



Carnival & the Christian

Sermon by Rev. Adolf Davis

“Carnival and the Christian”

(the abbreviated version)

What is carnival?

The word 'carnival' comes from Latin origin meaning “farewell to the flesh”, a word coined to reflect a practice where people were encouraged to entertain the desires of the flesh, abandon restraint, ignore discretion and disregard boundaries as a last “hurrah” before a season of self-denial and Christian discipline. Some saw this as a kind of purge, a time to get rid of sin by giving expression to it.

The lyrics of calypso and soca songs through the years have perhaps been the most articulate in representing this ethos. Chingee of Trinidad; “jumping so hard I don't care if a fall down in a drain, you want bacchanal, welcome to carnival”. Destra Garcia also of Trinidad in her song Lucy says “I grew up as a real good girl... as soon as I was introduced to carnival they say I loose...”

Carnival History – where did this all begin?

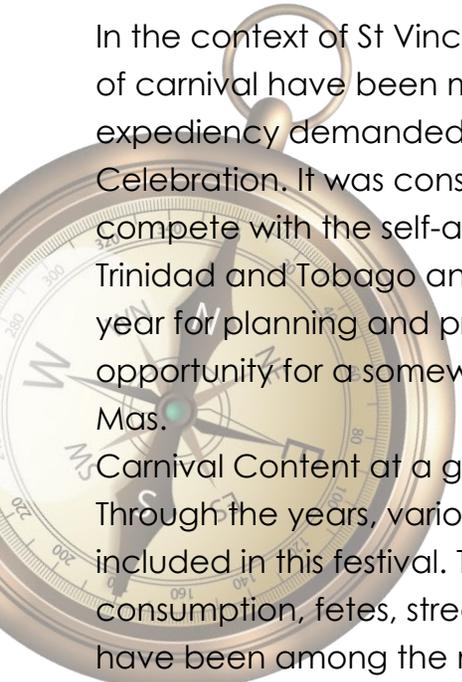
Carnival roots are deep and varied. In the European context one source speaks of carnival as predating Christianity; “The earliest record comes from ancient times, when tribes celebrated a fertility festival that welcomed the arrival of spring, a time of renewal of life. The Romans called this pagan festival Lupercalia in honour of “Lupercus,” the Roman god of fertility. Lupercalia was a drunken orgy of merrymaking held each February in Rome, after which participants fasted for 40 days.

Interestingly, similar to modern celebrations, the Romans donned masks, dressed in costumes and indulged all of their fleshly desires as they gave themselves to the gods “Bacchus” (god of wine) and “Venus” (goddess of love). The masks and costumes were used as disguises to allow sexual liberties not normally permitted as individuals engaged in “bacchanal,” the drunken and riotous occasion in honour of Bacchus. (The word “bacchanal” is still associated with Carnival celebrations to this day.)”

This source contends that as pagans converted to Catholicism, church leaders found it difficult to divorce the new converts from their pagan customs resulting in them syncretizing this festival with the Christian celebration of Lent.

Historians believe the first “modern” Caribbean Carnival to have originated in Trinidad and Tobago in the late 18th century, as a flood of French emigres (emigrants) brought the Masquerade tradition with them to the island. The festival was originally celebrated in the Caribbean among white planter class who hosted elaborate masquerade balls where masks and mimicry were an essential part of the ritual. They mimicked the coloured slaves. The slaves and free coloured soon developed their own versions of the festival holding the festivities around the burning and harvesting of the sugar cane (this was known as cannes bruleés, anglicised as Canboulay or Camboulay). They in turn mocked and mimicked the white planter class while adding several other indigenous ingredients such as

the drums, their dress, stick fighting and their “spirit” (the expressiveness and passion of an African and oppressed people). For the slaves, carnival had a subversive character (before and after emancipation). This was embodied in the opportunity for indulgence, defiance and “freedom” and meant a lot to a people whose lives were defined by bondage and restrictions.



