

This Sunday begins a week of celebration in the Canada and in the United States as we celebrate our National Days. It is a time to reflect on the amazing story of the populating of the Americas with people from every remote and close area of the world. This is a story of epic proportions, a mass migration of people, the volume of which had never been seen before in the history of humankind.

Everyone here today has a story of how your family ancestors came to settle in Canada or the United States. Some of us are very interested in this family history and others do not have any interest or curiosity in the family tree. However we feel about our background, it has shaped us and given us the DNA of who we are.

I grew up in a household where family genealogy was always a topic of discussion. My mother and her older sister were the family historians, traveling to England, the Channel Islands and Europe to trace family lineage. My mother's paternal grandfather came to Canada from the Isle of Jersey where the family settled after being expelled from France for being Protestant. These people were called French Huguenots, religious refugees from lands which had become very unwelcoming to those whose religious faith was not following the official state Catholic Church.

So, certainly the religious turmoil within Europe caused by the Protestant Reformation was a situation which prompted people to be on the move to a land where they could practice their faith and life style in peace. The Anabaptist movement within the Protestant reformation which brought about the formation of Baptists, Mennonites, Hutterites and other groups caused great turmoil. Their stance of pacifism and their unwillingness to go to war made them targets of derision and hate. My father's sister Emma married a man raised as a Mennonite who as a child in 1917, was placed in a boxcar with his family in Russia and sent to Germany, no longer wanted in the new revolution overtaking Russia. He remembers arriving and the doors being unsealed. People in the cars counted the dead and sick due to lack of clean water, food and the bitter cold suffered in the long days and nights of the journey. All the hardships of this journey made their later arrival in the cold of Manitoba a seeming blessing. Here was a land where they could be safe and free.

My father's great grandfather and great grandmother came from Ireland. One was Protestant from the north and other Catholic from the south; neither family was happy with this turn of events and so they came to London, Ontario to start a new life. These early settlers were often so pleased to be able to make a clean start in the new land of perceived freedom, that they never spoke much of the homeland and the families they left behind. This is not only sad but difficult for the future generations who want to do research on family history.

My two grandmothers were born in Norway, one in Boda and the other in Oslo. Their families came to homestead in Minnesota, raise large families and start anew. One daughter came to Winnipeg from Minnesota and married my uncle. Her sister, my grandmother, came to assist her with her baby and married a brother.

Another sister came north to assist my grandmother and married a third brother. Legend has it that my great grandmother in Minnesota would not permit a further daughter to go north and marry a Canadian.

There were so many reasons why people left Europe, the lands of the first settlers, to find a new life of possibilities on this new continent. As a child who was always interested in family stories, I often wondered aloud why my ancestors could not have gone south to warmer climates rather than settle in the cold of Canada.

If you have traveled to Halifax or to Ellis Island in New York City, you have seen the landing points for the new immigrants. Here people from all over Europe initially arrived in hope that they would be accepted as immigrants. Many were placed in quarantine due to tuberculosis or other diseases. Many were emaciated from the years of hunger and hardship in the lands they had left. Their reception was not always welcoming, and many were frightened by the prospect of a new home, a new language and being surrounded by people from all parts of the world.

How can we not remember with silent humility and awe the courage of these people. They came often with large families, little possessions and no financial capital. Yet, husband and wife had decided to go far across the waters to a new land for the sake of a better life and new opportunities for their children. The sacrifice of people who bid farewell to families in Europe knowing they would never see each other again.

The stories in the Americas are stories of the courage of women, many of whom had to bury their children and face haunting loneliness in isolated places. Another story if you will from my family. My mother's paternal grandfather decided to leave London, Ontario for the west. He settled near Winnipeg, built a sod house and walked to the city to practice his trade as a plasterer. He decided at some point to visit England and worked his way back there. In Plymouth, he met a young woman and fell in love. She had been raised in a private girl's school and was not familiar with household work. His stories of Winnipeg and Canada fascinated her and she agreed to come out to Winnipeg and marry him. He returned to Winnipeg and she booked passage for Canada. She arrived in Canada and took a train to Winnipeg. They were reunited there and were married. It was only then that he told her they were to live some 30 miles south of Winnipeg and took her to her new home which was a one room house made of sod.

Somehow, she survived, learned new skills, faced the days alone as he walked to Winnipeg for weekly work, cared for the animals and gave birth to nine children. In other words, she not only survived, she helped create a new world. Her story is one of so many women in the settlement days – they are the heroines, the ones who helped life to be civilized and worth living, who helped their husband in his dream for new opportunities. They were lonely days for wives with no social supports, yet they survived and in time thrived. These women were indeed heroines in our country's history.

