

**A SERMON GIVEN ON THE OCCASION OF A VISIT OF MEMBERS OF
THE UNITED EMPIRE LOYALIST ASSOCIATION OF CANADA**

Rev. Robert Campbell, Westminster Church, September 26, 2010

We have welcomed to our worship today folk who are dedicated to celebrating and keeping alive a particular part of our Canadian national heritage. They are the descendants of the Loyalists, people who lived in the Thirteen Colonies and who, during the American War of Independence, when the colonies rebelled against Britain, remained loyal to the crown and fought on the British side. It was of course, the losing side, and during and after the war, many Loyalists left the new nation, the majority of them coming to the colonies Britain retained in North America, colonies that were later to become Canada.

At certain points these Loyalists were to play a decisive role in the direction of Canadian history. I'll mention just two today. First, they were instrumental in helping to repel American forces and put a halt to American expansionism during the War of 1812. Second, and of particular interest here on the prairies, during the 1880's, many of them participated in the agricultural settlement of the West in tandem with the building of the national railway, forestalling the Americans at another time when they were very much looking north in search of more territory. Canada has now evolved into a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural nation, welcoming people from all over the world. But the fact that there is a Canada to come to may in some measure be attributed to the loyalties and efforts of the ancestors of the guests who are gracing our pews today.

On radio and television, journalists will often say something like, "In the interests of full disclosure..." and then they will reveal some connection to the person or story they are covering. I suppose this is the point where I should say, in the interests of full disclosure, that I am a member of the United Empire Loyalist Association. I have always known that I had Loyalist roots. My parents made sure to tell their children about that. And, if your ancestry goes back far enough in this country, many of you would probably have a Loyalist connection too. One in seven Canadians is descended from them. However, to be certified as a Loyalist, to be entitled to put UE behind your name, you have to do the work of tracing your line back to the original ancestors. For many years Margaret Carter pestered me — I mean, encouraged me — to get at this task. But I never seemed to be able to manage it. Well, fortunately, my sister has become a genealogical bloodhound and she did the work for me.

And when she did, we discovered the most amazing coincidence. My original Loyalist ancestor, who had lived somewhere in the Colony of New York and who settled near what is now St. Catharine's in the Niagara Peninsula was named Robert Campbell, something my parents certainly didn't know when they named me. And his son, who fought alongside General Isaac Brock at the Battle of Queenston Heights in the 1812 War, and who mercifully lived while Brock died, was named James, something Linda and I didn't know when we named our son. Some coincidences, I think, bespeak a providential hand in human affairs.

Now the presence of the Loyalists in church is an invitation to the preacher to move into the realm of public theology — political theology — for these people are focussed on nation, on national heritage, on national values. The problem with addressing such matters, however, is that society has come more and more to think that religion is a purely private and personal thing, and

less and less to expect or accept that the Word of God might be spoken to the community as a community, to the culture as a culture, to the nation as a nation. We are living in a time of suspicion of broad, overarching narratives that intend to describe us or speak to us in our collectivity. The way this used to be said is that religion and politics don't mix. The way it is now said is that there is no place for religion in the public square. Practise your faith, whatever it may be, in private, but don't expect your private faith stance to have a place in society's discussion of public matters. That conversation must be conducted in purely secular terms.

Now, it was against these very ideas that the Pope was reacting in some of the statements he made when he visited Britain last week. Speaking to leaders of the land gathered in Westminster Hall, he pleaded with them to resist the tide of secularism and its drive to marginalize both the faith and its practice. He chose his words very politely. I'd put it more bluntly. At some point Christians need to stand up and say that we are not prepared to be quiet as Christians. That would be to be untrue to what we have received.

For one thing, to try to read our Bible as if it were addressed merely to personal spirituality would be to twist it into something that it manifestly is not. What is the Old Testament if it is not the story of a nation, a nation chosen by God to be his instrument of salvation in the world? Its narratives often say things helpful to the personal life of faith. But, they are clearly written for a public life of faith. And what is the New Testament if it is not a call to the church to be public, to demonstrate to the world the values, the economy, the society of the kingdom of God as it is revealed in Jesus Christ? We cannot ultimately be true to our religion if we confine it purely to our personal life. It has something to say to the public life of the world.

Yet, we are often to hesitant to assess and judge what is happening in the public realm and hesitant to seek direction for our public behaviour in light of God's Word as it comes to us in scripture. Today, for example, the task would be to lay out a theology of Loyalism, to speak of how Loyalism might fit into God's design for the people this nation. But, I have to admit to a certain reticence in doing this. I have not really been trained to think this way. It is easy to speak of Loyalism in historical terms, in political terms, in social terms. But in theological terms? We are just not accustomed to it.

It is interesting that our friends in the United States are not nearly so reticent. For a nation that has a formal separation of church and state enshrined in its constitution, it is fascinating how much public theology emerges from its pulpits. American preachers are quick to talk about what the nation means to God and about God's purposes for America.

I experienced this first hand a few years ago when I was down in the United States on study leave and went to church with an American minister friend on July 4th, Independence Day. Not only did we get patriotic music, but we got a patriotic sermon. The preacher, a graduate seminary student, spoke in lofty terms of the American Revolution as having been conceived in the mind of God before it was enacted by the hand of man. He had no doubts that the right side had won. Showing off his erudition, he quoted from the sermons of several revolutionary era preachers and the quotes he presented made it abundantly clear that those learned clerics had not been afraid to speak to the political situation. In fact, they had obviously played a role in stirring up revolutionary fervour. That day I heard quite a few theological arguments defending the peoples' rebellion against the tyranny of King George and his oppressive ministers. By the about the fourth reference to the tyranny of King George, I couldn't take it any longer and I whispered into

my friend's ear the old Loyalist line: "Better one tyrant three thousand miles away than three thousand tyrants one mile away." Later when we departed the church, my friend could see that I was still agitated, in fact, that the steam was still coming out of my ears. Wanting to be helpful in the situation, but not quite sure about how to calm me down, he finally turned to me and said, "God save the queen?"

