Carnival and the Christian

(Highlights)

What is carnival?

- The word 'carnival' comes from Latin origin meaning "farewell to the flesh". It referred to a time of indulgence, abandoning restraint, ignoring discretion and disregarding boundaries before a season of self-denial and Christian discipline - Lent.
- This message is captured in the lyrics of calypso and soca songs through the years; Chingee of Trinidad; "jumping so hard I don't care if a fall down in a drain, you want bacchanal, welcome to carnival".

Carnival History – where did this all begin?

Carnival roots are deep and varied. "The earliest record comes from ancient times, with a Roman pagan festival called Lupercalia in honour of "Lupercus," the Roman god of fertility. Lupercalia was a drunken orgy of merrymaking held each February, after which participants fasted for 40 days. They donned masks, dressed in costumes and indulged all 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.

As pagans converted to Catholicism, it was difficult to divorce the new converts from their pagan customs resulting in the syncretizing of this festival with the Christian celebration of lent.

The first "modern" Caribbean Carnival originated in Trinidad and Tobago in the late 18th century as French emigrants brought the Masquerade tradition with them.

- The white planter class hosted masquerade balls where masks and mimicry were part of the ritual where they mimicked the slaves.
- The slaves and free coloured developed their own versions of the festival holding the festivities around the burning and harvesting of the sugar cane. They in turn mocked and mimicked the whites and added other indigenous ingredients such as the drums, their dress and their "spirit" (the expressiveness and passion of an African and oppressed people).
- For the slaves, carnival had a subversive element, 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 St Vincent, economic expediency was one of the reasons for a move to a June-July Celebration. It was considered a disadvantage competing with the self-acclaimed 'king of carnival', Trinidad and Tobago. This move created an opportunity for an indigenous identity, 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.

Is Carnival "We Culture"?

- 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, 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.
- What is called culture depends on definition and application.

My reflection is not a reflection on CULTURE as a whole but 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.

Culture is not a moral authority in itself and must be engaged and evaluated based on Biblical teachings and principles - "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…"

The Moral Excursus

The Christian and Carnival therefore is really a moral and spiritual discourse. While others may feel compelled to act for other reasons this essay espouses a morality that is intertwined with spirituality and informed by Biblical principles. The Biblical principles I refer to are universal 'best practices' for the construction of a wholesome and healthy society.

Carnival and morality

<u>The ideological framework – the etymological approach</u>

The question of the morality (rightness and wrongness) of carnival ought to begin at the ideological and philosophical level before looking at various practices and elements of the festival. The ideological framework which has guided and continues to guide and govern this festival is indulgence, sensuous and wanton, no-boundaries, "freedom".

- This principle is captured in the songs, "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).
- Heavy consumption of alcohol is characteristic of the festival and serves to reduce inhibitions, enable greater risk-taking and enable behaviours which may otherwise be viewed as inappropriate. Similarly, the use of masks (and costumes) 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 advises that the fruit of the spirit includes self-control.

An observational assessment

The critical onlooker to cannot miss 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 a festival of whose ideological framework is indulgence.

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.** CF 2 Tim 3.1-5

Consequences

Increase in crime, violence and vehicular accidents etc. Yet the bigger question for which it is difficult to do a scientific and objective analysis of 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? If Carnival is simply a snapshot of our wider moral decay does giving permission to promote and celebrate that decay help in redressing?

How do we respond?

Is there room to evaluate separate aspects of the festival and determine a response to 'each'. 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?
- Can ends be separated from 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?

Separating the parts from the whole raises the question as to 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.

- 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.
- 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.

On the matter of our **Christian witness**. 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)

If the Christian's intention is transformation, then it cannot simply be participation or presence for selective entertainment.

- Transformation requires clarity about the morality since ambiguity can lead to the one seeking to transform being transformed instead.
- Some see the Christian as being present for evangelism. This is entirely distinct from participation and entertainment.
- Some Christians believe in participation for demonstration of a better approach. The Christian approach cannot be one which tacitly or expressively supports a festival governed by the principle of indulgence. Hardly anyone looks at the Christian band saying, *"that's how it should be done"*. To the average onlooker doing it differently simply translates to doing it.

The Christian must should agitate for rebranding and redesigning this festival.

- Demanding 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. 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 Tobago Heritage Festival is a differently themed and branded event which creates occasion for cultural expression. The Heritage Festival is to Tobago, what Carnival is to Trinidad."

Conclusion

I love the calypso art-form and several aspects of our culture 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. We cannot support a festival which promotes ungodly values and encourages ungodly behaviour. 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 defiance – We must obey God rather than man (Acts 5.29).