

**A sermon preached by The Bishop of Coventry, the Rt Revd Dr Christopher Cocksworth, on the occasion of A Service of Commemoration and Thanksgiving in St Mary, Warwick, on the Eve of the Funeral for Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.**

**Readings: Exodus 2.1-12; Mark 10.35-45**

## **Introduction**

We will never forget this week. The moment we heard the news that our Queen had died will be for ever etched on our minds. I was in St Nicolas Church, Nuneaton about to put a new vicar into the parish. I was strengthened by the High Sheriff's words: This – church, in the presence of God – is the right place to be at such a time. And here we are now, together in the presence of God.

We have been on a profound journey since that shattering moment. A journey embodied in the lines of hundreds of thousands of people queueing to bid their farewell to our Late Majesty. I've been privileged to witness that long line of people in London and to see local lines of people queueing for as long as it takes in Coventry Cathedral and churches across Warwickshire to sign condolence books.

Some have said – rightly – that they, in London's long line, and we like them on our own journeys, have all been on a pilgrimage this week: a journey preparing us for tomorrow's destination of the funeral when we will bid our final farewells and commend our Late Sovereign into the hands of God whom she loved and served throughout her long life.

## **The Queen among us**

I've seen so many flowers, here and in London, lovingly laid. It's been the tributes, though, that have moved me especially, many written on cards and letters from the people of this land, many spoken on the streets, the radio, the television, in Parliament and across the world: they told of duty and dedication, constancy and service.

The ones that have moved me the most are by the very young and those much older, indeed almost contemporaries of The Queen, among them Warwickshire's own Baroness Seccombe in the House of Lords. And I'm grateful to Joan for allowing me to reference her words today.

. . . in wartime, life was grim, with sadness all around . . . I know many parents tussled with whether they should send their children abroad, but many followed the example of the King and Queen and kept the family together here at home in England. I think that this devotion of the King inspired his daughter to understand the suffering of others by being among them.

'To understand the suffering of others by being around them'. There were so many examples of that through The Queen's years of service. Perhaps the best known is her commitment to the people of Aberfan following the great tragedy of 21<sup>st</sup> October 1966 when 116 children and 28 adults died when a slurry engulfed them. The Queen followed advice at the time and held back from visiting

immediately. It is said that she regretted doing so and learnt that she could trust her instincts, as she did for the rest of her long reign. But visit she did, still only eight days after the disaster, and wept with her people and visited again and again: four times in total and once, when she could not be there for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, she sent her son.

How fitting that now, even in death, her body lies among her people, in the midst of our great sadness at her death. People want to be there, with her, as she has been with us.

### **God among us**

‘Pray that God may give me wisdom and strength to carry out the solemn promises I shall be making’ said the young Princess, shortly before her coronation, ‘that I may faithfully serve Him and you, all the days of my life’.

Our reading from the Old Testament shows how deeply rooted The Queen’s life of service was in the deepest wisdom of her faith. God reveals himself to Moses, the Hebrew, in the simplicity and wonder of a bush burning with the fire of love in the wilderness of the world: ‘I have observed the misery of my people . . . I heard their cry . . . I know their sufferings . . . and I have come down to deliver them’.

God is the supreme Majesty under whom our Late Queen served: the creator of heaven and earth, the righteous judge of all people. And this Majestic God whose power

knows no end, sees his people's suffering and comes down among them to be with them, to be there for them, to deliver, to help, to serve, to save.

Fifty-nine years after her coronation The Queen quoted from today's reading from the New Testament when she said to us all at Christmas, 'God sent his only Son "to serve, not to be served". [God] restored love and service to the centre of our lives in the person of Jesus Christ'.

Two of Jesus' disciples sidled up to Jesus. Confident that God was in him and that Jesus could command all the powers of God for their benefit, they said to him: make us famous, make us powerful, makes us great – 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left in your glory'.

Jesus rebuffed them. Don't think like that, that's the way of the 'rulers of the Gentiles' who 'lord it over their people'. Their 'great ones' are tyrants. *'But it is not so among you'*, said Jesus: 'Whoever wishes to be great must be your servant, and who ever wishes to be first among you must be the slave to all'.

That's who I am and why I am here: 'not to be served but to serve, and to give my life as a ransom for many'.

## **And what of us?**

And what of us? What does all this say to us gathered here for this Civic Service of Warwickshire with our callings to be public servants through our different institutions and organisations?

Three things come to mind.

First, that greatness is to be found in service.

Second, that service is grounded in being with the people we serve, so that we know their life circumstances, and can see the stresses and strains, the pressures and problems of the people we are called to serve.

Third, that authentic service – the sort of service that makes a difference to people’s lives – is only possible through constancy of presence, dedication to duty, faithfulness to promises.

‘Who am I that I should go?’, said Moses, quaking at the responsibilities before him.

‘I will be with you’ said God in reply.

‘Pray God that God may give me wisdom and strength to carry out the solemn promises I shall be making, that I may faithfully serve him and you, all the days of my life’, asked the Princess on her 21<sup>st</sup> Birthday.

For over eight decades her people prayed and over eight decades God most willingly answered our prayer: God was with her.

If we call our Late Majesty, 'Elizabeth the Great', it will be because her greatness was found in her commitment to be among us, in the midst of our sufferings, like Jesus, as one who serves.

For that is how she signed her name in a letter to each of us at the beginning of this Platinum year: 'your Servant, Elizabeth R'.

God will be with us too as we follow her example, the example she followed of Jesus Christ, the Servant of all.

### **Ending**

The Queen is dead but her life lives on in the God to whom we will commend our great and good Late Monarch tomorrow.

God save the King.

Long live the King.

**Long live the King.**