

Roots and Thorns, Politicians and Citizens
1 Kings 2:1-4; 2 Samuel 23
Sunday, June 30, 2019

What makes us truly Canadian?

What are some of the stereotypes of a “true Canadian”?

You’ve heard the common ones. Canadians are polite. Canadians have an obsession with hockey. Canadians drink Tim Horton’s coffee.

Stereotypes aside, what is it to truly be Canadian?

Politicians try to tell us what it is to be Canadian. Advertisers try to inform us of what it means to be Canadian. People try to create a boundary line of what it means to be Canadian, and work themselves into a frenzy declaring who is inside and who is outside of that boundary.

We may obsess about this boundary of who is in and who is out as a “good Canadian” or “real” Canadian; but Scripture doesn’t really seem to care about the fine points of our nationhood or our national identity.

The ideal of Scripture is not Canada; the ideal of Scripture is not strong, patriotic nations. The ideal of Scripture when it relates to nationality is this:

I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. (Revelation 7:9)

The ideal of Scripture is every nation, tribe, people and language in the Kingdom of God.

We may love Canada dearly, but Canada is small potatoes compared to the Kingdom of Heaven. Our nation is minor in its importance compared to the Kingdom of God Jesus has established here on earth through his death, his resurrection, his teaching and his work in the world.

Even Abraham, patriarch of Israel, was promised by God:

Through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed. (Genesis 22:18)

Abraham’s hope for his future did not end with a nation called Israel. The hope for his future was the blessing of the nations through his family.

So all the handwringing we do about bringing our nation (or nations) back to God has to stop. Because God is not just concerned with our nation – he is concerned about the whole world. And when we obsess about our nation, we end up leaving a lot of people out. When we obsess about nation we judge harshly who belongs and who doesn’t. Jesus obsesses about every nation, tribe, people and language.

When Scripture does have strong things to say about nationhood, those strong things seem to fall under two themes:

- 1) The righteousness of the nation – how it cares for the poor, the fatherless, the widow and the orphan.
- 2) The righteousness of the leader.

Scripture, from beginning to end, is devastatingly tough on leaders. There is much about respecting leaders and respecting those in authority. But, there is even more in Scripture in opposition to self-centred, unrighteous, deceived and wicked leadership, and how that leadership must be uprooted by God.

So when King David is on his death bed, 2 Samuel 23 says these are his last words of wisdom concerning leadership.

***“The Spirit of the LORD spoke through me;
his word was on my tongue.
The God of Israel spoke,
the Rock of Israel said to me:
‘When one rules over people in righteousness,
when he rules in the fear of God,
he is like the light of morning at sunrise
on a cloudless morning,
like the brightness after rain
that brings grass from the earth.’ (2 Samuel 23:2-4)***

David speaks in broad strokes here about the character of a leader. This leader rules over people in righteousness. This is not simply a “law and order” sort of righteousness. This is a living rightly, relying on God sort of righteousness.

This leader rules in the fear of God, holding God as worthy of higher respect than any other authority.

A truly great leader is a relief to all people. Not just “God’s people” or to “Christian people” but to all people.

In 1 Kings 2:1-4, on his death bed King David calls in his son, Solomon, who is the heir to his throne. And David gives these more specific words of wisdom concerning leadership to his son.

***“So be strong,
act like a man,
and observe what the LORD your God requires:***

Walk in obedience to him, and keep his decrees and commands, his laws and regulations, as written in the Law of Moses.

Do this so that you may prosper in all you do and wherever you go and that the LORD may keep his promise to me:

'If your descendants watch how they live, and if they walk faithfully before me with all their heart and soul, you will never fail to have a successor on the throne of Israel.'

God always calls leaders to a high standard. Always. He calls them to obedience and strength of character. He calls them to mind their personal character and live justly.

While I have been drawing our attention to these verses, I know many of you in your minds have been measuring up our current politicians against these standards. Some of you have been measuring how Trudeau falls short of these standards. Some of you have been measuring how Kenny falls short of these standards. Some of you have been measuring how Trump falls short of these standards.

