

June 28, 2020

The Rev. Dr. Morar Murray-Hayes



Reading: Isaiah. 32:1-5, 16-18

The Message: Canada Day: Dreams Realized or Dashed?

[Video](#)

The United Church of Canada, formed out of the nationalistic movement that created the country, drew together three denominations:

- Methodist (Wesleyan and Episcopal),
- Presbyterians and
- Congregationalists.

As new Canadians built communities, especially in the west, they started to ask why they were building all these different churches in each new town. Recognizing that the differences were imported from other countries and other times, they started a movement which had as its vision, one Christian church for all of Canada.

Eventually other denominations joined, but that original vision has yet to be realized.

The original vision was of very diverse churches stretching across the country united in one movement called The United Church of Canada and building the kingdom of God on earth: justice, peace, Godly ethics. This didn't happen in quite the way the founders intended.

This was true for the prophets of Israel who longed for justice in their nation.

“See, a king will reign in righteousness, and princes will rule with justice.” (Isaiah 32.1-18)

The people have been inflicted with fools, villains, and people of rash judgment. Injustice is bad in itself, but what makes it even worse is that it leads to resentment, conflict, and hostility. So the prophet looks forward to the time when righteousness will bring peace, quietness, and trust.

For the prophets of Israel the way to achieve justice is to honour God and to do God's will. This model of society laid the foundation for what we call Christendom, which governed western society from the fourth century to the lifetimes of some of us.

Kings and queens were anointed by archbishops, and had responsibility for the religious health of their people as well as their civil happiness. The two went together, because the way to justice was through honouring God and keeping God's commandments. Our coins identified the Queen with the initials D.F., defender of the faith.

Until relatively recently, we understood that Canada was a Christian nation, and English civilization and Christian faith were closely allied. That's why when people evangelized First Nations people, unfortunately, they thought that part of their job was to socialize them into British ways of doing things.

Changes were in the wind.

Sixty years ago the Minister of Immigration in John Diefenbaker's Conservative government, a woman named Ellen Fairclough, a United Church member, a chartered accountant who ran her own accounting firm in Hamilton, began a new era in Canada as Canada's first female Cabinet Minister. (She also was the first female acting prime minister from February 10 - February 20, 1958.) Fairclough threw out Canada's racist immigration laws, introduced a more liberal policy on refugees, and increased the number of immigrants allowed into Canada and laid the foundation for a multi-cultural, multi-faith Canada.

Another change from the 1960s we sometimes call secularization. Society could do without God. Church attendance declined. Public schools dispensed with prayers and religious knowledge. Sunday closing laws were repealed. Christendom in Canada disappeared.

Is this a good thing, or a bad thing?

Ancient Israel wondered the same thing.

When there were kings in Israel, the best ones of them ruled the people

- in God's name,
- protected the temple and priesthood,
- and kept the nation pure from idolatry.

But then Israel lost its territory. Was God to be honoured by living in a religious community isolated from the wider world? Or by learning to take roles of leadership in other nations, as Esther did? Or by converting the nations? Or by finding common ground with other faiths?

We no longer live in a Christian Canada. When we go to our polling stations, we want our political leaders to do justice, but now most believe that this is something they can do without necessarily being Christian. The author of Isaiah 32 wouldn't have believed that a just king of Israel could be anything other than a worshipper of the God of Israel. But later prophets thought that Cyrus, the king of Persia, was the instrument of the God of Israel for doing justice, even though Cyrus didn't at all believe in the God of Israel.

So on Canada Day we have two questions to ask.

1. how can Canada be a nation of justice and peace? And for that I think we can believe that the Bible shows the way to justice and peace, even for those who don't believe the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The way to justice and peace is declared by the apostle Paul when he urges us to "forgive each other, and clothe yourselves with love." We want to build a country where children are raised to value character, and where grown-ups are committed to compassion and kindness.
2. what's the role of the church? Are we to be a community set apart? Are we to find ways to adapt to a wider culture, even though it often seems to be characterized by materialism, violence, and contempt for spirituality? Are we to make strategic alliances for specific purposes? Are we to redouble our efforts to convert the world?

I wonder if the end of Christendom has really been a blessing for the church.

- A generation or two ago, we thought that the way to God was through a strong, wealthy church with a very large membership.
- Too often the result was not so much a relation to God, as an interest in church things and a sense of status in the church.

- Today the church has very little clout. (It took a concerted effort for 5 years by over 40 worshipping communities to convince the town of Oakville that faith communities had a charter right to live out their mission.)

But the blessing we enjoy today

- is the freedom to use the church, not as a structure that we fit into, but as a resource.
- It's a community of people who are seeking, not so much to convert others, but to be converted ourselves.
- We can read and study the texts of our faith, not in isolation from other texts, but in dialogue with people who are committed to other faiths.

As we do that, yes, our comfortable assumptions will be disrupted, but the disruption of our assumptions allows us to be confronted by the God of surprises, the God of mystery, the God of grace.

So I think we can thank God for a diverse Canada. It may sometimes be uncomfortable that other people don't think the way we do, and sometimes challenge us, and sometimes maybe even disparage us.

But that helps us

- ask questions, and
- seek deeper answers, and
- recognize ever more clearly the love of the living God.