

From Sea to Sea (to Sea) to ... See (?)

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Growing up in a semi-arid, high mountain valley, and walking and camping out in the vastness of deserts marks a person; and I have to tell you, the sight of our great rivers and the expanse of oceans surging and stretching to the horizon still fill me with awe. And barges moving down the Fraser, fishing boats returning from the sea, boats under sail and coastal ferries—do you know how exotic they are? And any bridge more than fifty meters long, spanning a river or an ocean inlet?—miraculous structures with one foot here and the other stretching out into the twilight zone! It's the sheer volume of water coursing down our rivers and moving with the tides in ocean straits and inlets with their boats and bridges, more than anything else, that make me feel like I'm living in a foreign land.

I knew ponds and snow-fed, fickle creeks, irrigation ditches and water from spout and sprinkler as a kid; nothing like the grandeur here. Mine were more modest, simpler waters; close-at-hand in field and home. Now from these, imagine, you're also growing up, as well, on Bible stories, church hymns, and classic myths and trying to make sense of the evocative strangeness of great rivers, winds and waves, and bounding mains. Well, there *is the mind's eye*: you try to imagine, because you're told that it's important, to conjure in the mind and feel the river that flowed out of Eden to the four corners of the earth, of those who wept by the waters of Babylon, and walked the shores of Galilee; there's the gathering at the river, the beautiful, the beautiful river, and Odysseus sailing the wine dark sea in his epic journey home.

And later on you may learn of the seven sacred rivers in Hinduism, of how the Ganges flows from Vishnu's foot and spreads out into the world through the hair of Shiva; or read of an

ancient Greek who said: “No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man.” Or discover that the traditional Nuxalk people believe that each person is born with a nuskelusta—a spiritual water basin—filled with sacred water replete with power that determines one’s fortune in life. Entire nations like the Sto:lo, the river people of the Fraser Valley, take their name from water.

Unlike lines on a map, elements like water, genuinely endure. Because our lives depend on them, they embed in our cultures and through the alchemy of untold creative minds across time and place become potent symbols expressing truths about life itself: its flux, its fecundity, its flow and ebb. No wonder we instinctively push back against polluting, despoiling and commodifying the elements (earth air, fire and water). They infuse and influence nation-defining symbols and myths, intimate social relations, economic systems, notions about the common good, and the most personal of beliefs about self, others, world and cosmos.

The element of water as a nation-defining symbol and myth, a way of looking at and understanding one’s country and its place in the world, that’s what I want to talk about now; and I think it’s particularly apt on this World River’s Day, and this past week’s visit of the Bishop of Rome with his message to the world’s elites, immigrant nations, as well as to the working poor and homeless.

When the founders of Confederation met in a series of conferences and orderly negotiations that culminated in the creation of a new nation in 1867—the first, I might add of any colony of any European empire to extricate itself from the grip of empire through negotiations, not war—I’m sure the founders didn’t know that all 203 First Nations communities in British Columbia were located on fish-bearing waterways. They did know, however, something about

oceans, rivers and lakes. They knew that the nation they would build was bounded east, west and north by three of the world's five great oceans. It was already the third commercial maritime power in the world, and would in time, just after the Second World War, and before most of our shipping was sold off, become the largest. They knew that rivers coursed through every nook of Canada and through our growing collective history. First Nations, then immigrants from Europe, from the States and Asia, built their homes along the banks and shores of rivers, lakes and oceans, and depended on them for food, trade, travel, settling, culture and communication.

So when Leonard Tilley of New Brunswick proposed "Dominion" as the political term to describe an aspect of this nation a-borning, and referenced it to Psalm 72 and Zachariah 9:10, where it states: "*And his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth,*" it made all the sense in the world to those who gathered in Charlottetown and Quebec City; it made sense, it felt apt, for a couple of interesting reasons.

First, unlike what many of us may have learned, or believed growing up, in the minds of those mid 19th century Canadians, the word "dominion," coming as it did specifically from those sources in Hebrew Scripture, did not carry colonial implications. In both Psalm 72 and Zachariah 9, "the word dominion was used to express power. Power 'from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth.' The type of country—the meaning of dominion," writes John Ralston Saul, "was to be tied to the country's motto, ensuring that its non-colonial sense would be clear. To make it perfectly clear you only have to read the official French translation: *La Puissance du Canada.*" (Saul, *A Fair Country*...p.253)

And there's this song we sing, as well, that underlines this view of dominion as the power of a nation, "From East to Western sea/Our own beloved native land/Our true North strong and free."

Let's return to Leonard Tilley of New Brunswick and the scripture setting of our nation's motto: *A Mari Usque Ad Mare*—from sea to sea. It furls out like a banner on our official coat of arms flanked by lion and unicorn, beneath a sprig of red maple leaves and other symbols of mythic heraldry: crowns, harps, shields, roses and fleur de lis. (No First Nations there!)

