



Remarks

by

H.E. Ambassador John W. Ashe

President of the 68th Session of the United Nations

General Assembly

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The Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine

Please check against delivery

Reverend Kowalski,
Members of the Clergy,
Congregants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good Morning one and all,

I have always been in awe of churches ever since I was a child. On reflection, I probably spent more Sunday mornings in churches as a young boy than I could ever possibly recall. And the images from those days come vividly to life whenever I enter the sanctuary of a church – any church – even to this day. I remember the wooden benches; the whirling fans overhead; the tropical heat outside; the ever present insects buzzing nearby; the endlessly long, sleep-inducing sermon...

Ah yes, just another Sunday morning in the Caribbean.

Today, though, is different. Today, I do realize (if I may be permitted to corrupt that wondrous line for the movie, “The Wizard of Oz”), “I am not in the Caribbean anymore.” I am therefore deeply honored to speak in this majestic house of worship about the role of the United Nations – and its Assembly of Nations. As an engineer by training, and as someone who grew up going to church with my family in a small twin-island Caribbean nation of Antigua and Barbuda, I am truly awed by the complexity and beauty of the Gothic architecture in this church. Let me begin by sharing with you the parallels between our Assembly of the United Nations and this assembly of St. John the Divine, which I was curious to learn about.

Construction began on this house of worship in 1892, against the backdrop of a period of mass immigration to the United States. Passing through Ellis Island, newly arrived citizens hailed from a range of countries, bringing with them a variety of languages, customs and cultures to their new homeland. Wanting to reflect the melting pot of this city, this Cathedral was built as [quote] "a house of prayer for all nations."

Further, a quick glance at your literature explains that worship in this Cathedral explores [quote] “the wonder and mystery of existence in which all things and all beings are seen to be connected.” [end quote] St. John the Divine first opened its doors in 1941, a week before the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

Four years later, on the 24 October 1945, the UN was officially created as its Charter is ratified by the 5 permanent members of the Security Council and the majority of other signatories and comes into force. A few months after that, on the 10 January 1946, the first General Assembly with 51 nations represented opens in Central Hall, Westminster, London and a mere two years after that the General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which today is still central to the on-going work of our shared United Nations.

Now some of you may be well-versed with the preamble of the UN but for those who are not, let me share a key part of it with you because it still resonates and is worth repeating in the world of today:

“WE THE PEOPLES OF THE UNITED NATIONS DETERMINED

- to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and
- to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and
- to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and
- to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,”

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Sixty-eight (68) years ago, the UN was founded in the wake of terrible tragedy. Its Charter echoed a global longing for peace and cooperation. Our shared assembly nations was founded in the aftermath of a great tragedy, a grueling World War that shattered lives, families and communities around the world; a war that resulted in gruesome acts committed by humans against humans, a war so profound that it raised fundamental questions about the very nature of what it meant to be human. But emerging from this darkness, the hope for something better was realized in the form of the United Nations.

Today, I stand here before you as President of this Assembly of Nations, which now numbers 193 member States; and I am here to tell you that ideas that are central to its founding – ensuring peace and security and improving human well being – are still central to our shared human global journey and what each of us must work together to support.

These universal longings for more lasting peace and a better tomorrow for all human beings have always been, and surely always will endure, as they are the most basic yearnings embedded in the hearts of our human family. These universal truths do not know boundaries, race, religion, creed or culture- they are as relevant to us as we sit in this divine Cathedral as they are to those who worship in other temples, shrines or gatherings of the sacred.

It is times like this that we need the UN the most. Times like these, when the world's headlines are filled with reports of: wars imminent or impending, civil and sectarian blood-shed and strife between, as well as within states, scourge of chemical warfare which has again resulted in death, trauma and anguish, grinding poverty, and malnutrition, gender violence, adverse effects of climate change and loss of valuable biodiversity, and the struggles of men and women and the young to live with human dignity and peace.

