith in the Nearer Presence of God.

My own personal faith in Jesus Christ, informs me that the great gifts which Professor Rex Nettleford brought to our lives as individuals, and as a community, were endowed by God, for the honour and glory of God, for the benefit of the human race, and for his own personal benefit. His separation from us by his physical death may in one sense leave us poorer, in so far as we are now deprived of his vibrant and creative presence. However, the God who endowed him with so many graces, and who in His providence has called Rex away from us now, calls us all to rejoice in our separation, because it has only opened a door to a fuller life for Rex, and it has called us to experience the breaking of a new dawn, where we may employ all that we so cherish in Rex, to provide us with an even richer, nobler and more prosperous life in God.

Nothing can separate us from the eternal love of Christ. Let us therefore not bemoan what is changing, lest we fail to embrace what is emerging, and run the risk of losing the beauty, and the reality, of new and ever emerging wonders.

To Rex we say farewell for a season, to life we extend ourselves in fuller embrace, to God be the Glory, great things He has done, and greater things He will do, and greater things He will. **Amen.**