A Mari Usque Ad Mare. We've already seen how Tilley and his colleagues knew what was happening and approved the intent of the words in the verse preceding the motto: "*dominion shall be* from sea to sea and from the river..." They knew their Bible back in those days. Many were fervent believers. Tilley was an evangelical low-church Anglican—a person who believed that the application of a social conscience was also a demonstration of one's faith. The Francophones knew their Psalms—for they are essential scriptures used in Catholic church services, and thus played an important role in French speaking Catholic cultural.

Let's take a closer look at Psalm 72; I think we might be in for something of a surprise. The whole of the Hebrew Bible is predicated on a world view that we are all sojourners, temporary inhabitants and stewards of a planet not of our making, a world with all its physical features and living creatures surveyed and pronounced "very good."

Psalm 72 is a prayer of blessing on the person exercising power, of dominion over a local piece of turf in that beautiful world of ours. A prayer of blessing, to be sure, this Psalm of David is also great visionary statement about the power of the ruler and his and her obligation to create a more equitable society, secure peace and the common good, and to be of service to the poor.

Listen to the words; I'm not making this up:

May he judge the people with righteousness and the poor with justice.

May there be an abundance of grain...and prosperity for the people.

May she defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy and crush the oppressor:

He delivers the needy when they call, the poor and him who has no helper;

She saves the lives of the needy.

May he be like showers that water the earth.

In his days may peace abound.

From oppression she redeems their life, for precious is their blood in her sight.

May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.

“*A Mari Usque Ad Mare*”—from sea to sea (to sea). Psalm 72 is one of the most moving, forthright biblical statements of egalitarianism, inclusion and justice; of the responsibility of those who govern to ensure the welfare of the people. The biblical scholar Walter Deller speaking of this Psalm, wrote that it's about the “obligation to create a more equitable society, which means a particular obligation to the poor.” And he wonders, if by emphasizing Psalm 72, placing it at the very heart of Confederation, were Tilley and his colleagues making an ironic comment on the British class system, of which they actually disapproved? For many of them, it must have been an expression of their intent, “their dream that Canada would be a more egalitarian, a more just place, a harking back to the principles of Howe, LaFontaine and Baldwin.” (Saul, *A Fair Country*...p 255-6)

“To pretend,” writes John Ralston Saul, “that the Fathers of Confederation didn’t notice or didn’t understand the sense of the Psalm around which they built the core idea of Canada is to refuse to deal with them as intelligent, sophisticated men caught up in a great creative project.” And then he goes on to assert: “I can’t think of a more conscious group in our four centuries of history.” (Saul, 256)

- All rivers run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the rivers flow, there they flow again. Wrote Koheleth, the author of the book of Ecclesiastes over 2000 years ago.
- Let justice roll down like a river, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Amos 5:24
- Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world’s great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words... I am haunted by waters.” (Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through it*)

I am haunted by waters. By rivers of justice. By the dream of the founders of this nation that ours would be a fair country from sea to sea, governed for a time by those who represent us, by women and men intent, by word and deed, to ensure the common good, the welfare of all those who live here.

It’s been nearly two weeks now since this congregation co-hosted an All-Candidates Forum in this Sanctuary. It was beautiful Wednesday evening. Candidates were asked to address four topics: Aboriginal Issues, Environment and the Economy, Affordable Housing and Climate Change. This was a non-partisan event. Our Environment and Social Justice Committees reached out to all federal parties inviting them to send a representative candidate to participate in this widely publicized event. Three parties responded. Sadly, despite numerous

invitations and genuine interest/openness on our part, no candidate from a fourth party was on the stage that evening; in fact, no riding or campaign office of this particular party had the decency to even reply to our invitations. Which is unfortunate, because those in attendance (nearly two hundred people) were courteous, curious and engaged; and all of us came away better educated and determined to vote.

The good news is this: first, our Environment and Social Justice Committees are alive and well, and they, with our event co-sponsors and supporting organizations, put together an excellent program that evening. Second, was the courage, thoughtfulness and decency of the three candidates who had to think quickly on their feet, respond unscripted and coherently to questions from the floor and to the statements of other candidates on this stage. I was proud of them, proud even just being a Canadian that evening, to see that people of such high calibre and commitment to the well-being of their ridings and this country were running for election.

And finally, and here's the thing: Aboriginal Issues, Environment and the Economy, Affordable Housing and Climate Change—these are four of the great and pressing challenges of our time, facing our nation. I heard on this stage, and could see in the well-informed and passionate words of these three very different people, a version of Canada—who we've been and what we yet aspire to as a country—a version of Canada that was consonant and fitting with the intent, with the dream of those in Charlottetown and Quebec nearly a 150 years ago who knew and affirmed the words of that visionary, prophetic Psalm. Justice. Equity. Inclusion. Prosperity. Peace. And the special obligation of those who govern to “deliver the needy when they call, and the poor and him and her who has no helper.”

My hope is that those who are seeking election during this season will be conscious of a call to realize this deeper, ancient, and yet *so contemporary*, insight about dominion. May we be worthy of it as well.