

Sermon for 11th September 2022, Trinity 13, First Sunday after the death of Her Late Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II

Preached at St Michael Smarden and All Saints Biddenden

Lamentations 3:22-26,31-33; 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:4, John 6:35-40

Sermon

Our three readings today have been specially chosen by the Church for this sorrowful period when we are mourning the loss of our longest-serving monarch, the beloved mother, grandmother and great-grandmother of our nation, Queen Elizabeth.

It is not hard to see the reason these readings were chosen. The ancient book of Lamentations, written over two thousand five hundred years ago in grief and mourning after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian Empire, teaches that God does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone, and that his compassion and abundant love are always present in the midst of our grief and our loss. It is an image of a God who journeys alongside the heartbroken, sharing in our grief, supporting us in the aching of our hearts.

Paul's later letter to the early church in Corinth, still almost two thousand years old, speaks of the strange tension for Christians as our bodies gradually but inexorably age and weaken, even as our inner nature is being transformed and renewed, day by day, becoming wiser we hope, and kinder, more generous, more selfless, more compassionate and forgiving of others and of ourselves. Becoming more like Jesus in fact, more ready for an eternal life, and perhaps more at peace with this one.

And in John's gospel, one of the last eye-witness accounts of Jesus' life to be written down, we hear Jesus himself speaking of his sense of vocation, duty, and calling. He is a King, the King of Heaven and Earth, but he has come not to do his own will, but the will of God who sent him. "I come among you as one who serves," he pointedly tells his disciples, while they are arguing who among them is the greatest and most important.

This is why Jesus has always been known as the Servant King, who thus provided a model and example for all Christian monarchs for hundreds of years. So many times, Jesus had the opportunity to take real power and authority for himself on earth, to make a difference by

force, but he always refused to do so. In one of the early stories in the gospels, even the devil tempted him with it. 'Bow down before me', said the evil one, 'and I will make you ruler over all the earth'. But Jesus didn't want power, he wanted to be a man of compassionate service, and he invited all of humanity to follow his example. The first Christians simply called it, "The Way".

Queen Elizabeth rooted her entire life in this same pattern of humble service. She was a true follower of The Way. All these virtues were hers in abundance, and it is no surprise how frequently she spoke of the importance of her faith. No power she had, except the true power of duty, service, honour and humility – the power of setting an example for her people, of embodying the character of a nation, of demonstrating the gentle art of always, always, being there.

But, as I mentioned earlier, I would like to give us all a chance to reflect on what The Queen has meant to us. And so, I invite you to ponder for a minute or so with the people sitting around you on these questions: "What stands out in your memory of The Queen? Do you have any personal memories of having met her?" and, "What has she meant to you, throughout your life? Can you find the words to express how you feel?"

< Pause for discussion >

It is said by many in the Church today that Queen Elizabeth has been the greatest evangelist of our lifetime. Certainly, every year in her Christmas message, she has spoken of the importance of her Christian faith, how it formed the bedrock of her life and character, and she has often spoken with such a clarity and confidence in her beliefs that we modern preachers may shy away from. And yet, what one says hardly has any power, unless we also practice what we preach.

The Queen was extraordinary in exemplifying the humility and self-sacrifice that Jesus himself taught and lived. Like Jesus setting his face towards Jerusalem and the Cross, Queen Elizabeth never wavered from the path set before her. Whenever she entered a public space, even though she was the Queen of the United Kingdom and of the Commonwealth, and all eyes and attention were upon her, she appeared utterly unselfconscious. All her attention and interest were on those she met. Never did you hear her say, 'let me tell you some more

interesting things about me'. She was the centre of everything and everyone, but her concern was for everything and everyone but herself.

It has been said of politicians and even of popes, that often when they greet you, they are already looking over your shoulder to see if anyone more important is coming along behind. But it is also said that when the Queen spoke to you, it was as if you were the only person in the room.

For centuries, followers and disciples of Jesus have said to each other, "If you want to know what God is like, you only have to remember the life of Jesus". Jesus demonstrated and embodied ideals and virtues of selfless service, compassion and forgiveness, practical care for one's neighbours, ensuring that the very least in society were lifted up, respected, and given a place at the table. And he also demonstrated that this selflessness is almost impossible without an inner experience of divine love, and the yearning to offer the same to others. And so, this has become the chief practice of the Christian faith – to seek God with all our hearts in prayer, to learn to love as he loves, to forget ourselves in service to others and so to become like him in the heart and depth of our being.

The earliest Christians had a Greek word for all this – kenosis, meaning 'self-emptying'. It is the highest and most profound calling for all Christians, and perhaps all the more difficult when one is born to privilege or gifted with wealth, power and influence. Most of the time in our lives we all seek those things, for good reasons or for bad. We do not generally wish to give them up.

But Queen Elizabeth was not born with an expectation of wearing the crown, and how blessed we are to have experienced the long reign of a monarch who never desired or craved it, but who only longed to serve her people, faithfully, until her final hour.

And so, in the days to come, I invite you to ponder, "What have you learned from the life and death of Queen Elizabeth II? To which of her virtues do you aspire, and if you have a faith yourself, in what ways has the Queen influenced your understanding of the message and life of Jesus, and the love of the God who made us all, and who, eventually, will welcome all of us home?"

May Her Late Majesty, our beloved Queen for seventy years, rest in peace, and rise in glory. Amen.