In the context of St Vincent, the fundamental principles of carnival have been maintained however economic expediency demanded the move to a June-July Celebration. It was considered disadvantageous to compete with the self-acclaimed ‘king of carnival’, Trinidad and Tobago and provided more time in the new year for planning and preparation while also creating an opportunity for a somewhat unique festival dubbed Vincy Mas.

Carnival Content at a glance (observational)

Through the years, various components have been included in this festival. The masquerade, alcohol consumption, fetes, street procession, music and dance have been among the most enduring components of the festivities. Calypso, steel pan, soca, pageantry have all become defining features of the modern festival though calypso has been fading in popularity.

Is Carnival “We Culture”?

It is very common to hear the phrase “Carnival is our culture”. This culture-label is however problematic as it raises several issues and questions to answered. If the

definition of culture used is “a way of life”, then does Carnival reflect how we live and function on a day to day basis or to what extent is carnival a snapshot of our way of life? If culture is understood as an artistic expression of one’s indigenous identity then, considering the historical roots (Europe to Trinidad to St Vincent) to what extent is this “our culture”? If, however culture is understood as commonly accepted norms, practices and behaviours then it is difficult to deny that carnival has mass approval and support in St Vincent and the region. Yet there is much room for discussion on whether we appropriately speak of carnival as our culture. Determining what is called culture depends in part on definition and application.

Whatever definition you use and whether it is the collective ethos of a people or the artistic expressions, it is perhaps facetious to suggest that my reflection is a reflection on CULTURE as against CARNIVAL – both are not synonyms. It is perhaps more accurate to speak of or discuss carnival as a cultural festival or a festival of culture since culture is the larger concept of which carnival is believed to embody.

I am guided by the view that Christ is above culture in the sense that culture is not a moral authority in itself and must be engaged and evaluated based on Biblical teachings and principles. It is the view espoused by Paul “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God...” In this Paul outlines that the Christian’s

first obligation is not conformity, not cultural norms and practices but adherence to Biblical standards and principles. So even when something is common, popular or culture that of itself is not the basis of Christian moral decision making.

The Moral Excursus

The Christian and Carnival therefore is really a moral and spiritual discourse. The question of morality is intriguing since we do not all come to the conversation with the same guiding principles. So, while others may feel compelled to act for other reasons this essay is geared towards those whose morality is intertwined with spirituality and informed by Biblical principles. Suffice it to say, the Biblical principles I refer to are universal 'best practices' for the construction of a wholesome and healthy society. The premise I espouse is one which recognizes that Biblical values and principles are battle-tested and proven to be credible and reliable guide for the general wellbeing of individuals and peoples.

Carnival and morality

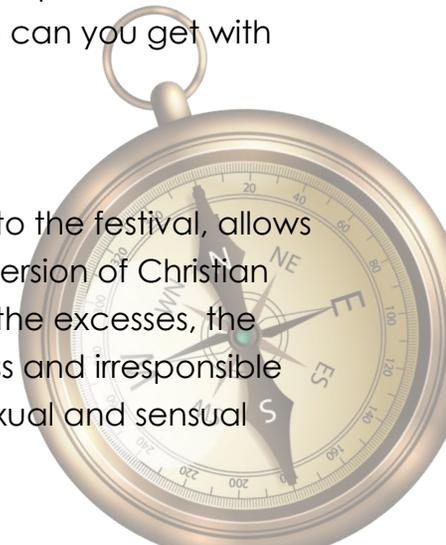
The ideological framework – the etymological approach The question of the morality (rightness and wrongness) of carnival ought to begin at the ideological/philosophical level before looking at various practices and elements of the festival. The ideological framework which guides and governs this festival is indulgence, no-boundaries, "freedom". From its inception carnival was based on a principle of sensuous and wanton abandon, indulging

