

## Grace Mennonite Church – July 4/21 – A Devotional by Doug Schulz

### “Homeland Honour”

This is a special week for North Americans. July 4<sup>th</sup> is the Independence Day holiday in the USA. July 1<sup>st</sup> is our Canadian Confederation holiday, simply called “Canada Day”. These are occasions when many of us honour our homeland.

One of our Scripture texts for this week is Psalm 48, a Psalm that proclaims God as “king over all the earth”. It’s a nationalistic hymn, really, in which God’s people – whose homeland is referred to as Israel – celebrate that they are the center of God’s will for the whole planet. That God rules the world through them. God is “our King”, they say. But they add that God is also “king over the nations”, so that the “the princes of the people” belong to God.

Read Psalm 48 to absorb the feeling of confident praise and pride contained in it:

- 1 Clap your hands, all you peoples;  
shout to God with loud songs of joy.
- 2 For the Lord, the Most High, is awesome,  
a great king over all the earth.
- 3 He subdued peoples under us,  
and nations under our feet.
- 4 He chose our heritage for us,  
the pride of Jacob whom he loves.
  
- 5 God has gone up with a shout,  
the Lord with the sound of a trumpet.
- 6 Sing praises to God, sing praises;  
sing praises to our King, sing praises.
- 7 For God is the king of all the earth;  
sing praises with a psalm.
  
- 8 God is king over the nations;  
God sits on his holy throne.

9 The princes of the peoples gather  
as the people of the God of Abraham.  
For the shields of the earth belong to God;  
he is highly exalted.

This psalm, like many other psalm texts, created for the people of Israel a measure of nationalistic dignity, not to mention spiritual confidence – bragging rights in the face of other dominant religious worldviews and political regimes in the Ancient Near East. Many Christians today reading the Old Testament apply that kind of “Zionist” thinking to the modern nation of Israel to the extent that they offer no criticism of the obviously unjust treatment that Palestinians have suffered since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thankfully, there is a growing sense among Christians in North America as there is in general in the world, that Israel must find a way to change what some call “apartheid” treatment of Palestinians.

Whatever my view might be about how Israel is blessed by God, as biblical scriptures teach, I need to be cognizant that the prophets of ancient Israel – in the years after the writing of these strong politicized spiritual proclamations in the Psalms – spoke out harshly in accusing leaders of the people for making worship of their identity more important than God’s commandments about carrying out the work of being an exemplary nation practicing peace and justice in the world.

Then, in the time when Jesus lived and preached and did miraculous actions, he was very critical of the old “regime” thinking that still caused people to believe Israel was blessed by God *no matter what*. He called leaders of religion and politics (largely inseparable in those days) to practice the wisdom about equity and justice that was offered by the biblical prophets.

But this drew a lot of criticism, and actually made Jesus feel shocked at people’s stubborn old ways of thinking, as we see in Mark 6:1-13:

6 He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. 2 On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! 3 Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary[a] and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense[b] at him. 4 Then Jesus

said to them, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” 5 And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. 6 And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching. 7 He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. 8 He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; 9 but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. 10 He said to them, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. 11 If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” 12 So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. 13 They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

So, we see here that Jesus is essentially rejected by his own closest people – his “hometown”. They had heard about or even seen that he had wisdom and great power, because there was growing evidence of that – healings of unclean spirits, lepers, paralytics, handicapped, demoniacs, the bleeding woman and the dead child, not to mention calming storms at sea! But they refused to accept his authority because he was just a local carpenter’s kid, after all, not an important national figure in the religious establishment.

Once Jesus sees that hearts are closed off against him, he leaves his hometown and sets out on a wider mission, now empowering his closest followers (the twelve disciples) to do his work alongside him. Note that Jesus and his disciples cast out demons and cure people. But they first of all proclaim “that all should repent”... meaning that they call on people to change the way they relate to God. People are called to let go of ‘group-think’ – ‘tribal’ or ‘nationalistic’ assumptions about religious loyalty - and take individual responsibility and use opportunity to experience God in a personal relationship, letting God’s power transform their lives in every way. People are healed by surrender to God. Once healed, people can see that their lives are restored not so that they will merely mouth praises to God, but to become strong ‘therapists’ in the world, pointing others to repent from false things and to exercise faith in the One True Healer.

What does all this mean for us today in Canada, especially during this week of Canada Day observance?

It's pretty hard to celebrate Canadian history now that we are becoming more and more aware of indisputable evidence of discriminatory, destructive and death-dealing treatment of indigenous people (especially children in residential schools). How does our nation come to a fuller practice of healing between and among indigenous and settler peoples? It's so clearly time for us all to realize that any sort of "homeland honour" for Canada has to include coming to terms with the past by 'repenting' known errors and crimes, and then resolving forward with fresh ways of practicing justice for the people who are still suffering from historic national sins.

