

Sermon to mark the Accession of HM Queen Elizabeth II

22nd Feb 2012

Introduction

The beginning of last week was a very moving time for the nation. On 5th February we looked back sixty years to when King George VI returned to Sandringham House after a successful shoot. 'We will go after the hares again tomorrow,' he said to his servant of twenty years. But tomorrow never came for The King. He died peacefully in his sleep during the night.

The young Princess Elizabeth and her husband were having a few days of holiday in Kenya during a demanding Royal Tour. When Prince Philip heard the news of the King's death on 6th February his private secretary said, 'it looked as if you'd dropped half the world on him'. Life would never be the same for this young couple.

The Accession Council papers had been packed in case of this eventuality. The Princess acceded to the throne immediately and Churchill declared to the nation: God save the Queen!

The sight of this young woman descending the steps of the Royal Plane, having exchanged a summer frock of African sun for the black winter mourning of her kingdom, will be for ever etched into the national mind.

Sacrificed for service

As you can see at the beginning of this order of service, a few years before her accession to the throne – barely an adult at the time – Princess Elizabeth gave her first radio broadcast, solemnly saying to her future people: 'I declare before you that my whole life, whether it be long or short, shall be devoted to your service and the service of our great [Imperial] Commonwealth to which we all belong'.

As Andrew Marr in his recent biography of Her Majesty notes, it was as if 'she was offering herself as some kind of living human sacrifice'. There is some truth in this. The Princess was offering herself for a life of service on the altar of her love for nation

and commonwealth, and for God who had laid this mantle of responsibility upon her.

It is the sort of sacrifice that the prophet Micah enjoined upon the leaders and people of Israel. When they asked 'with what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high', they assumed the answer would be 'with thousands of rams; with tens of thousands of rivers of oil'; even that they should offer their firstborn to God.

But God's answer to their question was of a different sort of devotion and duty and dedication – 'This is what is good and this is what the Lord requires of you: to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God'.

This is the sort of sacrifice that Princess Elizabeth offered in 1947 and this is the sacrifice she was called upon to fulfill in 1953 at her consecration as the Archbishop of Canterbury handed her the Royal Sword:

Receive this kingly Sword,(
brought now from the Altar of God . . .
With this sword do justice,
stop the growth of iniquity,(
protect the holy Church of God,(
help and defend widows and orphans,(
restore the things that are gone to decay,(
maintain the things that are restored,(
punish and reform what is amiss,(
and confirm what is in good order:(
[that doing these things you may be glorious in all virtue;(

and so faithfully serve our Lord Jesus Christ in this life,(
that you may reign for ever with him
in the life which is to come.]

'*Do justice*', commanded the Archbishop to The Queen in words reminiscent of the prophet Micah. About this time last year Warwickshire had the privilege of welcoming Her Majesty to the county as she opened the new Justice Centre in Leamington.

As The Queen sat in the centre of the Judges' Bench of the main court, beneath the Royal Coat of Arms, flanked by her Lord Chief Justice and her High Court Judges, we were given a powerfully symbolic reminder of Her Majesty's responsibility to see that 'the growth of iniquity is stopped' and that what is 'amiss is punished and reformed'.

But the justice of the kingdom of God – and the justice with which The Queen's Majesty is charged as the servant of God – goes further. It reaches out to 'defend the widows and orphans': it protects and promotes the poorest and most vulnerable of our society. And it 'restores the things that are gone to decay' – seeking to renew the very fabric of society with the values and virtues of God's truth and commandments.

We know from her remarkable example of service to country, commonwealth and nation, her commitment to charitable causes, her vision for a society of peace and prosperity for all, compassion and kindness to all, that our Queen has this sort of wholesome – kingdom of God – understanding of justice: a justice that our nation needs in our day of all days.

At their very best the lands over which The Queen has ruled have sought to live under God's just and gentle rule; and they are at their best when they strive to be this sort of godly and righteous society: 'helping and defending widows and orphans' and being ready and sufficiently humble to pray – *at all times and in all places* – for God's help to do so fully and fairly.