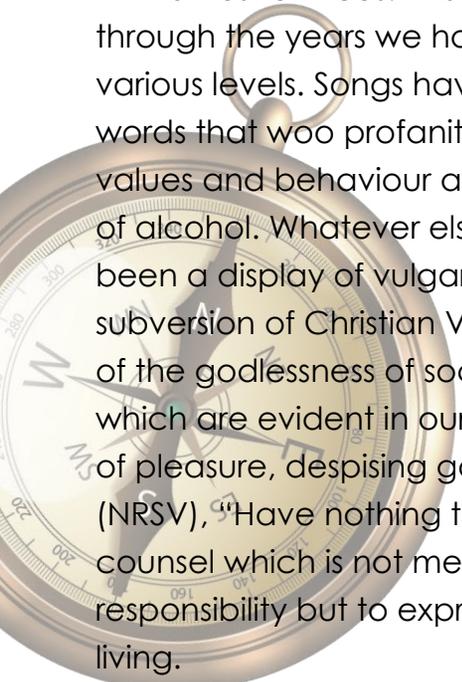
desire and something of a purge concept - get it all out of your system.

This principle continues to define the modern celebrations. The music captures this succinctly with lyrics which continue to reflect the ethos of freedom and recklessness, "behaving the worst" (Skinny Fabulous), "no behaviour at all" (Hypa 4000), "is whole year I live for the carnival... misbehaving, I ga no care at all" (Machel Montano - Like a boss). Heavy consumption of alcohol is characteristic of the festival and serves to reduce inhibitions, enable greater risk-taking and accommodate behaviours which may otherwise be viewed as inappropriate. This resonates somewhat with the use of masks as they enable a certain anonymity that facilitates the recklessness. Whatever else carnival is, the fundamental governing principle or ideological framework of permissiveness and indulgence is in radical conflict with Christian values, is Biblically and therefore morally wrong, unwholesome and dishonours God. In Gal 5.16-23 Paul outlines what are works of the flesh and advises that the fruit of the spirit includes self-control. How much more subversive can you get with "behaving the worst"!!!

An observational assessment

Taking an observational approach to the festival, allows the critical onlooker to see the subversion of Christian values and the display of vulgarity, the excesses, the lack of modesty in dress, the reckless and irresponsible behaviour, the heavy dosage of sexual and sensual





content in the songs, conversations and the dancing. These are not peripheral to the festival but have been characteristic ingredients of different levels and are an inevitable consequence of a festival of whose ideological framework is indulgence. However much one may highlight the positive and artistic components of carnival it cannot be denied nor ignored that carnival is inundated with a host of vices. This is not a recent phenomenon, through the years we have experienced these vices at various levels. Songs have long been composed coining words that woo profanity, promote unhealthy sexual values and behaviour and encourage use and abuse of alcohol. Whatever else carnival has been, it has also been a display of vulgarity and excesses and an obvious subversion of Christian Values. 2 Tim 3.1-5 Paul in speaking of the godlessness of society lists various examples which are evident in our carnival festivities (e.g. lovers of pleasure, despising good) and advises; "avoid them" (NRSV), "Have nothing to do with such people" [NIV] a counsel which is not meant to disregard our evangelistic responsibility but to express strong rebuff of that kind of living.

Consequences

In St Vincent, the evidences abound; police presence is multiplied not simply because we have crowds but because crime and violence escalates. The monumental increase in vehicular accidents is equally a reminder of God's grace since so few end up being fatal. The hospital's Accident and Emergency struggles to keep a

pace with the wounded patients that come for attention. Yet the bigger question for which it is difficult to do a scientific and objective analysis of, but is necessary to raise is, what impact does a festival which deliberately celebrates, glorifies and promotes unhealthy and unwholesome values have on the general psyche and outlook of a people? Is possible to contain the philosophical and ideological conceptions to the season? To ask the question in reverse, what benefit is there to be derived if Carnival is simply a snapshot of our wider moral decay? And if it is, does giving permission to promote and celebrate that decay help in redressing? The answer to this last question seems obvious since history has proven that the decay has only spiralled, carnival is certainly not a part of the solution.

