

SERMON FOR TRINITY 13 | REQUIEM FOR THE QUEEN | 1.09.2022

They called it ‘London Bridge’, the detailed plan that has been gradually put together over so many years to mark the death of the Queen. And so, when it happened, so very abruptly on Thursday when very few of us ordinary mortals had any inkling that we were to lose her, the state, the military and of course the media in all its many forms was ready to celebrate not only the passing of this quite extraordinary woman, and the passing of an age, but the death of our hereditary Monarch.

There has been wall to wall, detailed analysis of everything she has ever done or been involved with over her 96 years – from the abdication of Edward VIII which brought her into the royal succession, through the war years to the untimely death of her father in 1952, her marriage to Prince Philip and the challenges of that famous ‘annus horribilis’, the death of Princess Diana and the fire at Windsor. Her long life, both private and public has been recounted over and over for days - and there is no doubt a great deal more to come.

Tributes have poured in too - from ordinary people as well as from Presidents – I can’t add anything to what you have already learned in other places. So much of it has been positive ...I loved the line from President Macron (you may call her your Queen, for us she is ‘the Queen’); many picked up on her sense of humour, not least the wonderful story told by Theresa May in the Commons about a dropped sandwich at a picnic at Balmoral. King Charles as we must learn to call him, in his hugely touching speech on Friday night, spoke of love, and a lifetime of service to the people who looked to her as their Sovereign. But there is something else for us to reflect on as we sit in Church this morning, something which touches on a fundamental of our faith.

Because you will have picked up a slightly different narrative rumbling in the background – and not just in the under 35s. And it contains the question: why do we have a Queen or a King anyway? Isn’t a monarchy a completely outmoded way of running a country? Is it right for one person to be riding around in State coaches, attended by men and women in livery as of yesteryear? Why palaces and pomp and the prestige of an ancestral office of this sort? Don’t other countries have elected presidents able to carry out ceremonial duties without the trappings that come with a royal family? Is it right that those in office, in both Church and State in this country, have had to swear allegiance to the Queen, her heirs and successors. Long live the King.

There can be no doubt the Queen, because of her integrity and selflessness, has spent her life helping Christians in particular to find some kind of answer to this challenge. In an egalitarian age, when the rights and dignity of every single person demands the same degree of privilege is offered to every citizen, how can it be that some are raised in luxury simply because of their birth while others have so very little?

What Queen Elizabeth has managed to do is to offer to society a truly 'representative' figure. By being neutral, by being a one distance removed, by preserving some degree of mystique and an elevated symbolism, she has been able to not just speak for the whole nation but to reflect back to us what is best in our national life. In some quite extraordinary way she has personified what we believe to be the very best of ourselves. So that when people are rewarded by her or able to meet with her for some reason, it is a very special moment and they do remember it for the rest of their lives. And when she sat, on her own, in the middle of the Covid pandemic, in St George's Chapel in Windsor at the funeral of her husband the Duke of Edinburgh, it was clear where she got her strength from: her faith had made everything possible.

So it is, in the understanding that we have as Christians, that there are some who are called to stand up for principles which are greater than themselves. As we as a parish read the opening chapter of St Mark's Gospel together this week (copies freely available at the back of the Church) we are introduced to John the Baptist. Far from the trappings of royalty though he was, he had a similar public and representative role: to call his people to repentance in the waters of the River Jordan. Not for nothing does Jesus point to his cousin John as the greatest of the prophets. And of course there is Jesus himself, called not just to preach and to teach but to die 'on behalf of' each one of us'.

How easy it is to look at the outward wealth of the Royal Family with, at least for some, a degree of envy. I suspect King Charles intends to slim down the outward 'show' in line with more contemporary tastes.

But I hope that what remains is the essential truth that some people are called by God to special roles which are not given to others. We don't elect them or choose them because what they have is 'theirs' in a particular way. By extension we don't elect bishops or priests and deacons; instead we set up mechanisms to recognise what God has already given them. Their work is a vocation not a job.

How well the Queen revealed that: way back in 1936 an abdication and as a result some seventeen years later she inherited a ministry which we have every reason to give thanks for today.

But the calling did not come from within her – or even by what we as a nation would necessarily have chosen. It was not borne of her ambition or her proven ability She did not sit some civil service exam or face some interview panel. No, the calling was from God, in no less a sense that Samuel went through a whole bevy of sons before God chose the youngest, David, to serve his people as King.

As we give thanks to God for her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth, and pray for health and wisdom to be bestowed on King Charles, so we also give thanks that God calls men and woman to particular roles – by his own volition – and he asks us to trust him that he knows what he is about!

We thank him that as part of our national history we have been given a form of government which speaks of how one person can sometimes be called to represent us all and to symbolise what is best in our national life. That isn't to say that every country ought to have a king or queen but just that it works for the United Kingdom in ways which our forebears could never have imagined.

The legacy of Queen Elizabeth was not just her smile and her dignity, her common sense - and her love of horse racing: ultimately it was her deep Christian faith and her trust that, as our Gospel says, all those who have trusted in God and responded to his call, will be lifted up on the last day – from the greatest to the least.

I have used these words of Cardinal Newman with you before but they are so appropriate for today: *God has created me to do him some definite service. He has committed some work to me that he has not committed to another. I have my mission. I may never know it in this life but I shall know it in the next. I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons...*

***Therefore I will trust him. Wherever I am I can never be thrown away. If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve him, in perplexity my perplexity may serve him. If I am in sorrow my sorrow may serve him. He does nothing in vain. He knows what he is about.* In her work as our monarch, who better could have brought that to life better than her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.**