

The Ukrainian community in Canada is very proud of its history and traditions. Last year, we celebrated the fact that Ukrainians were the first to carry the torch of christianity in the heart of Eastern Europe, where it has been burning ever since. It was one thousand years ago, when Prince Volodymyr, the Great, baptized the population of his Kingdom in the Dnieper River, that Ukrainians entered the great community of European christian civilization.

And Ukrainians in Canada still revere the memory of the poet, painter and patriot, Taras Shevchenko, one of the Ukraine's most distinguished sons. It is an honour for me to come here today to pay homage to him. Taras Shevchenko is symbolic not only of the Ukraine, but of the struggle of men and women everywhere to assert their dignity.

A serf who longed for freedom, he succeeded in attaining it. A lover of liberty who fought against Tsarist oppression, he was exiled and punished for his beliefs. Weakened by his years of internal exile, he died too young.

By remembering him today, we give meaning to his suffering and pay tribute to the great and lasting legacy of his art. He is still with us, not only in the monuments which bear his name throughout the Ukraine and especially here in Kiev, but also in his poetry.

Shevchenko's verse captures poignantly and forever the essence of his homeland, its suffering and its courage. Through his poetry run themes dear not only to the Ukraine and its people, but to all humanity.

For Shevchenko is a poet not just of one time, the 19th century, and one place, the Ukraine, but for all times and all peoples, everywhere. In celebrating the fertile plains of the Ukraine, he rejoices in the beauty of our entire planet. In describing the grim burden of sweat and toil borne by the Ukrainian peasant, he speaks for the suffering of all working people. When he sings of his beloved, we see those we ourselves love.

His poem "Testament", penned more than a century ago expressed the yearning of all men and women the world round to be free. Inscribed on this monument, it speaks eloquently of his greatness:

"... In the great new family,  
The family of the free  
With softly spoken, kindly words,  
Pray, men, remember me."

God bless you.