How do we respond?

The exploration of response is guided by the view that "Whatever else carnival is, the fundamental governing principle or ideology of permissiveness and indulgence is in radical conflict with Christian values, is Biblically and therefore morally wrong, unwholesome and dishonours God."

Since the governing principle or the ideological framework of carnival is contrary to Biblical principles the question for exploration is, whether or not there is room to evaluate separate aspects of the festival and determine a response to 'each'. The artistic design of costumes, the satirical elements like calypso and ole mas, the pageants,

the steel pan; can a Christian responsibly divorce the parts from the whole in principle and in practice? If the overall governing principle is wrong can we isolate parts that are good and divorce them from that governing principle? If good is used to facilitate evil is the good still good, or at least excusable? These questions offer us the opportunity to again explore an age-old question of the relationship between means and ends. In the context of the Christian faith, can the ends be separated from the means or the means from the ends. If you are doing wrong or evil to achieve good, is God glorified? If you are doing good to promote wrong or evil, is God glorified? It seems to me that the first hurdle to negotiate is, with an ideological framework of indulgence can we participate in parts of the festival which may not normally reflect that indulgence? I do not believe that the separation can be made.

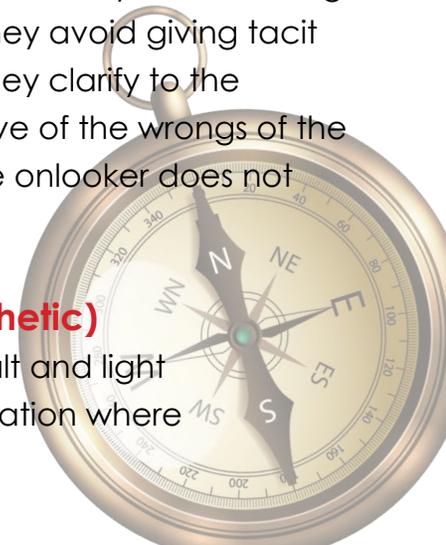
Separating the parts from the whole in practical terms asks (1) can we participate in the soca festivals but ignore the songs which promote negativity? Or, (2) can we attend selected shows because they are 'majority clean'? This kind of approach has various components to it including the issue of our Christian witness. It also seeks to ascertain the extent to which the Christian ought to participate in something that is mostly good but has obvious wrongs or mostly wrong with significant good. An extension of this prompts the question, is there ever a time when wrong is accommodated or overlooked because of the abundance of right? The Christian does not have

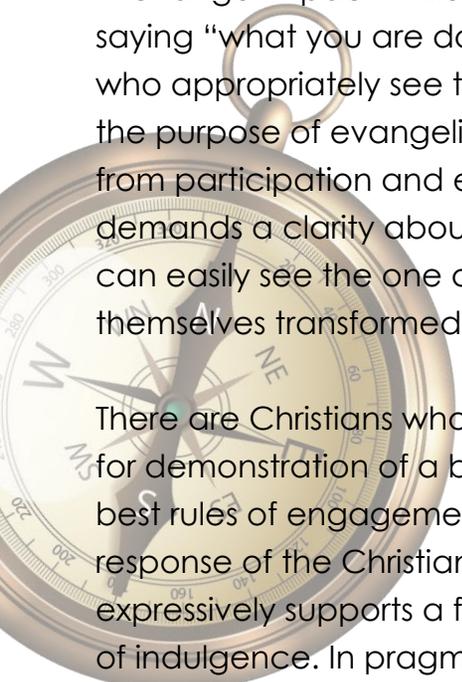
an option to accommodate or overlook wrong. Jesus' interaction with the woman caught in adultery in John 8.1-11 addressed the hypocrisy of Pharisees but certainly did not reflect an overlooking or accommodating of sin. In fact, his admonition was "go and SIN no more." Invariably the Christian who chooses to embrace the positive and celebratory elements of the festival by participation almost never makes it an order of business nor has occasion, save in private conversations, to declare the "go and sin no more." The conversations I have had with many who are sympathetic towards participating in the activities is a "wrong, but" approach. An approach which acknowledges the wrongs but either seeks to downplay them or overlook them because of the good. I find no justification in scripture for this approach. Our call to holiness reminds us that Jesus was uncompromising to a man who lacked ONE THING [Mark 10.21] despite the many noble qualities he possessed.

