

Sunday July 1st, 2018
Canada Day

PRAYER: O God of all nations, we approach you out of gratitude and concern for our nation. As we reflect on its achievements, we are grateful that its heritage has become ours. We are grateful, too, for all who have laboured to shape it to your will.

Yet our gratitude for this heritage is matched by our concern for its perils. Pilot us, O God, through the treacherous waters that we might do as well by our descendants as our ancestors did by us.

We love to sing “God Keep Our Land”, in our national anthem, Lord help this call to you come true and make us willing participants in making this land a part of your will, as your will reigns in heaven. Amen.

STEWARDSHIP: May we as Canadians, respond to the same call given to the Israelites long ago in 1 Chronicles 16:28, 29. “O people of all nations of the earth, ascribe great strength and glory to his name! Bring an offering and come before him.”

PASTORAL PRAYER:

O Lord of all lands and nations, we thank you for this beloved nation called Canada. When we think of our “home and native land” we are awestruck by its size and incredible beauty. Especially, on this special day we are thankful for those men and women who sacrificed much to build this nation, protect this nation and to help make this land prosper. We are well aware and eternally grateful that this country is so blessed. How we wish all people on this earth could enjoy the kind of life we have.

We wonder why you allow this fair land to grow and prosper while other more ancient lands seem to languish and falter. Then we remember that Jesus told us that, “To whomever much is given, much is expected.” Our richness, our freedom are gifts to be used to further the best interest of others. The poverty, oppression, violence that is perpetrated in other lands is our business, because it is your business. So, we thank you for this great blessing of Canada and we also pray that you would strengthen and guide us to fulfill the responsibilities such a blessing entail.

It is with some shame that we admit to you, O God that we constantly ask for your wisdom and counsel only to ignore it. We have squandered our resources and our opportunities for reducing the poverty, the violence, the drug addiction, in our own city. Far too often we have contented ourselves to the wringing of our hands and sitting back waiting for others to change things you have called us to address. How we have failed you by being preoccupied by our own rights, while ignoring basic human rights for others.

Awaken us and our nation, to our narrowness of vision and the hardness of our hearts. Arouse us to our oneness with all humanity; when we appeal to those in authorities over us, let us not forget those in misery who need us. As we celebrate those things that make this nation great and the envy of so much of the world, help us to make those ideals we value a reality for all people in our neighbourhoods. Mark us as your people, around the family table, the boardrooms, the marketplaces, and especially on the streets. May we leave every encounter with someone else a time marked by hope, love and reconciliation.

O Gracious God, of the whole earth, teach us to respect the people of other nations-who love their land as much as we love ours; for supporting their governments as much as we support ours; and for regarding their leaders as we regard ours. Give us the decency never to rejoice over the failure or fall of any nation-until at the same time we can pray for its transformation to a land of peace and justice.

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O Lord, we are an imperfect people in an imperfect land, in an imperfect world. Give us the vision to make the changes we must make, the strength to resist the changes that shouldn't be made, and the discernment to see those things that will harm us. Help us to join your allies in reconciling this world and again O lord we pray "Please keep our land, glorious and free" and more importantly make our land your land.

BENEDICTION: In this place your healing has begun. Now begins the healing of our nation and the world. God now in peace. Amen.

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Jeremiah 22:13-19
“Rendering to the Crown”

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Finance Minister Bill Morneau, and Treasury Minister Scott Brison were flying on the Executive Airbus to a caucus gathering in British Columbia when Justin Trudeau turns to Bill Morneau and says, chuckling, “You know, I could throw a \$1000 bill out the window right now and make someone very happy.” Morneau shrugs and replies, “Well, I could throw ten \$100 bills out the window and make ten people happy.”

Not to be outdone, Brison says, “Well I could throw a hundred \$10 bills out the window and make a hundred people happy.” The pilot rolls his eyes and says to his co-pilot, “Such arrogant politicians back there. I mean, I could throw all three of them out the window and make millions of people happy.” For the record I am not advocating tossing politicians out of airplanes, no matter how much we may want to.

However, I do feel somewhat like a broken record of late, lamenting our current state of political affairs. Although, to be honest I am not so concerned about our own political leadership, as I am about the leadership or lack thereof of our neighbours to the south. Being that this is our national holiday called Canada Day, I find myself, once again contemplating leadership, and what qualifies someone to be a good political leader or any kind of leader for that matter.

I am a firm believer that if we desire a government of good character, then we must elect people of good character to govern. Jesus said as much when he offered, “Whoever is faithful in a little is faithful in much.” I am sorry if you disagree, but I do think what you do in your private life does have a bearing on your public life, especially when it relates to leadership. I have just begun to read a book by Eric Geiger called “How to Ruin Your Life”.

Geiger makes a very important distinction that relates to character. He talks about the difference between an explosion and an implosion. An explosion is very dramatic, with debris blasting outward. Implosion, defines a demolition, where the building collapses in on itself. Demolition experts spend days, months even planning how to plant demo charges, at just the right places to bring a building down in a confined area.