For my great grandmother, as for so many others, the community church was a key, central part of her life. She and my great grandfather donated an acre of land for the

church and the church cemetery. She chose the name Avonlea for the church, a name the church still carries. It is on this very land where all my relatives lie. When I take my very interested grandson to the cemetery which I do each time I visit Manitoba, he goes from grave to grave and I tell him the stories of each relative all over again. In this process, the people buried there come alive and I realize again how blessed we all are by who went before us.

Each of you have a story to tell of your ancestors. I hope you take the time to share these stories with one another and with your children and their children. We are all a product of those who went before us and we carry the genes of the ages within us. Future generations will look back on us and reflect on what we have done. Hopefully, we will not be found wanting.

Canadians should be especially interested in the early days of Canada. Along with the early explorers came the missionaries. Today, these missionaries get bad press, blamed for all that has gone wrong in civilization. However, this is not fair. We forget the courage of the early explorers going to lands far away where they had no idea what they might find. They were people of their day, not our day, with the knowledge we have in hindsight.

These early Christian leaders were not along just to spread the Gospel, they were there as well to minister to the explorers themselves. They operated as medical men, buried the dead, cautioned for mercy, were among the first to learn native languages, often acting as language interpreters. They protected native woman from the exploits of some of the explorers and established classes to teach literacy, translating well known scripture passages into native languages for the local people. We have examples such as Father Brebeuf who wrote hymns in the native languages and worked so hard to make the message of Christ alive within their context of life.

We are well aware here in the County of the history of the Methodist Circuit Riders who traveled by horseback to lead services of worship and conduct Sunday School classes with the early United Empire Loyalists. They established churches across the land and we are all recipients of the faith they showed and the faith they instilled in citizens. We can thank those who risked all to ensure that God's message of peace and comfort was available to all.

Finally, we can celebrate the audacity of many people who looked at this vast, at times seemingly inhospitable land, and saw a future country sea to sea. Our first Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald, was a dreamer of possibilities. It took raw courage to promise to the colonies in British Columbia and Vancouver Island that Canadians would push a railroad east to west through Northern Ontario, the prairies and the Rockies to the Pacific. Naysayers said it could not be done. While they were negative, creating bad press with negative advertising we know so well today, Sir John got about exciting and convincing key people and got on with the job. And surprise of surprises, he got the railroad completed and Canada was assured of unity shore, to shore, to shore.

As an aside, as you cross Canada, you can see the big hotels the railroad built, the Royal York Hotel in Toronto being one. Again naysayers said this was wasteful and a folly. The CPR officials said: If we build them, people will come. Today, to me, these hotels remain across Canada as profound symbols of optimism and faith. We wonder where this inspiration and audacity is today with our political leaders and Canadians in general.

We have so much to be thankful for this Canada Day. We have remained a welcoming country to as many as 250,000 people a year, people we have invited and welcomed to join in the Canadian dream of fairness, justice and equality for all.

Canada was built on Christian principles. Christians alone do not own these values but the fact the early explorations were accomplished by Christians has enbued this country and shaped its destiny. Along the way we were not always fair to First Nations people; we could be derisive about people from some countries; we did keep the Chinese from full citizenship until 1948; we did place Japanese Canadians in camps in the war. We could come up with many examples of where we were less than stellar in our actions.

However, fundamental to Canada's understanding of people is the Christian belief that all people of whatever faith and culture are children of God and therefore worthy of just treatment and respect.

Human rights are an expectation; fair justice before the law is fundamental; human dignity is worthy of respect.

So, this weekend we remember and celebrate the founding and creation of this land we love, this country we call with pride our home and native land. When we remember and celebrate, we also remind ourselves again of our individual responsibilities as citizens to respect our laws, to preserve and enhance the livability of our land and to leave this place a better country than when we arrived.

So what are you doing to celebrate? In what way are you thanking God for his rich bounty to us as Canadians? Are you remembering the courage of your ancestors who braved so much hardship to start anew in this country, these people who created the opportunities we take for granted?

Canada is a country under God. God has richly blessed us. We can indeed celebrate openly and joyously as blessed people. And in our rejoicing, we also remind ourselves of God's expectation on us to be active doers for him in our daily life and in all we do. What we have, we have in stewardship from God. How we use these bountiful gifts is the challenge for all of us this day and every day.

Thanks be to God who has so richly blessed us and who has walked with our ancestors as he walks now with us.

Rev. Gary Magarrell