The matter of our Christian witness cannot be slighted. When a Christian gets involved in an activity where wrong is integral to that activity, how do they avoid giving tacit approval to the whole? How can they clarify to the distant onlooker that they disapprove of the wrongs of the festival? Experience informs that the onlooker does not distinguish a part from the whole.

Transformative response (prophetic)

This response appreciates that as salt and light the Christian imperative is transformation where





there is inherent wrong. If the Christian's intention is transformation, then it cannot simply be participation or presence for selective entertainment. It seems to me therefore that this transformative approach demands a response that does not seek accommodation and compromise but a turning over of tables. Such a response may be an administrative engagement that is deliberate in change-impact while it may also be a collective voice saying "what you are doing is not right". There are others who appropriately see the Christian as being present for the purpose of evangelism. Again, this is entirely distinct from participation and entertainment. Transformation demands a clarity about the morality since ambiguity can easily see the one attempting to transform being themselves transformed.

There are Christians who believe that participation for demonstration of a better approach is one of our best rules of engagement. I am of the view that the response of the Christian cannot be one which tacitly or expressively supports a festival governed by the principle of indulgence. In pragmatic terms, hardly anyone looks at the Christian band saying, "that's how it should be done", in fact, they more readily use the presence of the Christian band as evidence for approval of the festival as a whole. To the average onlooker doing it different simply translates to doing it.

The Christian must begin a conversation and use its influence to rebrand and redesign this festival. This

approach demands two levels of engagement (1) administrative and (2) collective influence. It is to demand that we have a cultural festival which seeks to truly celebrate our artistic and historic identity without the compromised vulgarity or immorality. There are several versions of cultural activities throughout the region that seek to prevent the philosophical or organizational corruption. For us in St Vincent, nine mornings has been a festival which has maintained a cultural uniqueness while avoiding (so far) the fete and rum and "wildness" that some admittedly long for. The concept of the Nevis Culturama and the Tobago Heritage Festival are all differently themed and branded events which create an occasion for cultural expression and are significantly "family-friendly". In fact, Tobago Festivals Commission speaks of the Heritage Festival as "by far the main event on the Tobago cultural calendar and it is considered and accepted that the Heritage Festival is to Tobago, what Carnival is to Trinidad." It seems to me, while a "lego beast" festival has its appeal to some, a truly cultural festival which promotes wholesome behaviour and values, accommodates the family and the significantly large Christian community, will be a much more inclusive and national festival. I must also admit that while this is true, vulgarity has over the years attracted greater participation and support than sobriety.

Conclusion

I love the calypso art-form and its social commentaries. I love steel pan music. I love the lively, catchy rhythms of



soca however, as long as these are ingredients of carnival I have a Christian and moral duty to distance myself from the carnival version as I advocate for righteousness in our nation. It is difficult for me to see how a Christian can justify “farewell to the flesh” or diminish their responsibility to be light and salt for personal interest and appetites. We cannot promote a festival which promotes ungodly values and encourages ungodly behaviour. That we have always done it cannot be our reason to continue. That it was started by the Church is no grounds for continuation. That it is hard and seemingly impossible to bring change is not a reason to stop trying. We cannot separate parts from the whole for our own convenience sake. We cannot be accommodators and justifiers of wrong because of that which we like. As Christians and anyone whose moral compass is still functional we have a responsibility to demand what is good and best for our society, work aggressively towards it, seeking primarily to be faithful to what honours God and persistent in our defiance – We must obey God rather than man (Acts 5.29).



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