**Canada Day and Christianity**

Mark 12:13-17, 1Peter 2:11-17 by Patty Friesen (July 4, 2021)

*Based on Canada 150 and Christianity by Patrick Preheim, July 2, 2017*

When Patrick and I were working at Faith Mennonite Church in Minneapolis, we got to know Pastor John from Mountain Lake, Minnesota. John told us about a funeral he conducted for a Mennonite who had served in WWII. It is the custom for caskets of U.S. service personnel to be draped in an American flag. The idea of a flag in the sanctuary, let alone on a casket, did not sit well with Pastor Kroeker. The family was clear—the flag stayed. The visuals of a flag covered casket raised theological questions: in our living and dying are we ultimately wrapped in the patronage of a Republic or the strong arms of God? On his way to the pulpit Pastor John processed past the closed casket at the front of the church. As he went by, he placed a bible on top of the flag. It was a small gesture, but one he felt needed to be made. We all need to be reminded that we live and die for One greater than the nation; and that One greater than the nation has lived for us, died for us, and lives again for us.

On this Sunday closest to Canada Day and on our neighbour’s national holiday July 4, it is again worth considering the Christian’s relationship to national identities. In our gospel reading from Mark, the Pharisees think that they can trap Jesus into either making himself unpopular with the crowd by supporting Roman rule or politically suspect to the Romans by rejecting the payment of taxes. Jesus eludes the trap by continuing to insist that people focus on what really belongs to God. Jesus turns the political issue into a theological issue: to whom do we belong and what does God require of us.

In the Hebrew Bible human beings bear the image of God and in the first commandment, thou shalt not have any other gods before Yahweh and thou shalt not make any graven images. And the second commandment “thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” Thus the Roman coin with Caesar’s image may belong to Caesar, but human beings belong to God alone and since God’s image is on our hearts and minds, we love our neighbours.

The pagan religious imagery used on coins violated Jewish rules against making images and idolatry. The inscriptions on Roman coins proclaimed the emperor to be divine, clearly offensive to Jews. One solution to the inevitable necessity of using such offensive coins in everyday dealings was not to look at them. Jesus, however, demands that his opponents, who were able to produce a coin easily, take a look at it. That demand must have caught his audience off guard.

Archaeologists can describe precisely the sort of coin in question. Mark 12:14b says that the tax the Pharisees were asking about was the “poll tax”, levied by the Romans on every Jewish adult listed in the census. It could be paid only in a silver denarius from the imperial mint—one side of the coin was inscribed with the emperor’s wreathed head; the other had a female figure, probably the embodiment of peace, wearing a crown and holding a scepter in one hand and an olive or palm branch in the other. Archaeological findings show that these coins were not in everyday use, even in the Gentile cities in Galilee; the coinage in everyday use by Jews living under Herod Antipas was free of images. Since neither Jesus nor his followers are likely to have encountered such a coin, it must have been produced by one of Jesus’ opponents, more likely the pro-Roman Herodians of Antipas’s court. As soon as Jesus’ opponents identify the image and inscription as Caesar’s, Jesus has the solution: The coin must belong to Caesar, so it should be returned to him.

This story has long been pondered in Christian theological reflection on the challenge of Christian citizenship. It was most commonly used to show that Christians could be both loyal citizens and committed believers. It has also been used to justify the separation of church and state. The church does not have to rule in the political realm. However, Jesus does not set the “things of Caesar” and the “things of God” on the same level. God always has priority. The question of how Christians should relate to the demands of the state would be different if there was a conflict between what God requires and what the state demands. The tax is “indifferent” in Jesus’ view. But when the emperor demanded that Christians show their respect by actually worshipping Caesar, the situation changed (cf. Revelation 13). Then Christians accepted martyrdom rather than violate the worship that belonged to God alone.

Apostles Peter and Paul both wrote that the Christian churches of Asia Minor were to accept (ὑποτάσσω in 1st Peter 2:13-17 and Romans 13:1) the authority of governing institutions. Peter goes so far as to say that we should “honour the emperor”. This is most curious in that the emperor was causing great suffering. 16 times Peter uses a term for “suffer” (πάσχω most often) in his short letter. Philippians 4:21 suggests that Christians served in the emperor’s household. We know members of the early church were also found to have served in the military, for we have accounts of their martyrdoms for refusing orders to fight in battle[[1]](#footnote-2). Certainly those Christians of the early decades “accepted”, “submitted”, and “served” the empire. Christians were able to live so honourably among their neighbors (1st Peter 2:11-12) that the power and influence of the empire was subverted even in the midst of persecution and eventually in 315 AD, Emperor Constantine was converted to Christianity. Then Christianity and the relationship to the state got extremely complicated.

