

A Sermon preached by the Bishop of Coventry, Christopher Cocksworth, on the occasion of the Warwick Civil Service to celebrate Her Majesty The Queen's 90th Birthday at St Mary, Warwick 12th June 2016

Readings: 1 Kings 1.32-40; Ephesians 1.15-23; Matthew 20.24-29

'The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.' Few of us will be surprised to hear this reading at a thanksgiving for our Queen's 90th birthday. In a radio broadcast on her 21st birthday, Princess (as she was then) Elizabeth famously said: 'I declare before you all that my whole life, whether it be long or short, shall be devoted to your service.' Since that day, as the longest reigning monarch in British history, she has been true to her word.

In honour of her Majesty's 90th birthday, a wonderful book has been published, *The Servant Queen*. It tells of some of the ways in which The Queen has honoured that pledge over her reign. Many of us have lived our whole lives with her example before us. We have known no other example of royal power. So it's easy to forget how radical Jesus' words are – 'The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve'. Words which Her Majesty has obeyed, living them out day by day.

In Jesus' day, rulers did indeed 'lord it over' their subjects, sometimes using shocking violence to maintain their position. King Herod killed his own sons. Jesus himself was soon to be the victim of such violence in Jerusalem at the hands of Pontius Pilate. And in some parts of the world today, this remains the reality – rulers rule by force and brutal oppression.

What sustains a 'Servant Queen?' We find the answer in Her Majesty's own words from her 2012 Christmas broadcast: 'This is the time of year when we remember that God sent his only Son "to serve, not to be served". He restored love and service to the centre of our lives in the person of Jesus Christ.' The book is rightly titled: 'The Servant Queen and the King she serves.' It is the person of Jesus, the Servant King, whose example sustains our Servant Queen.

Our gospel reading today is immediately preceded by the mother of James and John, two of Jesus' disciples, asking Jesus for what she calls 'a favour'. 'Let my sons sit in the positions of power in your kingdom, one on your right and the other on your left'. Jesus replies, 'Yes that's what happens among the rulers of the Gentles who lord it over their subjects, and their great ones are tyrants. [But] it will not be so with you'; whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant'. If the Son of Man can choose to serve and not be served, then service itself becomes not shame but glory. It is where true greatness is to be found.

In our second reading, we see it in St Paul, another one who calls himself a 'servant of Christ'. And he prays that the Christians of Ephesus will be likewise: 'May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him', he prays.

His readers would have been used to rulers 'lording it over them'. They would often have been told to 'know their place,' in the hierarchy of society. But in praying for wisdom and knowledge for them, Paul is praying that they know their place in a different story: the story of what God has done for them in sending his Son, the King of Kings, to be our servant, a slave of love.

Such a vision of monarchy is vital to our Queen, and is written into the coronation service itself. The solemn anointing with oil at the climax of the coronation goes back to the anointing of Israelite kings like Solomon in our Old Testament reading. It marks them out as set apart for God, to do God's work in God's way.

The anointing of The Queen was a moment of immense dramatic effect and profound spiritual impact, too sacred to be broadcast. The congregation joined with The Queen in saying the Creed. She knelt; the people knelt; and the choir sang:

Come, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire,
And lighten with celestial fire.
Thou the anointing Spirit art,
Who dost thy sevenfold gifts impart.

The Archbishop prayed for her that she will be established with God's 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 that she will be filled with the Spirit of God's holy fear'.

The people stood and the choir sang the spine tingling anthem: 'Zadok the priest'.

The Queen rose from her knees. Attendants took off her crimson robe and – as the words of the service say – 'being uncovered . . . walked to the Altar. She sat in King Edward's Chair with the Knights of the Garter holding over her a rich pall of silk or cloth of gold, and the Archbishop thrice anointed her.

Be thy hands anointed with holy Oil.

Be thy breast anointed with holy Oil.

Be thy head anointed with holy Oil: as kings, priests and prophets were anointed.

No wonder the royal biographer William Shawcross says of the anointing: "When Queen Elizabeth II was crowned in 1953, she found . . . an almost sacrificial quality at the heart of the service. It was the moment when the holy oil was applied to her rather than her crowning with St Edward's crown of solid gold, that was of supreme importance for the Queen. Indeed it was the most solemn and important moment of her entire life.'

In a few weeks' time, I will be ordaining new priests in Coventry Cathedral. I've told them that the service and all its symbolism is meant to drive them to their knees and pray earnestly for God's Holy Spirit. The same can be said about coronations – they are not to exalt but to humble. We know that Solomon's humbled him, for two chapters after our reading, despite all the pomp and ceremony, he humbly prays that God would give him wisdom.

Our Queen has sought the same. In her first Christmas broadcast, six months before her coronation she said: 'Pray that God may give me

wisdom and strength to carry out the solemn promises I shall be making, and that I may faithfully serve Him and you, all the days of my life.' And in the foreword to this book, she tells how she is grateful that God has answered our prayers: "I have been – and remain – very grateful to you for our prayers and to God for His steadfast love. I have indeed seen his faithfulness.'

We have much to be grateful for in the long reign of our Servant Queen. For though she has a unique role, she sees herself as a fellow disciple, a fellow servant, with all of us. Jesus' words are not just to her, but to everyone. Throughout her reign she has encouraged us, her subjects, not to stand by and watch her, but to join her in following the way of Christ.

So let me end not with my own words but with those of our gracious Monarch and her gentle challenge to each of us, spoken in her Christmas speech from 1975:

'A big stone can cause waves, but even the smallest pebble changes the whole pattern of the water. Our daily actions are like those ripples, each one makes a difference, even the smallest... and the combined effect can be enormous. If enough grains of sand are dropped into one side of a pair of scales they will, in the end, tip it against a lump of lead. We may feel powerless alone, but the joint efforts of individuals can defeat the evils of our time. Together they can create a stable, free and considerate society.'

As they said of the newly anointed Solomon, so may we say again of Elizabeth:

'Long live The Queen!'