

# *The Sunnybrook Pulpit*

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## **Citizens and Disciples**

*Let me inherit a double share of your spirit. – 2 Kings 2:1-14;*

*Give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor, and give to God what belongs to God.*

*– Luke 20:20-26*

Many years ago I spent six months traveling in South America. One day in a small Columbian town I was approached by hostile looking man, who had had more to drink than he probably should have. He wanted to know if I was an American. Somewhat nervously, I protested that I was a Canadian and showed him the Canadian flag displayed prominently on the back of my backpack. The transformation was instantaneous: all the hostility disappeared from his face and he shook my hand warmly. We sat down in the village square and conversed in my limited Spanish and his limited English, and sipped from a bottle of Ouzo. In his eyes I had been transformed from an agent of an empire bent on world domination to a citizen of a country which played a positive and constructive role in world affairs. He admired Canada, and he admired me because I am Canadian.

I remember that incident when I think about what it means to be a citizen of this country. There are many other things of which I am less proud. We still have lots of problems, and there are no shortage of things that compassionate and justice-oriented people can and should be trying to improve. On Canada Day, as thousands of new Canadians become citizens and celebrate the freedoms and responsibilities that belong to a citizen, those of us who are long-time jaded citizens might want to reflect about what it means to cherish this inheritance, and to pass on an even greater country to new generations.

The story of Jesus addressing the controversy over paying taxes speaks to being citizens and patriots in a world of divided loyalties. Jesus was Jewish, in an era when the Jewish nation had been conquered by the Roman empire, was occupied by a Roman army, and expected to pay taxes to the Roman emperor. And there was tremendous conflict about what loyal Jews should do in that situation. Was it faithful to pay taxes to the Roman Emperor, which is a kind of recognition of the authority of the state, however grudging? Or, at the other extreme, was it faithful to take up arms against the imperial army, which actually happened at least twice, and provoked a violent crackdown each time, with

enormous loss of life? In this story Jesus does not try to address all the issues involved in being faithful and realistic in his time, but simply sets duties to Caesar in the context of duties to God. What is due to God is everything. What is due to Caesar is quite a bit more limited.

In our time too, what is due to God is everything, but within that context, we have duties to our community, our nation, and to the wider global community. We need to constantly re-evaluate those duties against our ultimate commitment to God, and the basic values about what is right, just, fair, and realistic, which flow from that commitment.

The story that we read from the book of Kings tells of how the role of prophet was passed on from Elijah to the new generation, his disciple Elisha. Prophets, I hope you realize, are people who speak, often at great personal sacrifice, from a commitment to justice, integrity and truth. We often use the term prophet to refer to someone who predicts the future, but that is not the primary way that the Bible speaks of prophets. Prophets are less interested in the future, than in truth, justice and mercy. Prophets are God's spokespersons, condemning and exposing practices which are unjust, misguided and corrupt, and speaking for justice, integrity and truth. Occasionally they might point to the likely consequences of ignoring injustice and corruption, but that is more like a parent warning a child not to touch a hot stove than a carnival fortune-teller.

This story of Elijah and Elisha has three insights about citizenship that are worth noting as we celebrate this Canada day.

### **The Real Power**

First, the story reminds us that a nation is more than a government, and often it is those who are not in government who have the real power. Throughout the books of Samuel and Kings, there is a tension between the rulers of the nation, and the prophets, who call the nation to account to a higher authority. The rulers are who command soldiers and police, who make law and control enormous wealth. Rulers wield tremendous power for good or for evil, but the stories again and again suggest that the real power lies in the hands of the prophets, those whose power did not come from their position but from their moral integrity and spiritual insight.

The closest modern parallels to the ancient prophets are not carnival fortune-tellers, but those whose power to influence public opinion is rooted in their commitment to speaking the truth: I think of the poet Vaclav Havel in communist Czechoslovakia, the lawyer Nelson Mandela in apartheid South Africa, and the biologist Rachel Carson, who exposed

the effects of pesticides on birds. I think of journalists who seek to uncover what those in power do in secret, churches and faith organizations that help shape our moral imagination. Tyrants do not appreciate prophets, and so it is no surprise that there is often tension between government leaders and the modern prophets.

Abraham Lincoln once said that “those who mould public sentiment go deeper than those who enact statutes or pronounce decisions. They make statutes or decisions possible.” It may be true that “politics is the art of the possible,” but the power of the prophet and the church and the shaper of public opinion is to redefine what is possible, to make miracles, to call on the power of God to change what is possible.

### **God’s Power is Surprising**

Elijah was a great prophet. When Elijah’s life is drawing to an end, his disciple Elisha asks for a double portion of his spirit, so that he can carry on Elijah’s ministry. The inheritance he wants is Elijah’s power to redefine the possible, but Elijah says that it is not his to give, that to inherit that power is a mysterious process which is not ultimately under human control. So the second point is that ultimately, prophetic power is not power that can be easily manipulated or predicted. It is power that emerges in surprising and unpredictable ways. That should give us reason for hope.

This past couple of weeks in the US, one of the most heartless immigration policies of recent memory has been challenged, by a coalition of prophets. When the Trump administration decided that children would be separated from their parents and placed in separate detention facilities, a groundswell of outrage began to spread. It came from all kinds of people, inside and outside the system. Ordinary people, flight attendants and foster parents to even guards in detention centres, who encountered the children, began to bear witness to how traumatic it was for the children to be separated from their parents. Journalists investigated the situation and debunked the false claims that the administration used to obscure their role in it, lawyers went to work on legal action, faith groups started to mobilize to demonstrate and contact their elected representatives. What started with the stroke of a pen has now generated a full-scale social movement, with the power of a tidal wave.

As we look to the future, we may look with optimism or pessimism, we may look with excitement or with dread. There are certainly reasons for both hope and fear. But ultimately, we cannot know what the future holds. History is a complex, even chaotic mix, from which surprising and unpredictable powers will emerge. Somewhere in that history, I believe, God is at work, to bring about good, and to resist evil.

## **We Are Not Alone**

The third insight of this story is that we are not alone in our calling to speak the prophetic word. Sometimes we think of the great prophets as isolated individuals whose spiritual power drew from their own personal relationship with God. That is only part of the truth. The story of Elijah's last journey says that he led Elisha to Bethel and to Jericho, where Elisha met with bands of prophets. Was the purpose of this journey to introduce Elisha to these prophetic communities, and them to him? Did Elijah believe that Elisha needed the support and encouragement of these communities to fulfill his prophetic mission? I think the answer is yes on both counts.

The story of Elisha also makes it clear that his spiritual power came from his relationship to his mentor Elijah. Throughout his last day, Elisha must stick close to his demanding and unconventional mentor. Elijah urges him to stay behind, but Elisha ignores that request and sticks close. It is only by exposing himself as fully as possible to Elijah's spiritual power that Elisha can inherit that power. In the same way we too need to identify sources of spiritual power and moral encouragement and stick close, allow them to challenge and transform and strengthen us. In doing so, we too might inherit a double share of the prophetic spirit.

## **Conclusion**

As we celebrate this Canada Day, let us learn these three lessons from our Scripture readings:

1. that the real power does not belong to the politicians, but to those who dream dreams of what could be but now seems impossible;
2. that because the future is unpredictable, our faithfulness can have consequences far beyond our imagining;
3. that by sticking close to sources of spiritual wisdom and moral integrity, we might inherit the mantle of Elijah.

If that is the kind of citizenship that we practice, Canada will continue to be a great country to live in, because we will have passed on the best kind of inheritance. Amen.