

“Citizens and Saints”

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Text: Romans 13:1-10

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Did you ever wonder why our nation was called “the Dominion of Canada”? The origins of this idea stretch back to the days of Confederation. Those who were framing this new nation out of a British colony picked up on a line from Psalm 72: “May God have dominion from sea to sea” (vs 8). Psalm 72 is a prayer offered at the coronation of a new king for Judah. It asks for God’s perfect will to be expressed through this new king, that through the king the people will know justice, prosperity, the care of the needy, long life and safety from their enemies. A wonderful prayer, isn’t it, to offer up for the leaders of a whole new nation as it came into being. The Fathers of Confederation, when they began to craft the shape of this country, were a people dominated by the Christian faith. They understood that God was sovereign not just of the “Kingdom of God” but of this fledgling country as well.

They believed this because the Bible has much to say about rulers, government and nationhood. This is in part because the Bible spans more than 2,000 years of history. It recalls for us the movement of the Jews from a tribal organization to having kings and even full-blown state bureaucracy. The Bible recalls the domination of the Jews by other nations. In the time of Jesus Judea was under Roman rule. And within the twelve disciples we see the real range of attitude towards that power. The apostle Matthew held a franchise for collecting taxes for the Romans. He was complicit with and profited because of the Romans. But also among the twelve was Simon the Zealot – one of the revolutionaries committed to throwing the Romans out of Judea. Even within His closest circle of friends Jesus would have faced a real range of opinion on where God fit in with rulers and nations. The challenge to sort out where God fit in with the state became even more pertinent in the days of the early church, especially when governments started to persecute Christians for their public professions of faith. And today, given the sweeping changes we’ve seen in this land over the past 60 years, we are pushed to wonder how does faith fit with being Canadian. We are saints (the people of God) but also citizens (Canadians). How do these relate?

The first thing Scripture calls us to remember is that our citizenship in the Kingdom of God comes first. Universally in Scripture we find the message that God is sovereign: sovereign over all peoples, governments and nations. In 1st Timothy, for example, we read that Christ is now “Lord of Lords and King of Kings” (6.15). He is supreme, so that is where our first loyalty goes.

But there is also recognition that the state has its role – a God given role. We read this morning from Romans that governing authorities are “God’s servants for your good” (vs. 4). Paul asserts that “there is no authority except from God” so we should be “subject to the governing authorities” (vs. 1). According to our denomination’s “Declaration of Faith Concerning Church and Nation” the role of civil authority is to order the life of a nation for the wellbeing of all, and we are responsible to fit in and uphold that order, for by doing we honour God. Now, as Presbyterians, we are if nothing else a civil and orderly lot. I’m sure none of you, like me, have been stopped three times on the same day for speeding. Presbyterians, as a general rule, conform to the ways of the country. But even for us, this is still a good reminder that we are called to be good and responsible citizens, for in this we are demonstrating our loyalty not just to our land but even more so to the God who is the Lord of all lands. We expect Jesus to say, “Give to God what God deserves”. But He did also say, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s” (Matthew 22.21).

The people who created Canada understood and believed these things: the civil authority was under God’s authority. In the formation of this country there was the presumption of the Christian faith: that it was the support undergirding all that we are. But, times have changed. When I was in Grade 9 we stopped saying the Lord’s Prayer at the opening of the school day. When the inter-faith memorial service was held for those who died in the SwissAir plane crash off Peggy’s Cove in 1998, the only restriction put on any of the worship leaders was the one put on the Christian minister: don’t mention the name of Jesus in your prayers. Now, in recent days, the government of Quebec has banned some civil servants from the public wearing of religious symbols. Even though the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms begins with the line, “Whereas Canada is founded upon principles that recognize the supremacy of God...”, functionally today sovereignty rests exclusively with the democratic voice of the people of Canada. But while Canada distances itself more and more from the principles “that recognize the supremacy of God” that does not mean that we, as saints and citizens, should do the same. In fact, our denomination’s Declaration of Faith Concerning Church and Nation encourages us to think that we, the Church, are actually partners with the civil authority as we share with the state the concern for the care of citizens in the special work of Christian love. Go back to the passage we read from Romans, where it says that the state “is God’s servant for the common good” (vs 4) which (really) is a big part of the Church’s role in society as well.

The recent death of Jean Vanier reminds us of one example of this. After service in the Royal Canadian Navy Vanier obtained a PhD in philosophy and went on to be a philosophy prof at the University of Toronto. We should mark that his doctoral thesis was a study of ethics, which is the study of the moral principles that govern the conduct of our lives. In his thesis Vanier explored how the consequence of ethical behavior should be happiness. Keep that in mind. In 1964 he was invited to visit some government institutions in France where men with intellectual disabilities were housed. Vanier was disturbed by the loneliness of these people and how they had been rejected by society. In his PhD thesis this academic explored how the conduct of our lives should produce happiness. So he left the university

and with the support of benefactors and professionals, Jean renovated a small home and invited a few of those institutionalized men to join him in living there. He called the home “L’Arche”, meaning “the ark.” Today there are 149 L’Arche communities in 37 countries around the world. L’Arche Canada—a Christian organization—sees itself very definitely as a partner with the government. In its mandate L’Arche Canada states “ Build dynamic partnerships with all levels of government and with other organizations to promote the contributions of people with intellectual disabilities and to foster an understanding of their needs.” This is an excellent example of how we Presbyterians see the relationship between Church and State: that we are partners with the civil authority sharing concern for the care of citizens in the special work of Christian love. And we can see examples of this all over Calgary in Christian organizations like Inn From the Cold, The Mustard Seed, CUPS, The Dream Centre, The InterFaith Food Bank, Calgary Catholic Immigration Society, The Salvation Army, and so on.

So our calling as saints means we are to be responsible citizens, doing our part in the love of neighbour. Such things are built into the DNA of this congregation and is part of our impulse to move more in the direction of being a missional church. A perfect example happened here a couple of weeks ago. We invited people we called “community leaders” to join us in a conversation about meeting needs in the Varsity neighbourhood. We invited school principals, social workers, neighbourhood churches, businesses, the Police, community development workers, the Varsity Community Association...and brought them all together to consider an idea: can we meet more needs in more people by working more collaboratively...by working more together. At the end of the evening’s discussion all but one participant wanted to be part of an on-going discussion on this idea.

This won’t be easy. At times participants in that discussion noted the general social decline in things such as civic responsibility, volunteerism, generosity of spirit, mutual respect, concern for neighbour, community mindedness, even politeness and common courtesy. The Duke University ethics professor Stanley Hauerwas has observed that “we are beginning to realize that many of our social problems cannot be improved without an improvement in individual character”. But even in this we have a role as saints and citizens. As Christians, the indwelling in us by the Holy Spirit promotes a character that expresses “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self control” (Galatians 5:22-23). As we allow the Spirit to find a greater home in our lives, our character as Christians will exemplify, more and more, the character of a good citizen. And as we do that, pointing to God as our source, we show to others the way to be better citizens.

So as we mark Canada’s birthday this weekend, let us celebrate our citizenship...a citizenship that is shaped by our faith. We are the benefactors of an immense gift in that we are citizens of Canada. May we never take that citizenship—either in this country or the Kingdom of God—for granted.