

Homily for 18th September 2022, Remembrance Service for Her Late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II

Preached at St Michael the Archangel, Smarden

Revelation 21.1-7

Homily

One of the most striking parts of this week has been that extraordinary demonstration of Britishness known simply as The Queue. Snaking along a five mile stretch of the south bank of the Thames, The Queue has become a living symbol of everything the British people admire in ourselves, and in our late monarch, Queen Elizabeth.

On full display are all the virtues of stoic patience, compassion for the less able, community and caring, friendships made and grown, unity in diversity, pursuing a common endeavour with courage and fortitude, making sure no one is left behind, that everyone has what they need, comfort in hardship, rejoicing as the goal draws near, and shared silence in awed contemplation in that grand barn of a hall, shuffling past a coffin draped in a flag, containing the body of an old, frail woman who also happened to embody the character of a nation.

The Queue is not just a means to an end, it is a transformational experience. In a very real sense, The Queue has become a sacrament of God's grace. In The Queue, as in the church, we are drawn together by a common ideal, a shared yearning, an aspiration for something that we cannot attain to alone. The very length of the Queue magnifies its value and its effect on those who tread its path or watch its progress, just as the impact of a pilgrimage is increased by every mile walked, and every hardship faced along the way.

Similarly, Holy Communion is also a shared journey, gathering together to express sorrow at our failings, public forgiveness for our hurts, sharing peace

with our neighbours, offering thanksgiving to God, and eventually, walking silently and reverently together to the Lord's table, to kneel or bow before God, to become one body in the bread and the wine, and then to emerge together, blinking into the light, quite different people to when we first began.

The Queue, however, also like a church service, has no power of itself. Without its focal point, it has no energy, no goal except to endure. The focal point of the Queue is the body of our Queen, who embodied the nation's best sense of itself. That flag-covered coffin exhorts each one of us to honour, duty, persistence, patience, kindness, and The Queue teaches all these things to those who make up its body. The journey and the destination are one.

The liturgy of Holy Communion attempts the same for Christians. Every week, for centuries, the Church has tried to inspire people to become Christlike, by holding up Christ for all to see, and then offering a way to become part of Christ, and of one another, to become one body embodying love, by sharing one bread and one cup of wine.

Religious services, just like the Queue, are not mere symbols of some greater Neoplatonic reality far away; they create real change within us. As we gaze on glory, as we admire virtue, these things take root in our hearts and minds. It doesn't happen any other way.

This is the whole point of prayer – not to persuade God to do things, but to gaze on love so that we might become love. Whatever we worship, we are formed into that image.

In life, Queen Elizabeth was a focus for the aspirations of many admirers throughout the whole world, a steadfast example for all followers of Jesus, and a still and stable point at the heart of a culture that aspired to nobility of character and purpose in every hearth and home. And yet, it may be that in death, she has given us something even greater, a tangible reminder that when

we come together in homage to a great ideal, it is the coming together that transforms us into everything we long to be.

Tomorrow morning at 6:30am, The Queue will close for good. But the pilgrimage of our hearts towards God goes on. It may be odd to think of an eternal queue as a foretaste of heaven rather than of hell, but as Jesus said, “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them.”