

“The Servant Queen and the King She Served”

from Matthew 22v34-40

If you are younger than 96 years you will never have known a time in your life when her Majesty Queen Elizabeth had not been alive and part of our nation's history and story. And if you are younger than 70 you have never know a time when Queen Elizabeth had not been our monarch.

Queen Elizabeth came to the throne six years before I was born and has always been part of my life... the head on all my stamps and coins; hers is the crest on the post-box; and she has been part my family Christmas for as long as I can remember, and in all that time has demonstrated an unrelenting commitment to public duty and service, a model of humility, grace, astuteness, good humour, generosity, and deep faith, a symbol of steadfastness and stability – her death marks the end of a lifetime of faithful service and she will be greatly missed by the people of this country and beyond.

In our reading from Matthew one of the Pharisees tested Jesus with a 'loaded' question, "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" (v36) The Pharisees prided themselves on the meticulous observance of the letter of the Law. They not only knew and fully practised the Ten Commandments, they also paid rigorous attention to all the laws in the books of Moses; that is something like 613 additional laws, reasoning out all their implications to make sure they avoided the possibility of violating any of them.

But such meticulous observance meant the Pharisees lost sight of the very heart of the matter, loving God. Without a heart of a love for God, the external observance of the commandments becomes an empty ritual. A little later on Jesus warned them of the danger: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean." (Matthew 23v25-26)

So what was Jesus' answer? From our reading: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind'.... And Mark c.12 also adds strength. Love God, heart, soul, mind and strength.

But these are not distinct small pieces of ourselves that we offer separate from each other. They all point to who and what we really are. Beginning with our inmost commitments and all our thoughts, we are to hold nothing back, we are to give our lives completely to God. God wants us to be alive and thriving in all aspects of our lives, and the only way to do that is for us to give all of ourselves to him and surrender all that we have and all that we are.

But that loving of God is just abstract unless it leads us to love our neighbours as ourselves... In 1 John the connection is made explicit: "We love because he first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister." (4v19-21) Loving God empowers us to love other people. In receiving his love, we can, in turn, love others.

So we come back to the Queen: The Queen demonstrated an unrelenting commitment to public duty and service and has been rightly commended. Even staunch republicans acknowledge that the way she carried out her duties has been a remarkable example of selfless service. But trying to understand the Queen's duty and service apart from her Christian faith is impossible. According to her biographer William Shawcross, her Christian faith was both central and the root to her sense of duty, a life lived to God in the service of others.

One of the monarch's regal titles is "Defender of the Faith"... the faith in question being the Christian faith and the Church of England flavour in particular. Most of the time the Queen kept her thoughts private but the Queen has never hidden her strong Christian faith. Here are five significant quotes from her that show something of the Queen's relationship with Christ and how that faith strengthened her and shaped the way she lived.

1. Putting her service in the hands of God: She said in her 21st birthday radio address in 1947: "I declare before you all that my whole life, whether it be long or short, shall be devoted to your service and the service and the service of the great imperial family to which we all belong. But I shall not have strength to carry out this resolution alone unless you join it with me, as I now invite you to do: I know that your support will be unfailingly given. God help me to make good my vow, and God bless all of you who are willing to share it." Her promise before God to serve and her reliance on him to enable her to keep it did not fade away into history.

2. What sustained her in difficult times? from her Christmas Day message of the year 2000: 'To many of us our beliefs are of fundamental importance. For me the teachings of Christ and my own personal accountability before God provide a framework in which I try to lead my life. I, like so many of you, have drawn great comfort in difficult times from Christ's words and example.'

3. The challenge of Christian discipleship: from her Christmas Day message of 1980: 'In difficult times we may be tempted to find excuses for self-indulgence and to wash our hands of responsibility. Christmas stands for the opposite... we need to go out and look for opportunities to help those less fortunate than ourselves, even if that service demands sacrifice.'

Time and time again she spoke of her trust in Jesus Christ and the difference he made to her life, and her gratitude to God for his steadfast faithfulness. Having listened to those Christmas broadcasts for most of my life I have been struck, particular in more recent years of how explicit she was in speaking of her Christian faith.

4. Her Christmas broadcast of 2014 was, for me, perhaps her most personal, as she spoke of her faith and trust in Jesus Christ and how Christ was the inspiration in her life: 'For me, the life of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, whose birth we celebrate today, is an inspiration and an anchor in my life. A role-model of reconciliation and forgiveness, he stretched out his hands in love, acceptance and healing. Christ's example has taught me to seek to respect and value all people of whatever faith or none.'

5. And from Christmas Day 2002: "I know just how much I rely on my faith to guide me through the good times and the bad. Each day is a new beginning. I know that the only way to live my life is to try to do what is right, to take the long view, to give of my best in all that the day brings, and to put my trust in God... I have drawn strength from the message of hope in the Christian Gospel."

What made Queen Elizabeth a great Queen was not her parentage... that is privilege; it was not her position or power, or her personality. Rather than do as she pleased with who she was and what she had, she chose to dedicate her life to the service of others out of her love for God. Our model, as always, is Christ: in Matthew 10v25-28 Jesus called his disciples together and said: 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'

The greatest among you is the one who serves... The Queen lived out her Christian life under the most intense media scrutiny for nearly a century... and took seriously her 21st birthday promise, demonstrating a consistency of character, a commitment to service, a concern for others, all built on her clear dependence on Christ. In Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II we saw a great Queen, but her greatness came from the fact that she trusted an even greater King and, as such, she offered us an extraordinary example of consistent godliness.

The American Pastor Rick Warren wrote in 2014, commenting on our western culture: "Thousands of books have been written on leadership, but few on servanthood. Everyone wants to lead; no one wants to be a servant. We would rather be Generals than Privates. But to be like Jesus is to be a Servant. That's what he called himself." I wonder how much we are like Jesus, how the faith we profess is seen in service to others. To be like Jesus is to be a Servant.

In her own words our Queen spoke of the inspiration Jesus Christ had been in her own life and leaves us to decide if we are interested in being inspired ourselves. There is no doubt about the identity of the King our Queen served. She was gracious in the things that really matter – her hope and faith in Jesus Christ, her love of God and her service of the people she has been graced to serve. I wonder how much we are like Jesus, in grace and hope and faith and how the faith we profess is seen in service to others.