And if that is where this sermon stops for us today, that is very, very disappointing. If it's just Facebook fodder for your political views, then we've just wasted our time here together this morning.

Because in this passage and passages like this all throughout Scripture, it is God that is the focal point. In these passages God is always presented as Sovereign, in control, and above it all. God calls us to things higher and more honorable than patriotism, as good as patriotism can sometimes be.

I know the idea of God being in control of our world is difficult to accept. We have chaos around our world. We have atrocities happening that are brutal and senseless. We cry out, "God, how can you possibly be in control in this world?!?"

And despite that anxiety within us, Scripture presents a God who is above it all, yet at the centre of it all, yet providing peace amongst it all. David in 2 Samuel 23:5 continues

***"If my house were not right with God,
surely he would not have made with me an everlasting covenant,
arranged and secured in every part;
surely he would not bring to fruition my salvation
and grant me my every desire.***

At the centre of all of this is not the righteousness and character of the king. At the centre of all of this is God. At the centre of all of this is the covenant, the agreement that God *initiated* with people. God's promise at the centre of this endures and stands. God extends covenant to all of us today. All of us can be right with God and following God and living for God. God, not the political leader, is central in this passage. God, not the political leader, is central in our world.

As I said before, God is ruthless with poor leadership in Scripture:

But evil men are all to be cast aside like thorns, which are not gathered with the hand. Whoever touches thorns uses a tool of iron or the shaft of a spear; they are burned up where they lie.” (2 Samuel 23:6-7)

This is not, “Just you wait until the next election” sort of threat. This is a God that roots out those who are evil. We see God tear down corrupt institutions and governments. We see God uproot and deal with evil people. We entrust this justice to God. God is the one that removes. God is the one that uproots.

King David outlines just and honorable leadership in 2 Samuel 23 and in his charge to Solomon in 2 Kings 2. But these instructions aren’t just for national leaders. These instructions are for all people. After all, national leaders arise from regular people. People that do not come from a background of strong, personal character will never endure the pressures of leadership.

God calls us to rule ourselves justly.

- All of us can be strong
- All of us can act “like a man” (1 Kings 2). This is not just talking about gender. This has far more to do with character. Be a solid person. (Keep in mind this is a specific charge to a specific king, so sorry/not sorry for the “act like a man” line that David says.)
- All of us can observe/obey/keep the written Word of God.
- All of us can walk faithfully.

We like to make much of politics. We should. And we shouldn’t. It’s important to be invested. It’s important to be involved and know what’s going on. But we give politicians and political more power and influence than they should ever really have. Our God is greater. Our God is stronger. Our God is higher than any other.

We like to think we can make a difference politically. We can. And we can’t. Again, we can be invested and involved. But when we are obsessed with politics, we obsess about who is on my side and who is my enemy. If your first allegiance is with a political leader or party, you will always be compromised. Despite our political passion and anger and sadness, political things are still out of our hands and out of our control. Yet God is sovereign and at work.

Jon Foreman from Switchfoot writes, “I pledge allegiance to a country/without borders/without politicians”. He’s writing about the Kingdom of God. And the King is not subject to any border or governments. Jesus is more worthy of our allegiance than any province or any nation.

Never forget – David was a mess. At times his house and his Kingdom were in chaos. Some of this was out of his control. Some of this was because of poor leadership and decisions by him. Yet he could

honestly charge Solomon to be faithful because that's the way he tried to live. David was plodding along in the direction of God.

All of us can do that. All of us can be faithful to God in simple, daily ways. All of us can commit our daily allegiance to Jesus Christ.

Here's how I wanted to end:

God bless Canada. Or don't. In a very cosmic sense: it doesn't matter.

While that may be true, it's not necessarily helpful. (Being abrasive rarely is helpful!)

Maybe this is more helpful instead:

We often make much of being Canadian or living in Canada. It's a good thing! There's much to celebrate about Canada. However, there's a much larger Kingdom at stake. Jesus invites us to be part of this Kingdom, and every tribe, people, nation and language are invited. There is a greater King more deserving than any country of our allegiance. Let us daily give our loyalty to Christ alone. Let us daily grow in character as we submit our lives to Jesus, our holy, caring and merciful King.