



God Keep Our Land Glorious and Free

Texts: Psalm 80: 1-7; Isaiah 64: 1-9; Luke 19: 41-48

November 27, 2011

Rev. Kenneth R. Gallinger

This morning's sermon was born initially not out of scripture readings, but rather out of an e-mail from a friend. Bryan was fascinated by a recent CBC survey on the subject of the national anthem, *O Canada*. According to this survey, 86% of Canadians were in favour of retaining the words "God keep our land glorious and free," while only 14% favoured deleting God and substituting more secular language. Bryan asked my opinion and, because Bryan is who he is and I am who I am, I tossed off this eight-word response: "God doesn't give a rat's rear what we sing". To which Bryan replied, "I knew I could count on you for a reasoned and thoughtful response." This from a man who daily sends me jokes with semi-naked women in poses I didn't think were even physically possible. Obviously some people are in better shape than I am.

It's interesting though how much this question of the role of God in public life is being talked about these days. It's driven, in part, by a reaction to the excesses of the Christian right south of the border, as well as concern about the Zionist agenda in Israel and the Islamist agenda around the world. But this discussion is not new.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, and the Biblical texts this morning are profoundly political in nature. That's normal; Advent is the season when the most political readings of scripture come into the lectionary cycle each year. This morning's Psalm, number 80, was written at a time when the holy land had been laid waste by a hostile and violent enemy, and it is a prayer for God to make things whole again, to rebuild the cities and institutions that had been sacred before their destruction. Listen:

*Lord God, come back, we pray,
look down from heaven and see (our suffering).
Come and protect your land.
Our enemies have thrown it on the fire like dung,
but now the frown of your rebuke will destroy them.*

Isaiah 64 comes from a very particular moment in Israel's history, when the Hebrews had been driven out of their cities, their homes had been destroyed, and they were in captivity to a Babylonian enemy. It's an attempt at political analysis, an editorial aimed at God, seeking to understand how God's chosen people could be facing such terrible circumstances. Listen again:

*No one had ever heard, no eye has ever seen any god but you act like this
for the sake of a people who trust you.
Yes, you have been angry, and we have been sinners,
but now we have returned to your ways, so we will be saved.
We are the clay, and you are the potter,
so please, don't let your anger with us go too far.*

The third reading is more recent. It's from the New Testament, and it recounts one of only two occasions when we are told that Jesus wept. There's no evidence that Jesus ever shed tears for himself, although God knows he had enough reason to, but he did weep when his friend Lazarus died, and he wept again for his beloved city of Jerusalem, much in the way that some people today weep for their beloved city of Toronto. Listen:

*When Jesus came in sight of the city, he shed tears, saying:
If you had only recognized the way to (God's reign of) peace.
But a time is coming when your enemies will raise fortifications around you.
They will encircle you and hem you in;
they will dash your children to the ground.
They will not leave one stone unturned.*

I have to confess that there's something about these ancient readings, with their firm conviction about a God who sits in heaven, protecting one group of people against another, deciding when cities will stand and fall, supporting one army and slaughtering another – something that I find really quite charming. “God keep our land glorious and free” – it's a lovely worldview in some ways. This brand of ancient theism, so nicely captured by the old spiritual “All night, all day, angels watchin' over me my Lord,” can be profoundly comforting: we as a nation are in God's hands and, at the end of the day, even though God may get angry with us and we go through bad times, we will be restored, God will defeat the enemies, our cities will be rebuilt, and life will go on . . . all because that's the way God wants it to be.

As post-theists, however, these readings are somewhat more difficult. Firstly, for many of us, that whole notion of a warrior god who blasts cities into oblivion and sides with one army/football team/faith group against another, is simply not on; it's a charming rah-rah mythology, but so is the story of Cinderella.

Secondly, and more important, history has showed us the danger of producing this mythology out to its seemingly logical conclusion: the line between “God Keep our Land” and “Gott Mit Uns”, never mind Allahu Akbar, is a very fine one – too fine to be entrusted to military generals, elected demagogues or self-appointed messiah-figures.

This morning we sang “O Come, O Come Emmanuel”. *Gott Mit Uns*, the logo worn by the Nazi Wehrmacht on their belt buckles during the Second World War, is the direct German translation of the word *Emmanuel*.

Beyond these obvious difficulties that the texts pose for contemporary post-theistic Christians, however, there is another more profound difficulty buried in the texts themselves. When we look a little more closely, we quickly discover that they don't actually say exactly what we think they do. Yes, the texts do affirm the notion that Jehovah watches over his people; they are very clear in their conviction that God is faithful, God protects the nation, and God never abandons the nation in times of trouble. But the texts don't stop there; in fact, that's really just the launching off point for what these texts are really about. Listen again:

- Psalm 80: *Never again will we turn away from you; give us life, and we will once again call your name.*

- Isaiah 64: *We have all been like unclean things, like filthy rags. We wither, all of us, like leaves, and our misdeeds carry us off like the wind.*
- Luke 19 (the words of Jesus): *You did not recognize the moment of your visitation. My house should be a house of prayer, but you have turned it into a den of thieves.*

These passages are not, it turns out, the breezy assurances of God's protection that we at first might have thought. Quite the contrary. Yes, they affirm that God is with us, and stays with us through thick and thin. But they are also quite clear, even in the language of that old theistic paradigm, that God is neither prepared, nor willing, nor going to rescue us from our own unfaithfulness, greed, or stupidity. If we read them correctly, these passages make clear that the God of scripture is not a God who will keep our land glorious and free on our behalf, while we stumble on hoarding and grasping and destroying creation. The God of the Bible is not One who will shut down the oil sands, cut our profligate energy consumption, protect us against the excesses of the market place, or reorder our economy in the direction of sufficiency versus unfettered consumption. That's not how the God of the Bible in fact works, despite the Canadian national anthem, Nazi belt buckles, or the ravings of lunatic Islamists.

