

Proud Canadians, Eh?

Amos 5:21-23;6:1-7

Luke 10:29-37

Canada Day Sunday

27 June 2010

I have some short pieces of music to which I want you to listen for a moment or two ... These pieces of music share something in common. Do you know what it is? They are all national anthems. You heard the national anthems of Australia, Brazil, Spain, Italy, Greece and Japan.¹

These pieces of music, these national anthems, also have something else in common. They fill the people of their country with the same kind of emotion as Canadians experience when they sing, "O Canada". And that emotion is pride. Pride in their country and all that it stands for, all that it means to them. So much is wrapped up in these national anthems. And if you have been watching the Soccer World Cup in South Africa this past week or two, you will have seen firsthand the pride that all these countries have as their players link arms and belt out the words – albeit often in completely tuneless fashion!

Like those of other nations, Canadians are a very proud people. But what is it that makes us proud? What makes you proud to be a Canadian?

I think we should be proud that we live in such a beautiful land. We should be proud of our First Nations peoples and their culture. We should be proud that we live in such an ethnically diverse country, made up of people from every nation in the world. We should be proud of our military personnel who are serving and have served with such great courage in Afghanistan, especially those who have given their lives. We should be proud of our young people and their achievements, especially our athletes who performed with such great distinction at the Winter Olympics in Vancouver.

We should be proud that we are such a tolerant and peaceful society when compared with some places on earth. We should be proud that we are a place of refuge for many fleeing persecution. We should be proud that we can hold a G8² and G20³ summit where the leaders of the industrialised countries can come together and plan for the future. We should be proud that we can also engage in peaceful protest and hold these leaders accountable for their actions. We should be proud of our Canadian health system no matter how much our neighbours south of the border try to convince us otherwise.

We should be proud of the many great people of this land. Sir. John A. MacDonald. Nellie McClung. Lucy Maud Montgomery. Tommy Douglas. Roberta Bondar, Terry Fox. Frederic Banting. Charles Best. Craig Kielburger. Jean Vanier. Margaret Atwood. Wayne

Gretzky. Louise Arbour. Mike Weir. Sheila Fraser. To name but a few.

But, unfortunately and with sorrow, as Canada Day comes around this week, we must say that there is much about Canada of which we cannot be proud. We cannot be proud, for instance, that Canada does not give greater leadership in the battle against climate change. We cannot be proud of the fact that Canada has reneged on promises made at past G8 meetings to help make poverty history. We cannot be proud that Canada has spent over a billion dollars in security for the G8 and G20 when children go hungry in our country. We cannot be proud of the fact that Canada has not met its commitments to boost aid and cut debt in Africa. We cannot be proud of the fact that, though asbestos is widely regarded as a major health hazard and is being removed from most buildings in our country, Canada is a major supplier to the developing world. We cannot be proud of the fact that many of our First Nations peoples live in deplorable slum-like conditions on reservations throughout Canada. We cannot be proud of the fact that we continue to slaughter seals in inhumane ways though the market for seals skins has completely fallen through in most parts of the world.

Though we have much of which to be proud in Canada, I don't think we can be truly call ourselves proud Canadians until we start putting right those things of which we are not proud. We can't just let these things go and simply say, "Well, that's reality. That's life. There will always be those negative and troubling aspects in our country we just have to accept." No, that can't be. We have to work for change and not rest until such change comes about in the fabric of our common life.

Especially, as Christians we have a bounden duty to work to right the ills of society, no matter how daunting the challenge may be. Perhaps that means speaking out about the wrongs of our times – like the Old Testament's Amos who fearlessly blasted the injustices and evils of his time and upset the powerful with a frankness and directness in his criticisms that would have made General Stanley McChrystal look like a rather shy and tongue-tied schoolboy. "How terrible it will be for you that have an easy life in Zion and for you that feel safe in Samaria," proclaimed the 8th century prophet, "How terrible it will be for you that stretch out on your luxurious couches, feasting on veal and lamb! ... Listen, you that trample on the needy and try to destroy the poor of the country ... the Lord God has sworn that he will never forget [your] evil deeds."⁴

Like Amos in his times, so today we are also called to be the conscience of our community, our society and our world. Constantly challenging the people among whom we live – our families, our friends, our work-colleagues, our social acquaintances – to rise to the highest values known to humanity as expressed in the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. Constantly, speaking out on issues that are unpopular among many, questioning stereotypes and prejudices, speaking compassion in the face of insensitivity, pointing to the needs of the poor, advocating on behalf of the homeless around us as well as arguing the cause of the peoples of our developing nations.

