

Sunday 05 June 2016

Kings College Cambridge

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‘Women of Spirit: HM Queen Elizabeth II’

1 Kings 1:32 – 40
Galatians 5: 22- 26

In a radio address in 1947, on the occasion of her 21st birthday, Princess Elizabeth said:

‘I declare before you all that my whole life whether it be long or short shall be devoted to your service...God help me to make good my vow and God bless all of you who are willing to share in it.’

Next weekend sees the official celebration of HM Queen’s 90th birthday. At 90 years of age Elizabeth is the world’s oldest reigning monarch and Britain’s longest lived. Throughout this long life she has lived out unswerving faithfulness to her calling.

In our modern democracy there are, of course, many different opinions about monarchy. Our historic pattern places the constitutional monarch, whose authority is inherited, at the head of the armed forces, of the judiciary and of government and as the Supreme Governor of the Church of England. This system asks the monarch not just to accept and step-up to their role, but more than that to embody his or her calling with grace. Whatever your opinions about monarchy, I’d like us to reflect this morning on power and authority, on privilege and service.

When the bible depicts Kings, Queens, rulers and empires, we see a mixed bunch. Scripture shows with painful clarity how earthly power corrupts and how fallible human nature is to corruption. Against this backdrop, the anointing of King Solomon as successor to his father King David, begins a wise reign and a blessing to his people. King Solomon knows that his power is exercised under God’s authority and this is the source of his wisdom and judgement. Heavenly authority puts all earthly power in perspective. Monarchs come and go, earthly empires rise and fall, but God reigns for ever. And we are all of us, including Kings, accountable to God.

This belief has been woven through the powerful symbolism of the Coronation Service for British monarchs dating back 1000 years. A golden orb is placed in the hand of the new King or Queen representing the world, and it sits beneath, the cross of Christ, King over all. The Royal sceptre, holding a great diamond, represents all earthly power and wealth, again under the cross. At the most sacred part of Queen Elizabeth's Coronation Service, so sacred that it wasn't filmed by the television cameras, the young Queen, was anointed with oil by the Archbishop, as Solomon was anointed, in an act of dedication and setting apart for service.

Throughout her long life HM the Queen has recognised this heavenly authority under which she serves. She shares her Christian faith with candour in annual Christmas broadcasts and has spoken publically about the importance of prayer and how much she values the prayers that supports her. She is faithful and regular in church worship. This is her way of life, lived under authority, as she pledged aged 21.

And in many ways, of course, the Queen lives counter to the spirit of the age which is so often about pursuing fulfilment through desire and self-expression. To be spirited in a contemporary way is to share opinions and feelings. In complete contrast, the Queen models a restraint of expression and opinion, in order to be available to everyone, in order to serve.

In this she expresses the gift of the Holy Spirit, often over-looked, but there in the precious nine fruits of the spirit, set out in Galatians,

‘By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.’

St Paul sets out these beautiful attributes as the fruit of life lived under God's authority. Recognising God's authority, he says, gives human beings freedom from sin and all the kinds of behaviour that might seem attractive, but actually just ruin lives. The freedom that comes with the Spirit of God is love, joy and peace.

Now God has these good gifts to give us, if we want to receive them. The Christian life is lived co-operating with God, letting that fruit grow, by offering hospitable hearts and minds. The life of the Spirit needs to be nurtured and we can cooperate or not. Someone has said, ‘be careful at what you chose to practice, because you will get good at it.’ So practicing

being kind, patient, generous, gentle, self-controlled, makes these things come more naturally. Or the opposite.

HM the Queen chose her way of life, which is public service and she has deliberately continued to choose and cultivate this life. Such unswerving faithfulness over six decades since her accession is rare, perhaps unfashionable, but powerful. A couple of years ago in Birmingham, at the cathedral where I am Dean, we invited Brummies to come and sign a card for the Queen and it was fun to see what people wrote, and the fondness and familiarity with which they expressed it: 'Queenie, you rule! High five!' Well done!

Perhaps the birthday celebrations of a faithful 90 year old may enable each of us to reflect on the values that we would wish to see endure, and if so, what are we doing to make sure that they do? Might provoke each of us to ask what are the virtues on display in our lives? What are we practicing, and getting good at? How am I using the privilege and power that I have, (we all have some) recognising God's authority over all. What am I willing to give up to serve a greater good?

And may God bless us all with the desire to serve others, and faithfulness to remain true to these ideals.

Amen.