These are indeed troubling passages because if we read them correctly in a post-theistic light, here's what they say:

"You, Canada, are a holy people. You have within you, and amongst you, the potential to be a light to the world, a place where sacredness shines for all the world to see. You have the potential to be a chosen people, but whether or not you live up to that potential depends not on some far-away, imaginary deity. Whether you are a light to the world depends directly on decisions you make, and actions you take."

That's what these passages actually say – if we take the Bible seriously enough to really dissect it. And they say the same thing if you substitute the words United States of America in place of Canada or, for that matter, if you insert the words "State of Israel". Chosen-ness is not a right in the Bible: it is a calling and an opportunity . . . but a contingent opportunity. And that, in the end, is why these difficult passages belong in Advent, the season of preparation. That's why we read these verses at the same time of year as we sing "O Come, O Come Emmanuel". We are preparing for the birth of the Messiah. Scripture tells us that we prepare best not simply by decorating Christmas trees . . . as much fun as that can be. We prepare by building justice, working for peace, reshaping the economy, creating the land, the lands, we are intended to be.

A few weeks ago, one of our members, Warren Coughlin, directed me to a remarkable presentation that is part of the TED-talks Internet series. I'm a big fan of TED-talks, but I'd somehow missed this one, so I'm grateful to Warren for sending me to it. Richard Wilkinson is a social epidemiologist at the University of Nottingham, England. Together with researcher Kate Pickett, Wilkinson has looked in great depth at the correlation between the factors that make for happy and healthy societies and a number of economic criteria. He focused his studies on successful market democracies not on the developing world, where the results might, he admits, have been different. But Wilkinson looked at countries like Canada, the United States, Japan, Sweden, Germany and so on, and he asked the question: Is there any direct correlation between the social well-being of citizens of those countries, and the economic conditions in which those countries operate?

His findings are absolutely remarkable, and rather than describe them, I want you now to watch and listen to just three minutes of his presentation from July of this year:

http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/richard_wilkinson.html (time code: 2:19 – 5:30)

To summarize in a few words, Wilkinson's key findings are that, amongst successful market democracies, there is absolutely no correlation between the well-being of citizens and the Gross National Income; there is, however, a hugely significant relationship between the well-being of citizens and the size of the gap between the richest and poorest members of a society: the larger the gap between rich and poor, the higher the incidence of social problems and the lower the level of human well-being. Or, to say it another way: above a certain threshold, it doesn't matter a damn how rich you are. What matters is the size of the gap between you and other people around you. The larger that gap, the less likely it is that you'll be happy, or that they'll be happy.

Now let me wrap up with three quick observations and an even quicker conclusion.

Observation 1: The criteria which Wilkinson uses to measure human well-being are *exactly* the same criteria Jesus uses when he talks about the Kingdom of God. Wilkinson uses science to measure things like trust, health, the welfare of kids, the freedom of prisoners, and so on. Jesus uses stories to teach about exactly the same things. So in theological terms, what Wilkinson is saying is that this Kingdom of God that we Christians say we want so badly, is closer to reality in countries where the gap between rich and poor is smaller than it is in countries where that gap is huge.

Observation #2: Wilkinson's data, presented in a part of his lecture I didn't show you because of time, confirms what we already know: that it actually doesn't matter a bit how you narrow that gap, as long as you do. He compares Sweden and Japan, two countries with the smallest gap between rich and poor, two countries with the highest measures of human wellbeing. In Japan, economic inequality is kept narrow by the structure of the economy itself; senior executive salaries are much less than North American standards, while minimum wages and employment levels are high. In Sweden, the natural gap between highest and lowest earners is almost as high as in North America, but aggressive taxation of the wealthy is used as a vehicle for re-distribution of that wealth. *And it makes no difference* – one system works as well as the other. Swedes and Japanese score almost exactly alike on the conventional measures of human well-being. In theological terms, this means that there are a variety ways for people to get closer to each other – what matters is not *how* we do it, but rather *that* we do it.

Observation 3: The data makes clear that relatively small differences of inequality make huge differences in peoples' lives. For example, the statistical difference between child well-being in Sweden, one of the countries with the lowest gaps between rich and poor, and the United States, with one of the largest gaps, is huge, but the difference between the income gaps is relatively small. In Sweden, the richest 20% of society make 4x what the poorest 20% make. In the United States, the richest 20% make 8.5x the poorest 20%. That's not a huge difference, relative to the enormous difference it makes in happiness and well-being of every citizen of those countries, and perhaps especially the children. Nobody here is talking about a socialist state in which everyone is equal – that's another discussion entirely. All that's being said is that anything that narrows the gap between people contributes in hugely significant ways to their well-being and happiness. In theological terms, in other words, small things matter.

Now the conclusion. 86% of Canadians want to keep singing “God Keep our Land Glorious and Free”. Good on ‘em. And we Christians want to keep singing “O Come, O Come Emmanuel”. Good on us. What would happen if, in this Advent of 2011, we – as post-theistic Christians, who bravely declare that “Christ has no Body Now but Ours” – decided to prepare the way for the coming of Christ by working, in whatever way is appropriate to us, to actually narrow the gap between rich and poor in this chosen land of Canada?