Of course, we might well argue that putting right those things of which we are not proud is beyond us. It's a job for others. It's a job for the more gifted, the better placed, the more influential people in our land. After all, what can we rank and file people do? What can we "small people" – as the President of BP unfortunately called ordinary people in a slip of the tongue last week – what can we small people do? And, even more challengingly, what can we as individuals do in a world so dominated by interest groups, pressure groups, advocacy groups and the like? Surely we can't personally make a difference? Surely we can't right wrongs on an individual basis? It wouldn't seem so.

But, then again, there's the story of the Good Samaritan.⁵ There's someone who personally made a big difference. And it's important to note that he made that difference because he didn't spend time blaming others for their inaction in failing to come to the help of the traveller robbed and bleeding at the side of the road. Nor did he try to evade his duty by saying that the victim belonged to another racial group. Nor did he leave the poor fellow on his own while he found others to help. On the contrary, the Good Samaritan took personal responsibility in a very practical, hands-on way. And look what a difference he individually made! Not only to the injured wayfarer, but also to so many others who heard the story and felt moved to emulate his good deeds.

Yes, it flies in the face of probability that one person can make a difference ... but, then again, there's the story that Dr. Ernest Gordon, Chaplain at Princeton University who told of his experience in a prisoner-of-war camp in Thailand during the Second World War in his book *Through The Valley of the Kwai*, Dr. Gordon says that by Christmas 1942, many of the soldiers in his prisoner-of-war camp were so low in morale they abandoned their normal standards of human decency, robbing the sick and mistreating one another. But then one soldier started giving his food to a sick friend to help him get well. In time, the sick prisoner recovered but the Good Samaritan died of malnutrition.

The story of this man's Christ-like sacrifice made the rounds of the camp and had the most wonderful

effect. Soldiers began to recall teachings of Jesus they had learned as children. "This is my commandment that you love one another."⁶ Some began to witness to their faith. Some met for Bible study. Others to worship. When Christmas of 1943 came around, says Dr. Gordon, 2000 prisoners assembled for a church service. The whole atmosphere of the camp changed from despair to hope with the more healthy prisoners sharing their food with the sick. And, all because of one man who had acted courageously in the name of Christ. His selfless actions had made an impact on everyone's conscience with the most amazing results.⁷

As individuals in today's world, we can similarly make a big difference when we are prepared to act courageously in the name of Christ. We can change other people, the way they think and behave, when we are willing to move out of our comfort zone and act in the self-sacrificial way that seems to fly in the face of all common-sense. And by so doing we can change our community, change our society, change our country, as the ripple effects move out in wider and wider concentric circles, like a rock cast into a pool.

As Canada Day approaches this year, let us wholeheartedly celebrate our country, all that it means to us, all that it has achieved over the years and all it stands for in today's world. And that is immense. But let us not overlook the ills and evils, the areas of injustice and neglect that constantly beset us. Rather let us individually commit ourselves to working to change those things that cause us indignity and ignominy. Remembering that, when we commit ourselves to putting right those things of which we are not proud, we will experience a pride as Canadians that is much, much greater than any we have ever enjoyed before.

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¹ National Anthems, MasterSong, Australia,
www.mraentertainment.com

² G8 Summit, Huntsville, Ontario, June 25-26, 2010

³ G20 Summit, Toronto, Ontario, June 26-27, 2010

⁴ Amos 6:1,4; 8:4,7

⁵ Luke 10:29-37

⁶ John 15:12-14

⁷ Ernest Gordon, *Through the Valley of the Kwai*, Greenwood Publishing Group (June 1983)