

SERMON FOR TRINITY 14 | 18.09.2022

Amos 8: 4-7; | Timothy 2: 1-7; St Luke 16: 1-13

We don't have the numbers yet, but they say that the final count of those passing by the coffin of the Queen, lying in state in Westminster Hall over the last few days, will have been in excess of 250,000. Shuffling along, at least for some of the time in the dark - temperatures which fell overnight to little more than 7degrees - the world has been astounded at the patience and stoicism of those who waited for anything up to 24hours to get those precious few moments to say good bye and thank-you to the Monarch who has served this country so well over seventy years.

The outpouring of love, the words of respect and admiration, the stories of past encounters with the Queen over the years, all suggest that this extended endurance test is a real indication of what people feel: it isn't something whipped up by social media or the press. From David Beckham to totally anonymous families from all over the country, people wanted to 'be there' to express what they felt about the person that so many have described as 'the mother to the nation'.

By the strangest coincidence, the second reading in today's universal lectionary (or required list of readings) is the passage from St Paul's first letter to Timothy: *I urge you, he writes, that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings should be made for kings, and for all in high positions, so that you may lead a quiet life in all godliness and dignity. He goes on, for this is the will of God that all should be saved and come to the full knowledge of the truth.*

And if that isn't enough, we then get a very strange Gospel story about how those in authority might win over the support of those they ruled.

So with those readings in mind I began to look around for some current evidence of what people are thinking about the Monarchy today. And already some serious questions are being asked. For example in a radio interview this week Linda Woodhead, professor of sociology at Lancaster University with a special interest in changes in religious faith and practice, began by reflecting on the comments made by the crowds milling around Buckingham Palace.

Apparently they nearly all expressed their admiration for a Queen and for her stated commitment 'to live in order to give' – of her time, her experience and – because of her status, her ability to encourage people in whatever walk of life they had chosen. But, said, Prof Woodhead, that overwhelming admiration did not extend to wanting to behave like her: in general 'life is for living' had replaced 'life is for giving' which was the Queen's motto. Indeed, Linda said that she thought the Queen had felt rather isolated over the last few years as her instinct to make service and giving her priority had become more and more rare. We still admire people who are self-less, said Professor Woodhead, but that did not mean we are necessarily prepared to be the same.

In a way Jesus' Gospel story take up that theme. You will remember that a middle manager was being held to account by his boss and was about to be sacked. With all his authority gone, then manager has to work out how he was going to survive among then people he had previously ordered about. As he says, he is too weak to dig and too proud to beg.

So what does he do? He ingratiates himself with the workers by rounding down the inflated debts they owed to the boss: a hundred jugs of oil becomes fifty, a hundred bags of wheat is reduced to eighty. The result: those who would have laughed in the manager's face when he was fired have a good reason to look after him now that he has nothing. *Well played, says Jesus: the so called children of light have something to learn from the rest of society.*

And the lesson is about power. In our first reading the prophet Amos, living eight centuries before Jesus under a totalitarian regime where the poor were robbed hand over fist by the government, have to be content with the promise that they will get their just rewards – eventually. *I will not forget their deeds, says the Lord. But right now I know, I understand you are powerless.*

But perhaps what the Queen has shown us so faithfully over these 70 years is another kind of power altogether: the art of soft power, the power of influence. Surely what she has done, usually behind closed and with a potent mix of Christian humility and well applied royal mystique, has been to identify and to promote reconciliation and care for others with a smile and an unremitting tenacity that has left no one in any doubt what she stood for.

Of course we are all well aware that her son, King Charles, is not the same kind of person as his mother and his opinions about so many things – from wildlife to architecture - are well known. But it seems that he too, has realised that entering into the political debates as ‘just another voice’ is perhaps less effective than the quiet diplomacy that Queen Elizabeth employed.

And we too, in the Church, may have more of that ‘soft power’ than we realise. With my dog collar clearly visible but actually sweeping up confetti after the wedding blessing on Friday afternoon, broom in hand, a young man swept onto the pavement in front of St James’ on his bike and asked, ‘*Is it a sin to smoke weed?*’ Now this isn’t the kind of question that I am asked very often but he wasn’t taking the mickey; he genuinely wanted an answer. A three minute conversation perhaps, and he went away, cheerfully reassured by the answer I was able to conjure up out of thin air!

Likewise at tomorrow’s funeral, millions of people will be listening for the way Archbishop Justin makes connections between the real world we all know – and the Christian faith that was so fundamental to the Queen.

Last Sunday we invited everyone who would like, to start reading one chapter of St Mark’s Gospel, each week, between now and Advent. And in that first chapter we could imagine John the Baptist standing out in the wilderness – exercising influence – soft power - in a society which had lost its way and desperately wanted to find its roots again – in very much the same way as those crowds were prepared queued for hours to reach the body of the Queen in Westminster Hall. Even in death she is having a huge influence, making people think, question - and explore new possibilities.

Like the shrewd manager, we too have to find the right ways to connect to our society. Reflecting on the slightly smaller audiences who are attending the Islington Proms this year, Isabel said last night that we will need to do an in-depth analysis of the changes in a society that may be preventing people experiencing what have been a series of simply superb musical events. Unlike Professor Woodhead I will take away the comments of so many who said, *Don’t lose heart; carry on. What you have here is so valuable.* Soft power is God’s way of bringing about change through love alone.