At the United Nations, we often refer to the interconnectedness of the human family in terms of crises or challenges; the changing climate, food and fuel prices, financial

markets; migration and population shifts all have far-reaching impacts that neither understand nor respect the concepts of nation and sovereignty. Obviously, this type of interconnection greatly impacts how we approach our work in poverty eradication, sustainable development, education, health, water and energy access, human rights, peace and security. But at the same time, the interconnection runs deeper, rooted in our most basic human needs, hopes and aspirations; in the same desires for respect, love, peace and well-being.

It is in our interconnectedness which is referenced both in St. John the Divine and in our UN where the parallel lies.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today, the United Nations still stands by and seeks to realize these human truths through our various bodies, programmes and initiatives. Granted, the nations of the world are not always able to agree on the same path or realize our objectives as quickly or as fully as we'd like, but we would be wrong to cast off, and or underestimate the value and impact the United Nations can have in what seems like an increasingly troubled world of today.

The work of the United Nations is spread across the world – going to places where few others want to go and working on issues that few others want to work on because of a fundamental belief in interconnectedness of humanity. The UN family of organizations and agencies works on a broad range of issues, from sustainable development, environment and refugees protection, disaster relief, counter terrorism, disarmament and non-proliferation, to promoting democracy, human rights, gender equality and the advancement of women, governance, economic and social development, international health, clearing landmines, expanding food production, and more, in order to achieve its goals and coordinate efforts for a safer world for this and future generations.

As I delivered my opening statement as the President of the 68th session of the UN General Assembly, I was struck once again by the rich diversity of views, religions and

ideas that are represented in this main deliberative, policymaking and representative organ of the United Nations. Comprising all 193 Members of the United Nations, the General Assembly - or GA as it is commonly referred to - provides a truly unique –some would say lively and spirited forum for multilateral diplomacy and discussion of the entire spectrum of international issues covered by the UN Charter.

During this past week, numerous world leaders and dignitaries spoke and spent significant amounts of time discussing some of the issues that are most fundamental to humanity. Heads of State and Governments and Ministers of Foreign Affairs attended meetings focused on poverty eradication, sustainable development, nuclear disarmament, social inclusion and providing equal rights to all persons and next week we will consider the important issue of human migration.

Some of these meetings emphasized that the well-being of the world's people and the health of the planet are inextricably linked. Prior to becoming President of the GA, the focus of my attention had been on a range of sustainable development issues and I, for one, am deeply aware of the symbiotic relationship between people and planet and how important it is to ensure that we balance the needs of current generations with those who come after us.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the dawn of our Millennium, the leaders of the world came together here in this city and adopted eight goals to guide the world to a better tomorrow, in areas such as reducing poverty and hunger, child mortality and disease burden; increasing primary education enrolment; improving gender equality and maternal health; and ensuring environmental sustainability. These goals, known as the Millennium Development Goals or MDGs, created a sense of momentum and optimism, uniting governments, private sector and civil society from all parts of the world around a global anti-poverty movement with one focused set of targets.

Throughout the past thirteen years, we have seen significant and admirable progress in meeting the targets such as halving extreme poverty, putting more children in primary school and reducing deaths from HIV/AIDS and other diseases. However, progress around the world has been uneven both within and among nations. More than one billion people still suffer from extreme poverty. Many go to bed hungry and in the dark, and many living in conflict ridden areas are also fearful of the fresh horrors that the next morning will bring.

The deadline for the MDGs is upon us in 2015, and the international community is now beginning to shape a new agenda – for the post-2015 era- one that applies to all countries of the world, and one which addresses pressing global problems such as climate change and biodiversity loss, conflicts, population demographics, inequality and job insecurity. Arguably, this may be the boldest and most ambitious and most collaborative project that the United Nations has ever had to undertake, and our Assembly of Nations, will need to be equally audacious, ambitious and collaborative if we are to rise up to the task we have chosen for ourselves.

My goal as President of the General Assembly is get UN Member States to begin the process of narrowing in on their priorities for this agenda, and to envision what the new goals might look like. We are still in the early stages of this process and there is much negotiation ahead of us, but if we are truly successful in this task, if 193 countries of the world agree on an ambitious, universal development agenda, which protects the planet and puts the world on a path to ending poverty, then I would say, we can feel very proud of the UN's role in the world.

Thank you.