Patriotism or Nationalism?

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National identity is a precious gift. Without a sense of belonging to a particular people, we feel rootless, unsure of who we are, and vulnerable to exploitation by outsiders. The consciousness of being part of a nation and subscribing to its cherished values can inspire the best that is in human nature - generous service or astounding self-sacrifice. Yet nationalism can become not a gift but a curse. Nationalism can set nation against nation, person against person. It can inspire not the best, but the worst, in human nature. So what distinguishes a healthy sense of national identity or patriotism, the love of the land of our mothers and fathers, from the nationalism which fosters ethnic hatred and violence?

Christians look for the answer to that question in the Bible. The Bible, as the football commentators tend to say, is a game of two halves. The first half is the story of the formation of a nation. Israel was born out of the experience of slavery in Egypt, followed by the great act of liberation of the exodus and entry into the Promised Land, a land that was a new land in the rich promise it contained yet also an old land, the land of the fathers from which they had originally come. But Israel failed to live in that land as the people of God, and as a result were forced into a new exile in Babylon in modern Iraq. One of the lessons the Jews had to learn in exile was that God was concerned not simply for their own good, but for all nations. In our reading from Isaiah, the prophet seeks to reassure the people in exile that God has not forgotten his covenant
promise to David. He also paints a vision of a future in which other nations, some they had not even heard of, would come eagerly knocking at their door, to join in worship of the God of Israel. It is a vision of a day when different peoples will unite in pursuing something even more precious than national identity: the truth of God.

And that is the theme of the second half of the game. In the New Testament the coming of Jesus Christ transforms the identity of the people of God. The ethnic boundaries between Jew and Gentile are transcended in the new humanity of the body of Christ. Those from every nation whose lives have been transformed by the grace of Christ become the new Israel, a 'holy nation' called to invite all peoples to draw near in worship to the God who had revealed Himself in the story of Israel.

The Bible, then, suggests that what keeps patriotism from becoming nationalism is first an awareness of the undeserved grace of God, the God who twice delivered Israel out of captivity. Secondly, it is a sense that a nation finds its true calling in a wider mission to other nations, indeed to all humanity.

In a remarkable way, the story of Sierra Leone illustrates precisely these two themes. The different groups who comprised the early population of the colony had all either been slaves or were destined to be slaves. The original settlers from the black population of London, the 1,200 African Americans who arrived from chilly Nova Scotia in 1792, the Maroons from Jamaica who joined them in 1800, and finally, after 1807, the 'recaptives', rescued from the horrors of the Atlantic passage - all found themselves in the 'Province of Freedom' as a result of actions of the British government which suggested a more than purely human benevolence: here was the gracious hand of God at work.

These various groups shared a common experience of liberation, but also a common sense of purpose. The Nova Scotian settlers were Christians who had come to faith during the evangelical awakenings in America - and came ashore singing hymns of jubilation. They felt like the children of Israel, delivered from Egyptian captivity and now entering the new Promised Land that was also the land of their fathers. The years of exile were over, and they were home again on African soil. But they believed they had been brought
home with a purpose. Out of the experience of captivity had come the freedom of knowing Jesus Christ and the forgiveness that He brings. They had been brought back to Africa in order to share their faith in Christ with its inhabitants. Even before the CMS arrived on the scene, the vision had formed of making Sierra Leone a base for the transformation of Africa into a Christian continent.

The Society did not make a promising start in Sierra Leone, its first mission field. Melchior Renner and Peter Hartwig were sent to work not in the colony itself but some 120 miles to the north-east among the indigenous people, the Susu. Even before they left Freetown, they had fallen out with each other. Both began work among the Susu, but in Hartwig’s case as a slave-trader, which was not quite what the Society had in mind. Nothing daunted, the CMS sent out some more Germans, and some more, but they kept dying. By 1816 of the 26 missionaries dispatched to Sierra Leone, 16 had succumbed to the fevers which earned the colony the label of ‘the white man’s grave’. The work among the Susu people was hard and bitterly opposed. In 1816 the Society decided to abandon its mission among the Susu and turn its attention to the recaptives. It was the most strategic decision the CMS has ever made. The recaptives believed they had been chosen to spread the Christian faith and education they received from the CMS to their own African homelands. They supplied the first personnel for the evangelization of West Africa. Among them was a young Ycruba boy named Adjai, given a new name after a London vicar and CMS supporter, who thus became Samuel Adjai Crowther, the first student of Fourah Bay College and later renowned as the first African Anglican bishop. The Krio people became the first educated elite of modern Africa, leading not simply Sierra Leone but also other West African nations into the modern era. As the national anthem which we have sung puts it, 'Knowledge and Truth our forefathers spread; Mighty the nations whom they led.'

Out of the furnace of captivity and liberation, transportation and return, was forged a new African nation. But it was a nation whose identity was essentially bound up with a wider mission: Sierra Leone was to be a model of what Africa could become and of what a Christian nation should look like. Like ancient
Israel, her role was to summon nations near and far to put their faith in the God she had come to know as her own.

Is it still relevant to speak of that model today? Ten years of brutal civil war in the 1990s have disfigured the face of a country that was once the pride of Africa. Once again, the international humanitarian and Christian community is called to help open doors of hope for a people who have suffered grievously.

But Sierra Leoneans are no longer wholly dependent on the goodwill of outsiders to promote their liberation.

They now have the resources of their own proud national identity and a tradition that has become their own of faith in God. Just as Israel learned that even in the darkest days of her exile, God had not abandoned her, so we may be confident that God's purposes for Sierra Leone are not complete. Adapting Governor John Clarkson's famous prayer, we can pray:

'May the heart of this Nation, O Lord, imbibe the spirit of meekness, gentleness and truth; and may they henceforth live in unity and godly love, following as far as the weakness of their mortal natures will admit, that most excellent and faultless pattern which Thou hast given us in Thy Son our Saviour, Jesus Christ, to Whom with Thee and the Holy Spirit be all honour and glory, now and forever. Amen.'