The Anabaptist Reformation of 1525 sought to separate Christianity from the nation’s control and Anabaptists were martyred as the early Christians were in Rome. Eventually Anabaptists either were accepted in Dutch, German and Swiss society or they emigrated to the New World. From Holland to Russia, the Dutch Mennonites were quite involved in politics – in governing their own colonies and in dealing with the Czar’s government and that tradition of political involvement carried over into Canada and the US and continues today as Mennonites are both committed followers of Christ and dedicated political leaders.

I am proud to be Mennonite and on most days I am proud to be Canadian. I am proud to be Canadian when we confess wrongdoing to our First Nations and work hard at Truth and Reconciliation. I am proud to be Canadian when we are a place where all cultures can fit into a mosaic, rather than be reduced into a melting pot of a dominant white culture. I am proud to be Canadian when we live into the vision in which foreign policy is to be guided not by national interest but by the imperative to protect people. I am proud when my taxes fund health care, schools, and community development.

Our form of government is a significant improvement from 1st century Emperor rule, 16th century theocracies, or the Politburo in Russia. Christian responses to intolerant and self-serving polices will look different in a democracy than a dictatorship or theocracy. In fact, we have opportunities that 1st century Christians or 16th century Mennonites would not have dreamed about. We are in a different political world than these eras, and yet our call to serve God and neighbour remains the same. A story which ties these themes of together comes from Samuel Wells, the vicar of St. Martin-in-the Fields in London. In the weeks following the Brexit vote he responded with these words:

With Brexit, it was hard not to see a harsher, more intolerant, less inclusive future for the U.K. Listening to the campaign felt at times like discovering secrets about one’s family one didn’t want to know—and that in the privileged location of central London, one could pretend weren’t true.

My own church, St. Martin’s, is a community that stands for diversity, welcome, and an international and generous richness of life. Members of our staff come from 25 different countries. Shortly after the vote we held a celebration event to cherish and share the pain of those who heard this result and wondered if they still belong in the U.K. But we are at root a community of faith, and we believe that God, who brings resurrection out of death and speaks truth beyond fear, will bring some good out of this confusing and disorienting event. For those who’ve lost the public argument there’s only one thing to do. And that’s to turn anger, grief, and dismay into renewed ministry and mission. The way to do that is by example. It may be people have never experienced or even imagined the kind of renewed, participatory, and dynamic community we strive to embody at St. Martin’s. It’s our job to ensure that they do.

I pray that the U.K. finds a kinder, gentler way of talking about immigration. But if it doesn’t, St. Martin’s must remain a place of hospitality and belonging to those on whom our society has turned its back. I pray that the U.K., or what’s left of it, continues to be a model of tolerance, diversity, and respect. But if it doesn’t, St. Martin’s will still seek to be a blessing to all in our country. I believe it’s possible to build a community of humility, generosity, gratitude, grace, truth, and compassion—for which the only word I know is *church*. A church like St. Martin’s is called to be a living example of what the reconciling, liberating, and transforming love of God can do. It may be that a witness like ours can begin to heal our country and inspire it to take a different, more inclusive, and more hopeful direction... But even if it doesn’t, we’re going to do it anyway.[[2]](#footnote-3)

As Christians and as Canadians, we recognize that “voting is easy; but democracy is hard”.[[3]](#footnote-4) Democracy demands that we get involved with our neighbourhood organizations, with our city and rural municipalities, with our province. It is vital we have relationships with those of our community living on the edge at Friendship Inn, the Lighthouse, Egadz, the Bridge. It is good for us to visit with our city councillors, health care workers and a police officers. I have to think that Peter would describe this as “honourable” living in a democratic society; the kind of witness which makes people respect Christianity and maybe even consider practicing Christianity.

People respecting Christianity is a challenge these days when Christianity has been the source of abuse of Indigenous children. We have a lot of reckoning to do as Christians and as Canadians. We have to deconstruct the religious systems that operated in the name of Christ but not in the Spirit of Christ. We have to confess the failings of Christianity and nationalism both. We have to reconstruct what the Spirit of Christ is calling us to as Christians and what our civic duty is calling us to as honourable citizens in this time. We are Christian and we are Canadian both but we have to put the Bible on top of the flag. Let us pray…

Author of Life, give us hearts set on the coming of your reign; give us wise, just and humble leaders; give all who live in this land a will to live in peace, through Jesus Christ, the One who is above all powers and dominions. Amen. (803 HWB)

1. St. Martin of Tours and St. Maurice and companions of the Theban Legion for example. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Samuel Wells, “What Brexit is revealing” in *The Christian Century* (Dec 7, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Bill Moyers, Quoted in a Bill Moyers interview for PBS fundraising on Friday, June 16, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)