The Queen practising and promoting the rule of the kingdom of God

There is no doubt that the principles and practices of God's kingdom are the priorities of our Queen and, in so far as she is permitted, she personally promotes them to her people and prays publically for their coming.

Her Majesty's most recent broadcast was a remarkable example of this. In her Christmas speech she chose to speak about forgiveness, a theme at the heart of the Diocese of Coventry, following the wartime experience of our Cathedral.

With scenes of her historic and healing visit to the Republic of Ireland in the background, she talked about how:

The spirit of friendship so evident in both these nations [Ireland and America] can fill us all with hope. Relationships that years ago were once so strained have through sorrow and forgiveness blossomed into long-term friendship.

With the skill of a preacher, Her Majesty then went on to apply the rule of the kingdom of God to our own lives:

Although we are capable of great acts of kindness, history teaches us that we sometimes need saving from ourselves – from our recklessness or our greed.

God sent into the world a unique person – neither a philosopher nor a general, important though they are, but a Saviour, with the power to forgive.

Forgiveness lies at the heart of the Christian faith. It can heal broken families, it can restore friendships and it can reconcile divided communities. It is in forgiveness that we feel the power of God's love.

In our second reading, we heard Jesus spelling out the principles of the rule of God's kingdom in the practices of hungering for righteousness, being merciful and making peace. Sometimes it is said that all this was the wishful thinking of a romantic religious mind far removed from the harsh realities of politics and even from the necessary pragmatics of personal and family life.

Clearly The Queen who has had twelve Prime Ministers, known every US President since Eisenhower, and seen tyrants come and go, thinks that God's way for the world as taught by Jesus Christ is the safest foundation for political life: 'For me the teaching of Christ', she said, 'and my personal accountability before God provide a framework in which I try to live my life'.

What has sustained The Queen?

I hope that it is not presumptuous of me to wonder what has sustained The Queen over these sixty years and kept her sacrifice of service for love of God, country and commonwealth so vibrant.

I will not speculate on her personal life, on the great love that she received from her parents and continues to receive from her husband and family. I will simply focus on four factors that can be documented.

The first is the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was much invoked during Her Majesty's coronation, including with these words from the Archbishop:

Strengthen her, O Lord, with the Holy Ghost the Comforter;(

Confirm and establish her with thy free and princely Spirit,(

the Spirit of wisdom and government,(

the Spirit of counsel and ghostly strength,(

the Spirit of knowledge and true godliness,(

and fill her, O Lord, with the Spirit of thy holy fear.

There is a great deal of evidence over sixty years that The Queen has been ready to receive the gift of God's Holy Spirit and to live and reign in the power of God's love.

The second is the Bible. At her Coronation the Archbishop gave her a Bible saying:

'Our gracious Queen: to keep your Majesty ever mindful of the law and the Gospel of God as the Rule for the whole life and government of Christian Princes, we present you with this Book, the most valuable thing that this world affords.'

We know that The Queen has been ready to quote the Bible to her people and to seek to live by its teaching.

The third is worship. The Queen is regular and committed in her worship of God. I have even had the honour of preaching before her: and I can tell you that she listens to the sermon!

The fourth is prayer. And this is where I would like to end: with the prayer of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second for all her people. Her Christmas Day Speech ended with these words:

In the last verse of this beautiful carol, O Little Town Of Bethlehem, there's a prayer:

O Holy Child of Bethlehem,
Descend to us we pray.
Cast out our sin
And enter in.
Be born in us today.

It is my prayer that on this Christmas day we might all find room in our lives for the message of the angels and for the love of God through Christ our Lord.

Conclusion

As Her Majesty's loyal subjects may we become – not just on Christmas Day but every day – the answer to her prayer and find room for the love of God through Christ our Lord.

And may that which has sustained her: the Holy Spirit, the Scriptures, worship and

prayer (public and private) be the foundation on which we build our lives and on which we, through all our national institutions, build up our common life.

God save our gracious Queen!

Long live our noble Queen!

God save the Queen!