

“A Work in Progress”

July 1st, 2018

Zechariah 9: 9-19 & Hebrews 11: 1-3; 13-16

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Today is July 1st and today Canada turns 151 years old. 151 is a kind of nothing anniversary. Last year our 150th was a really big deal – but 151 doesn't sound or feel very significant. Yet still today marks another year in the life of our country Canada, and it is worth pausing and reflecting upon.

Our 151 year old Canada is a complex and very diverse nation. We have a very large numbers of Canadians today (one in five) who either by themselves or, with their parents, came to this country from some other part of the world. They were not born here.

We still have a substantial number of Canadians whose ancestors came from the British Isles or some other part of Europe, but increasingly new Canadians are coming from Asia, South America, and Africa. And to make this mixture more complex there are increasing numbers of aboriginal Canadians who keep reminding us that originally this was their land, and we stole it. We don't like being reminded of that no matter how true it may be.

When it comes to faith and religion at the age of 151 – well that too is a complicated situation. Christianity is still the largest faith in Canada, with Roman Catholicism having the most adherents. About 67.3% of our population claim to be Christian. Do you know what the next largest group is? The next largest group is people who claim to have no religion at all. This group who are secular and claim no religious faith is now close to ¼ of all Canadians – 23.9% to be accurate. Islam is the third largest group, but before getting alarmed – you need to know that it is practiced by a tiny 3.2% of the Canadian population.

So 67% of Canadians claim to be Christian but sadly most of these are what we call cultural Christians. They rarely practice their faith and they know even less about it. The one time in the entire year when they may make an effort to come to Church is Christmas Eve. In the old days we used to talk about our C & E members – Christmas and Easter – but in today's world it's only Christmas. Easter is no longer the big Sunday it used to be. I do so wish those who claim to be Christian would become even a bit more active. I think they would be surprised at how much good it would do them.

Our country has a strong Christian heritage. Christian values and beliefs founded this land and are still at the core of who and what we are.



Our Canadian motto reads - "A Mari Usque ad Mare," – Latin for "From Sea to Sea." It comes from the book of Zechariah 9:10 in the Old Testament. *"He shall have dominion from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth."* (You can find the same verse in Psalm

72:8). In Hebrew *"From sea to sea and from the river to the ends of the earth"* was an expression or kind of catchphrase that meant the whole world. In Hebrew *'dominion'* is a verb - an action describing God's constant creative power and justice, alive and growing, shaping and reshaping the world. In other words our motto tells us that by the grace of God Canada is a land that will forever be growing and reshaping itself in peace, goodness, and justice – from sea to sea. We could not have a better motto.

The motto for the Order of Canada also comes from our Bible – this time from the New Testament. It's our highest national honour – established in 1967, our Centennial year, by Prime Minister Lester Pearson. The man who actually designed it was John Ross Matheson, from Brockville. John was a veteran of WW2. He came home injured – and after the war he always walked with two canes.

John was a member of this Church. He taught Sunday School right here in Wall Street United Church. I knew John well. He died five years ago (in 2013) at the age of 96. In the 1960's he was elected to Parliament from Leeds and Grenville and Prime Minister Pearson, tapped him to undertake two special projects. The first was to design a new flag for Canada and the second was to create a new honour to be called The Order of Canada.

Today a lot of people know about the role that John Matheson played in creating our Maple Leaf Flag, but not very many know about the Order of Canada. It was John who chose the motto for the Order of Canada. Remember he was a Sunday School teacher. The verse that he chose was from the New Testament Hebrews 11:16 – *"They desired a better country"*. In Latin the inscription beneath every the Order of Canada medal reads – *"desiderantes meliorem patriam"*. It has been incorporated into and is now part of our Coat of Arms. *"They desired a better country"*. (I kind of think Wall Street should get some credit for it – not that that will never happen).

The book of Hebrews is about Faith. It says, *“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things we cannot see.”* It talks about those who came before us; who heeded the call of God and reached out in faith, for a better country, a heavenly city, and how they remained faithful to that call, even though they themselves never saw it.

What I want us to realize is, it’s not just our forefathers and mothers who built this land who were like that – striving for a better land they never saw. It is we who are here today – you and I as well. We need to continue the work for a better country that maybe we will never see. For Canada is a work in progress and it always will be.



Our first Prime Minister, Sir John A. MacDonalD spent years knitting the country together; bit-by-bit; and strand-by-strand. He led Ontario and Quebec, and the Maritimes into Confederation. It took years of persuasion culminating in the birth of a new nation in 1867 – 151 years ago. And yet, it was not perfect. And Sir John A. himself was anything but perfect. He had feet of clay. It has come to light only recently – (bits have been kind of bubbling up) – that the way he regarded aboriginal Canadians was all too

typical of his time. He saw them as an inferior class of people. The term savages was the word commonly used 151 years ago to describe our aboriginal people. By contrast, we of European descent were the enlightened ones. The Indians were savages and had nothing to teach us. Today we have come a long way past that ugly and totally fallacious attitude. But we still have a very long way to go.

But before coming down too hard on Sir John A Macdonald and start renaming buildings and pulling his statues down; it is worth realizing that no one is ever perfect; yesterday or today, or into the future. We are all a work in progress, and God uses flawed people like you and me, as well as Sir John A. to do his will. Indeed that is all there is. And while it’s true that Sir John A Macdonald was a flawed person, a man of his time; it is equally certain that without him we would not have the Canada we know today. In the midst a very difficult and dangerous time he knit this country together and then kept us together.

It’s very easy to forget how dangerous the times were for us in mid the 1860’s. The American Civil War had just ended leaving the victorious North with an army of close to two million highly trained very effective

soldiers. It was by far the largest and strongest army in the world and there were loud voices south of the border urging a takeover of British North America. That was how we were called at the time.

Today, we still live in a difficult and unpredictable world. From the unimaginably cruel immigration measures of Donald Trump's America to the genocide of the Rohingya people in Myanmar (formerly Burma) to the rise of right wing autocrats in Europe and Turkey – the world seems in many ways to be going backward. It's clear to me that vast numbers of people have totally forgotten the lessons of World War 2 – why we fought it – and the enormous value of a society that is both democratic and deeply caring.

The United Nations declared Canada to be one of the best places in the world to live. And it's true! There are millions of people in the world today who'd give anything to live here. One of our biggest problems is the stream of refugees pouring in from America of all places. Who would have thought it? We are a nation people want to come to. Yet we are so far from perfect. We still we have miles to go. Do you recall Robert Frost's famous poem,

“Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening?”

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

That poem describes our beautiful land so well. We are deeply blessed – and yet truly we have miles to go before we can even think about resting.

Let me close with the inscription found on the cornerstone of an old English church.

It reads: *“In the year 1653, when all things sacred in this kingdom were being either profaned or demolished, this Church was built by Sir Richard Shirley Baronet, to whose singular praise it was to do the best of things, in the worst of times.”*

I think that is a wonderful motto for us today. We are called – all of us – to do our best, no matter what the times may be. If we as Canadians can strive do this, the future of our land will remain forever bright.

Happy Birthday Canada!