By the time the demolition takes place, considerable effort has been undertaken to prepare for the wrecking. The same is true for people whose abhorrent behavior becomes public knowledge. We only see the wreckage now but long before, the rot and destruction were under way, eating at a person’s character, until the whole thing collapses. In other words, the scandals we hear about did not happen overnight.

And we may wonder, at least I do, if faith should matter in our political leaders. Abigail Adam’s wife of the second president of the United States, wrote her husband in which she made the following observation, “*A true patriot must be a religious man. I have been led to think...that he who neglects his duty to his Maker may well be expected to be deficient and insincere in his duty to the public.*”

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Even suppose him to possess a large share of what is called honor and public spirit, yet do not these men, by their bad example, by loose, immoral conduct, corrupt the minds of youth and vitiate the morals of the age and thus injure the public more than they can compensate by... generosity and honor?"

Unfortunately, as President Rutherford B. Hayes said, "Nothing brings out the lower traits of human nature like seeking office." Is it any wonder that we struggle, to know who to vote for, in an era when a person's character does not seem to carry as much weight as a person's charisma. Which brings us to our Old Testament lesson for today. I actually preached on our Gospel lesson about 6 months ago, so I chose Jeremiah today.

Judah and Israel, the divided kingdoms, and also when they were one kingdom, had a perpetual problem. There never seemed to be consistency in their leadership, from their kings. One king would be very good, and the next king was a moral disaster, and sometimes the kings were a mixture of good and bad. God knew that human rulers were not 100% trustworthy in their righteous behavior. It was one of the reasons he didn't want to have a king in Israel.

Read back in 1 Samuel 8 and you discover that the Israelites grumbled and demanded a king like other nations around them. Samuel warned them that having an earthly king would ultimately lead Israel to stop following God's standards. In Verse 18 God says, "When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, and the Lord will not answer you in that day." Before Saul became king, Israel chose daily to listen to God through his prophet Samuel, now they would defer to a fallible human being.

God's chief concern in all this seems to be that unless the leader of a people has a heart for God, the people will not have a heart for God. To have a heart for God means an unwavering commitment to do what is right, despite public opinion. The bible has stories that illustrate the high cost of maintaining integrity. Twice David had an opportunity to capture and kill King Saul, after all the terrible things Saul did to David, but David refused to raise a hand to Saul.

Why? Because David knew that Saul was God's anointed and only God would decide when his reign was over. Remember Daniel. He was told to eat what the King of Babylon offered, but David refused to defile himself. When godly principles cease to matter, then: ethics, honesty and integrity disappear. Which brings us to King Josiah's two sons mentioned in Jeremiah 22. You might remember that Josiah was one of those great kings that popped up from time to time.

Josiah was a righteous man, who undertook a major revival of religious reform, including the compilation of scriptural texts. He was succeeded by his son Shallum, who died without a male heir, making way for Josiah's other son Jehoiakim to ascend to the throne. Neither Shallum or Jehoiakim were the man their father was. Instead of seeking to serve the people of Judah, they instead exploited them.

Jeremiah writes "Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbours work for nothing and does not give them their wages; who says, 'I will build myself a spacious house with large upper rooms,' and who cuts out windows for it, paneling it with cedar, and painting it with vermillion.

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Are you a king because you compete in cedar?" God's message through Jeremiah is a condemnation of Shallum's exploitation of his own people, treating them like slaves. Remember; these are the same people who were delivered from bondage in Egypt.

Then God compares Shallum to his father, depicting Shallum as the opposite of Josiah. As Josiah sought to dispense justice and care for the poor in his kingdom, Shallum only considered his own wants. By being so callous with his own people, Shallum shows that he knows not God's heart, instead choosing oppression and violence against innocent people. God's concern, voiced through Samuel, when Saul was anointed King, came true time and time again.

The reality truly is "that power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." A quote by the way by **John Emerich Edward Dalberg Acton**, first Baron Acton (1834-1902). The historian and moralist, who was otherwise known simply as Lord Acton, expressed this opinion in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton in 1887. Godly leadership must always be for the benefit of those being led, not for the enrichment of the leader.

John Maxwell, who has written extensively on Christian leadership, explains well the difference between godly and ungodly leadership. Godly leadership pursues love and service to others rather than power and prestige; seeks to improve the welfare of the people rather than their own welfare; sees others as brothers and sisters rather than enemies and competitors; determines to meet needs and grow the cause rather than remove and kill the opposition. (The Maxwell Leadership Bible, p. 539)

Godly leaders also see power as an opportunity to be faithful. President Woodrow Wilson said, "If you will think about what you ought to do for other people, your character will take care of itself." The story goes that Mother Theresa was on a street corner in Calcutta, and there were bodies lying in the street. She began to care for one of the persons lying in the street when a visitor asked, "Aren't you upset that you can't get to all the bodies?" She responded "No. God created us not to be successful, but to be faithful."

Shallum wanted to be seen as successful, thus he longed for a display of opulence and power with his cedar lined palace rooms. But he displayed no faith at all. All leaders, regardless of their political stripes, or area of responsibility, have a choice. And frankly, there is ample evidence that many have chosen poorly. Joshua, nearing the end of his life sums up the choice very clearly.

"Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshipped beyond the river and in Egypt and serve the Lord. But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourself this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the river, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord". (Josh. 24:14-15)

Bob Dylan stated it best in one of his songs, "You've got to serve somebody." And if we and especially our leaders serve the Lord, they will have a profound desire for justice. In this very chapter of Jeremiah, verse 3, God speaks to Shallum and says, "Rescue from the hand of his oppressor the one who has been robbed.

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Do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place.” God’s desire for justice is repeated hundreds of times in the scriptures, both Old and New Testaments.

Notice in this verse the covenant formula of caring for the widows, orphans and aliens in the land. In Proverbs we read “Speak up for people who cannot speak for themselves. Protect the rights of all who are helpless. Speak for them and be a righteous judge. Protect the rights of the poor and needy.” (Prov. 31:8-9) Isaiah states that justice is defined as liberating the oppressed, sharing resources with the needy, providing shelter for the homeless, supplying clothing to the naked, and ceasing accusing and judging others.” (Isaiah 58:6-10)

Does this not sound exactly like the very words of Jesus? In other words, the bible is consistent on this matter. In the two great commands of Jesus, loving God is intimately tied to loving our neighbours. They go together, hand in hand. Our leader’s goals, in whatever office they hold is to seek every effort to build up people, to help them live in health and wellness. And sometimes seeking justice for others, means making sacrifices.

I had never noticed before, or at the very least it never registered, that in Judges chapter 9 there is a prophetic parable. Many people call it the parable of the trees. In the parable, the trees decide they need a king so they ask the three most qualified first-and all three refused to serve. The olive tree felt his olive oil-used for food, medicine, and lamp fuel-honoured God and was too precious to give up.

The fig tree felt his cherished fruit- a key agricultural product highly valued-was too necessary to give up. The vine felt its wine-used for not only the main beverage but also for the temple sacrifices-was too precious to give up. So, the trees asked the lowly bramble bush to be king and rule over them. The bramble bush is a far cry from the quality of the other trees. It grows uncontrollably, is useless and fruitless. All it can really do is burn quickly. And while it offered shade, it really had no shade to give. But because he was asked, he ruled.

The point of the parable is that if other qualified people turn down the opportunity to rule, or lead, the vacuum will be filled by people who are not qualified or who have nothing to offer. The three qualified trees refused to serve because they refused to sacrifice. They didn’t want to give up their current job, or status, or contribution. The unwillingness to sacrifice is when we end up with less than stellar leadership.

A.W. Tozer suggests that “a true and safe leader is likely to be one who has no desire to lead, but who is forced into a position of leadership by the inward pressure of the Holy Spirit...I believe it might be accepted as a fairly reliable rule of thumb that the man who is ambitious to lead is disqualified as a leader.” Tozer’s words give me pause in consideration of all leadership, even leadership in the church. Willingness does not equal competency.

Finally, maybe in our secular world it is too much to hope for, but a godly leader would certainly be one who has a passion for prayer. Nehemiah was one such leader. The book of Nehemiah opens with this scene.

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“During the month of Chislev in the twentieth year that Artaxerxes ruled Persia, I was in the fortress city of Susa, when my brother Hanani came with some news of Judah. So, I asked them about the city of Jerusalem. They told me, ‘Those captives who have come back are having all kinds of troubles. They are terribly disgraced, Jerusalem’s walls are broken down, and its gates have been burned.’ When I heard this, I sat down and cried. Then for several days, I mourned; I went without eating to show my sorrow, and I prayed...”

For a godly leader prayer is job one. Nehemiah did not know what to do until he consulted God and dare I suggest none of our political leaders know what they are doing until they consult God. There are mysteries that we humans cannot understand, on our own. No number of experts can solve every situation. Isaiah 47:13-15 reads,

“You are powerless in spite of the advice you get. Let your astrologers come forward to save you-those people who study the stars. Who map out the zones of the heavens and tell you month to month what is going to happen. They will be like bits of straw, and fire will burn them up! They will not be able to save themselves-the flames will be too hot for them, not a cozy fire to warm themselves by. They will leave you and go your own way, and none will be left to save you.”

Jeremiah said basically the same thing in this chapter before us today. Verse 22 reads, “But if they had stood in my council, they would have proclaimed my words to my people and would have turned them from their evil ways and from their evil deeds.”

The point is on this Canada Day that whatever leadership role we undertake, or we elect someone to, our skills, policies, and contacts are no where near as important as whether our leaders are godly. This goes for: politicians, teachers, parents, bosses, ministers; frankly, all leaders. If a leader’s foundation is not solid, nothing they will do will last.

During the news coverage of the widespread devastation of Hurricane Andrew in Florida, one news crew found a home and its owner completely unscathed. When asked why his house was still standing the man replied, “I built this house myself. I also built it according to the Florida State code. When the code called for 2x6 trusses, I used 2x6 roof trusses. I was told that a house built according to code could withstand a hurricane. I did, and it did.”

Psalm 127:1 says, “Unless the Lord builds the house, its builder labour in vain.” So, on this day when we sing, “God keep our land”, do we mean it, and if so, shouldn’t we demand of our leaders at whatever level they serve, to turn to God as well.