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A Pastoral Letter for Emancipation Day

To the Clergy and Faithful of our Province and Region

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

On this first day of August, we mark Emancipation Day, the anniversary of the day in 1834 when the Slavery Abolition Act took effect across the British Empire and the chains of legal bondage began to fall from the wrists of our ancestors. Truly, it was only a beginning because freedom did not arrive whole and complete that morning. For many, an apprenticeship system prolonged their subjugation for years to come. Emancipation, we must admit, was not a gift bestowed upon our forefathers and foremothers. It was a hard-fought victory won through generations of resistance, endurance, and prayer, and it remains, in important ways, an unfinished work to this day.

The Church must not mark this day as a spectator, but with the prophetic mandate given to her by Sacred Scripture. When Moses stood before Pharaoh, God’s demand was not a petition but a command: ***“Let my people go.”*** When our Lord Jesus opened the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth, he named his own mission in the language of Jubilee - ***to proclaim release to the captives, to let the oppressed go free.*** Saint Paul told the Galatians plainly, ***“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm, then, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”*** Our faith does not merely permit us to honour Emancipation Day; it compels us to.

As we pause to celebrate this important day in our history, I ask that we bear a few things in mind.

First, let us not take for granted what our ancestors endured. Neither must we rush past the sin of the Church’s own historical complicity in the trade of human beings. Repentance that is honest must first be accurate. We give thanks for the courage of the enslaved and the freedmen and freedwomen who built family, faith, and community out of what bondage tried to destroy, and we name plainly the evil done to them.

Second, let us give thanks and rejoice. Emancipation Day is not only about bemoaning the past. It is also a day of jubilee in the biblical sense, and jubilee is meant to be kept with gladness. The same God who heard the cry of the oppressed in Egypt heard the cry of our ancestors, and freedom came. Let our worship this day carry the joy of Miriam and the women who sang and danced in the hope of Moses' birth as surely as it carries the weight of our collective memory.

Third, let us continue the work. Emancipation from chattel slavery did not complete the work of justice, and the systems of inequality that followed it - in land, in labour, in law, and in opportunity. These are still with us in new forms. To honour those who were freed is to labour, as they did, for the freedom of those still bound by poverty, by exploitation, by prejudice, by discrimination, and by the modern trafficking of human beings made in the image of God. A church that celebrates Emancipation Day and tolerates injustice within its own life and community has kept the feast without keeping the faith.

Let every parish, every congregation, every member of our Province and Region mark this day with worship that tells the truth, that gives thanks, and that sends us out renewed to do the work of justice and peace for which our Lord lived, died and was resurrected. May the God who broke the yoke in 1834 break every yoke that remains, and may we be found to be faithful labourers in this ongoing work of liberation.

Yours in the service of the One who sets the captives free,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Philip S. Wright". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "P".

The Most Reverend Philip S. Wright, B.A., M.A., OBE

Bishop of Belize

Archbishop, Primate and Metropolitan of the Church in the Province of the West Indies

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