As I've thought of that worship experience over the years, I have wondered, is it just the winners who get to write the theology of an event, or might something equally valid come from the experience of the losers? I want to suggest that the Loyalists experience of God has something to offer to both our public and personal life today. And I want to get at it by telling the story of one Loyalist family whose descendants found their way to Westminster Church.

Mrs. Colin H. Campbell was received as a member of this church in 1892, the year of its founding. I regret that I cannot tell you her first name — women in those days appear not to have had first names — at least, not in church records and biographical sketches. But I can tell you that Mrs. Campbell's maiden name was Buck. And the Bucks were United Empire Loyalists. Her father, Dr. Anson Buck, was a distinguished Upper Canada / Ontario physician who developed the practice of medicine in the rural part of the province and made many contributions to public life. He was a well-connected man, numbering among his close personal friends one premier of Ontario and two Fathers of Confederation. His daughter travelled in the same circles and was married to the Hon. Colin H. Campbell, K.C., an eminent barrister and later an Attorney General of the Province of Manitoba. Mrs. Campbell, as befitted a woman of her standing was a tireless worker in church and community on projects related to social welfare, philanthropy, and education.

We are talking here about a well-accepted family, attending an established church, and moving in the right social circles. So many people of Loyalist stock would fit this description, even to this day: nation builders, community leaders, decision-makers, insiders.

But those were not Mrs. Campbell's roots. Her roots were those of an outsider. She came from a people oppressed and marginalized. During the War of Independence, her great-grandmother, Mrs. Buck, lived in a community where there were several families loyal to the crown. Their menfolk were either away serving in a losing cause in the Loyalist armies or were languishing as prisoners of the rebel armies. One day the rebels came and swooped down on their defenceless homes, raiding and confiscating their possessions, torching the barns, stealing their livestock, and driving away the women and children who remained. Mrs. Buck, several months pregnant at the time, found herself on a forced march. Her neighbour, Mrs. Bowman, clutching a week old baby, was allowed to take one blanket for her child. After all, it was November and some compassion needed to be shown. Hungry and freezing, these poor souls wandered through the wilderness of northern New York, trying to get to the safety of a British held fort.

When at last they did, they were given an escort and sent on a march to Quebec City for safety. On the way, in the middle of winter, on a country trail near Lachine, Mrs. Buck gave birth to Mrs. Campbell's grandfather. They were lucky to survive. Many did not.

In those days Loyalists were outsiders, condemned as traitors by the winning side, stripped of all their holdings, denied the opportunity to fit in, deemed unworthy to be part of the new America, turned into refugees by the political cleansing that followed the war. They were a miserable, pathetic lot who did not count and to whom the community felt no sense of obligation. In short the bottom had fallen out of their world.

Now, when something like this happens, you can give up, or you can carry on. These people carried on, and carried on in a fashion I wonder if we would have the capacity to do today. What made it possible? Well, they lost their land, they lost their place in society, but they did not lose their faith. As people steeped in the narratives of the Bible, they knew of God's continuing concern for the oppressed and downtrodden, the stranger and the refugee. As people driven into the wilderness, they remembered how God had led and sustained the Israelites in the wilderness for many years after their departure from Egypt. The Loyalists could read their exodus in the light of the biblical exodus and find hope from that to endure.

In short, the desperation of their situation never led them to believe that they had been abandoned by God, that God was concerned only for the victors and not for them. No, they had read the book. They knew the story-line. The God who cared for Israel, the God who was incarnate in Christ, is the God of the marginalized, is the God of the underdog. And so they trusted God to open a new door in front of them after the old one had closed behind them. God repaid their trust. God provided. And their disaster was turned to deliverance. And during that time of intense deprivation and struggle, they learned the truth of what God had said through the Prophet Isaiah. "See, I have refined you, but not like silver; I have tested you in the furnace of adversity"(48:10). The experience of the Loyalists teaches us that adversity, though it is a scary word, is not a dirty word. It teaches us that it is in conditions of adversity that God does his greatest work. Many of us need to know that.

Now, life was transformed for the Loyalists in their new land. Busy establishing British institutions of governance and laying the groundwork for Canada, they were able to go from outsiders to insiders, from refugees to rulers within the space of a generation or two. But that is not where they began, and Loyalists who remember their roots will always be concerned for the plight of other people for whom the bottom has fallen out of their world.

Sadly, the world still produces refugees today. Because of the fallen nature of humanity, because of our propensity for evil, there will always be places in the world where some people can simply no longer stay where they are, for whom no place exists in the society they inhabit, for whom there is no choice but to go. And when the door closes behind them, will they find a door opening to them somewhere? The Loyalists found an open door in this part of the world; and see what a fantastic contribution they made. Will our doors remain open to others who, in time, can do the same? In a modern and complex society, the acceptance and accommodation of refugees in a way that does not compromise the security of the nation or allow those who would take criminal advantage to make a mockery of our institutions will always be a huge and daunting undertaking. But, I submit that we must not allow the difficulties to stop us from being a nation that finds a place for the dispossessed and the desperate.

To that end the church has stories to tell, biblical narratives of a God who opens doors, a God of whom Isaiah said, "You have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat"(25:4). And the Loyalists have stories to tell, for the Loyalists have encountered that very God in their experience and they have found the biblical story come alive in their story.

Let us not hesitate to tell our stories. I don't know how welcome they'll be out in the public square. But that is most certainly where they need to be heard. And if we don't tell them, who will?