



## *Richmond Hill Reflections*

**“Beyond Nation and Tribe”** (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

December 15, 2019; Third Sunday of Advent

Reading: Ruth 1:14-22; 1 Kings 1:15-30

There's something about this time of year. For a time everyone's kinder. Habs and Leafs fans cease hostilities. People are more likely to hold a door open, at least until the mad scramble on the 24<sup>th</sup>. Families set aside squabbles and gather for dinner with hope that a new squabble won't erupt. My examples are tongue in cheek, but more seriously, on Christmas Eve 1914, as “Silent Night” wafted over no man's land, for a day, enemies became friends as opposing soldiers played games of soccer, exchanged sweets, spoke of sweethearts and pondered the possibility of peace.

I share this scene when people looked beyond nation, because we often don't, reverting more and more to “us-and-them” thinking. A resurgence in partisanship, sectarianism, racism is tearing at the solidarity we thought was on our horizon. It feels like we're becoming more tribal. The push for Brexit seen in the UK election this week, at least in England, shows that. Loyalty to one's tribe isn't wrong. In fact, it assures our survival out of childhood. We rely on those we trust, starting with our family. We see this as Bathsheba advocates for Solomon. We look to our tribe because we all venture outside our family and need to know who has our back in the struggle to survive. People we don't know become family because they act like us. We share customs, language, ways of seeing the world. Our tribe hunts with us, protects us against predators, and, as the story shows with conflict erupting in a family let alone with another group, we expect our tribe to fight in times of threat. In the harshness of the pre-modern world we needed our tribe. In calmer times, lines between groups blur, but when under threat, as many feel today, we look again to our tribe.

Despite the need for a tribe in our evolution, we know from history that having a group where we feel loved and nurtured can morph into something more dangerous. One danger is how being part of a tribe turns into tribalism as we become polarized. As long as we interact with others, we can disagree and still get along. But when we withdraw into tribes, our worldview is reinforced. We are good, rational, just. The others are bad, irrational, barbaric. We are shaped in this by various cognitive biases. One is affective bias. We give more value to things that make us feel good. We feel good when we belong to a group and tend to believe the tribe's perspective has higher worth than another's. There's focus bias where things we pay attention to seem larger. Also, repetition bias: the more an idea is repeated, the more we see it as true. You see how feedback loops occur. We feel good to be in a group. The group values some ideas over others, encourages us to focus there. We accord them greater weight, repeat them and they seem more true. No wonder the world's as it is.

Jesus was also born into a divided world. He was Jewish, a tribe under great duress. They lived under Roman occupation, most people struggling under high taxes, loss of land base, judged for their religion. Under those circumstances many people felt the best way to survive was to cling more fervently to their tribe. But Jesus took a different approach, seeing connection rather than separation

as the best way forward. He called a divergent group as disciples - fishers, zealots and tax collectors sitting together, especially at table. One of the best ways to break down tribalism, be it between social conservatives and progressives, Tories, NDPers and Liberals, Catholics and Protestants, is to help people see they have more in common than they thought. This method was used by US Senator George Mitchell as he brokered an end to “the troubles” between Unionists and Republicans in Northern Ireland. They weren’t getting anywhere, meeting as they were in a former British government building, especially as the press daily asked questions that reinforced sticking points of each side. They went to a secret location. They ate together. They couldn’t sit as groups across the table and were forbidden to talk business. “What will we talk about?” they asked. “What most people not negotiating an end to conflict talk about. Your kids, families, what you did on the weekend.” He joked with them, saying he always went to the opera before leaving New York to see them. He knew every line of La Boheme and knew their lines too. He helped them laugh at themselves and see what they had in common. They ended up with a breakthrough.

The Good Friday Agreement shows us that tribal impasses are not impossible to overcome. There is another way. We see this in our reading from Ruth. She is loyal to her mother-in-law despite the hardship they faced. Under the stress, you’d expect tribal lines to win. Unlike Orpah, Ruth clung to Naomi. They had become family, even though their nations were historically enemies.. This is what Matthew wanted to emphasize in his gospel. He was writing to a group of Jewish and Gentile Christians. Historically they were enemies too, and they just couldn’t get past it and accept each other. He reminded them of their shared faith in Jesus. And pointed to how he over-came tribal bias. Matthew emphasized Jesus’ Jewishness, and that time and again he reached across tribal lines. This is why Matthew gives us the magi. Gentiles honouring a Jewish child. Matthew also traces Jesus’ Jewish heritage, but adds four women, none of whom were Jews. The message is clear. If Jews and non-Jews are in Jesus’ family tree, they can be a church family too.

Ultimately that is the message for us all. Jesus came to free us from the bondage of tribalism, to help us break down walls and build bridges instead. This is a big part of our vision to be a centre for community, creating space for our diverse community to come together. As Paul writes, we are all part of the same body, a relationship that moves us past nation and tribe. At Christmas we celebrate incarnation, that G-d is present profoundly in the life of a child named Jesus. The same G-d people experienced in the life of Jesus is around us, and within us. Could someone come and look in the manger? What do you see? (*There is a mirror in the manger*). No matter who we are or where we’re from, we are all reflected there. Of all the things we share, we most share the presence of G-d. May that knowledge bind us as one family, one tribe, not just at Christmas but all year long. May it be so. Amen.