This is a huge challenge for Canada. But I'm thinking Jesus would say: "Right now, confess your limited vision of national pride in the accomplishments of Canada. If you believe in a God of kindness and justice toward all people, regard yourselves as responsible to account for the sad, wrong behaviours of those who went before. And realize that what you have come to is a great opportunity to practice the kin-dom of God by reimagining what Canadian life could be like if you seize the moment for reconciliation and resolution toward new ways of practicing nationhood. Imagine a world-leading Canada again. And strive for it!"

Well, would Jesus say that? I don't know. I just know he'd tell me to 'shake off the dust' against any kind of thinking within me that does not believe in the possibility of a true spiritual renewal in my perspective about what it means to love my neighbours, every one of them. And why not believe in a new Canadian vision?

The sad thing is that we Canadians have known about the historic abuses that are presently being 'revealed'. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission already several years ago contained calls to explore residential school history more closely in terms of the burial areas nearby. And the commission exploring missing and murdered indigenous women and children has been asking us to wake up to the facts, and to feel the pain... as if it were our own mothers, sisters, daughters, grand-daughters, nieces, cousins, or neighbours' kids that we're talking about!

I realize that we'd rather feel patriotic and proud on Canada Day. And we can. But our loyalty needs to follow the path of Jesus, for whom the values and goals of the kin-dom of God caused him to be more concerned about healing what's gone

wrong than about celebrating even the best parts of heritage. After all, what is a heritage that is built upon the (often deliberately ignored or even purposefully designed) reduction of health of some members of the family? A truly positive Canada Day experience for us should be some resolution now to learn more about our full history... particularly the story of the first peoples of Canada.

Thankfully, our Mennonite Church Canada has produced wonderful, easy-to-read books over the past few years on this subject. Several are available from my office. See the titles mentioned in this week's *Grace Weekly News*. Feel free to ask to borrow any of these, or ask for information to order them for yourself.

Many people use the expression "What would Jesus do?" as a way to help them decide how to think and act in difficult situations where a decision needs to be made. I believe we are living into a time where decisions must be made by all Canadians about true repentance and reconciliation, so that our nation can sing its anthem with greater truth and power: "God keep our land glorious and free!"

Interestingly, the Canadian National Anthem was written originally in French. It was commissioned by Lieutenant Governor of Quebec Théodore Robitaille for the 1880 Saint-Jean-Baptiste Day ceremony (June 24). Think of it. The song we heartily sing to celebrate national identity itself reveals the broader modern Canadian reality; we're a nation of many cultures. Yet today we cannot deny that the dominant culture(s) of Canadian identity were literally built over the graves of children whose cultural distinctiveness was deliberately destroyed in honour of a discriminatory nationalist idea. Our history admits of religiously protected racism.

Homeland honour for any of us today must explore all of our issues. And it must call us to awareness and action. Not to change history. But to confess it. And to work for a more just, inclusive reality in the character of Canada today. May we become a nation that leads the world toward transformation where needs of old and new neighbours are included fairly and fully in the community's life direction.

This is not shallow idealism. It is sick idealism to sing an anthem about "standing on guard" on top of the graves of children whose lives were unsafe because seen as unimportant, un-Canadian. It's a timely, practical thing for me to simply read up a bit more on my country's full history. And to resolve to do what I can while I have time-of-life in this land, to right some wrong. To practice "true patriot love"!

## **Postscript: A Story – Reader, you decide how much of this story is true...**

A friend told me a story:

“John Seaforth was an adventurous sort who was looking for a place to settle down and build a new life. He moved into the large mansion of a woman named Candida. Candida had children, and, at first, John acted respectfully toward them. But it was, indeed, an act. Not genuine at all. Over the years, John forced Candida’s children into small, poorly lit corners of the house.

Candida was a spiritual person who saw God in nature and in all people, but John dominated Candida’s mind to the point that she tolerated his behaviours, even when he began trying to re-educate all her children into his idea of faith; and he used some very harsh methods. In fact, some of Candida’s children died from mistreatment or neglect, and were buried in the basement of the house.

Well, years went by and Candida’s family members that survived John’s takeover and uncompassionate treatment were so weakened in morale that they tried self-abusive behaviours such as alcohol consumption to cope with the stripping away of their identity and the perpetually limited affirmation of their worth. Today, John’s descendants more or less blame Candida’s children for their problems.”

After telling me this story, my friend said: “So, Doug, what do you think Jesus wants us to do about this?”

I said: “For starts, write a little devotional.”

“What else?” said my friend.

“I’m definitely going to read some more books on this topic,” I said. “And I’ll start mentioning good resources more often in the Memo I put out every week at my church.”

“Doug,” said my friend, “that’s all good. But what does that really cost you?”

“True. Well, on July 1<sup>st</sup> for the past few years, my wife and I have donated \$400 to the Brock University Indigenous Students Emergency Relief Fund. That’s based on 10% of my annual property tax amount. I call it paying my annual *LandLifeLease*. It’s sort of tokenism, but it actually acknowledges a ‘homelandback’ debt, I think. Maybe I’ll ask some friends and family to do the same thing this year. Every year.”