

Blean: Sunday 12 June 2016: "Celebrating with our Queen"

Psalm 21.1-7

Ephesians 1.15-23

I am rather hesitant to say this, in the middle of June, but let us turn our minds to Christmas.

More precisely, let me remind you of the Queen's Christmas message to the nation. 3.00 pm on Christmas Day is still one of the great ritual moments of family and community life. Many of you, I'm sure, were brought up in households where Christmas lunch had to be eaten and the washing up had to be done before the 3.00 pm deadline! While it may be slightly less rigorously followed nowadays, compared with say the 1950s or 1960s, the Queen's message nonetheless reaches a television audience of about 8 million people; or twice as many as *Top Gear*.

We live at a time when, it seems, many people no longer have the patience to listen to more than about 30 seconds of a speech before they claim to be "bored". Therefore on the television or radio we often only hear short "soundbites" of rhetoric. There is no time to develop factual arguments, so anyone who tries to give a sermon these days is on to a hiding to nothing.

But the Queen's message goes against this trend. It is worthy listening, since she invariably has a well-constructed message, and she usually says something appropriate or inspiring about the Christian gospel. In 2015 for example, she said this:

"It is true that the world has had to confront moments of darkness this year, but the Gospel of John contains a verse of great hope: 'The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.'" She went on, "Despite being displaced and persecuted throughout his short life, Christ's unchanging message was not one of revenge or violence, but simply that we should love one another."

In a world racked by terrorism and violence, she had chosen the perfect verse, the perfect image – light shining in darkness – to illustrate the Christian message. The Queen knows that faith in Jesus Christ can help everyone and anyone through the darkest moments of human life, the tragedies and the shocks; the times of war and natural disaster.

Or take this brilliant insight from her message in the year 2000.

"Even in our very material age the impact of Christ's life is all around us. If you want to see an expression of Christian faith you have only to look at our cathedrals...listen to their music, or look at their stained glass windows...But the true measure of Christ's influence is not only in the lives of the saints but also in the good works quietly done by millions of men and women day in and day out throughout the centuries."

In other words she was emphasising, and applauding, the daily life of church communities up and down the country. The daily prayers, the charitable works, the pastoral visits: all these are selfless community actions that do so much to make up the real fabric of our society. For, at its best, the Church of England is a dynamic and an irreplaceable Christian

presence in every parish or community in the land – one that makes immeasurable positive contributions to wider society. The Church invigorates society and works tirelessly for the common good, and it has always done so. That was one of the key messages in the little book *Where Prayer has been Valid* which we delivered to every home in Blean and Tyler Hill. Blean Church is at the centre of local community life.

We need to recognise that the Queen's faith and her commitment to the Church are not casual or subsidiary features of her life. At her coronation, back in 1953, the Queen made significant vows, one of them relating directly to her role as Head of the Church of England. She has the title "Defender of the Faith", and has solemnly vowed to "maintain the Church of England...which holds [her] allegiance." She affirmed that she was called by God "to forward...the Church of England in its work of preaching the Gospel and building the Church, which is the Body of Christ."

You could almost say that she was "ordained" into this particular role at her coronation: she certainly became a servant or minister of the Church; and I am sure that she recognised it as God's calling or vocation, just as priests or readers recognise their callings. For over 64 years she has been an exemplary leader, not just through her Christmas messages, but in her daily life, her regular Church attendance, and many other public utterances. Her public speeches are full of allusions to the Bible, the parables, Paul's epistles, the prophets.

The influence of the Bible on our monarch is worth exploring briefly. The psalm we heard for our first lesson would have been sung at the coronations of the kings of Israel – or used on other significant royal occasions. It describes the glory and the majesty of the monarch, and the honour that should be accorded. But it also makes clear that the king (or queen) is nothing unless he or she puts their trust in God. If you study the history of Israel within the Bible, you will see that kings fail if they do not honour or acknowledge God. As the psalmist said: "...the king puts his trust in the Lord; because of the loving kindness of the Most High, he shall not be overthrown" (Ps. 21.7).

And the passage from the epistle to the Ephesians is also quite clear that, in the wider hierarchy of life, principalities and powers and dominions fall far below the glory of Jesus Christ – "not only in this world, but also in that which is to come" (Eph. 1.21)

The Queen knows this, and understands it well. Of course she has a protected and privileged position, with formidable ceremonial duties and all the trappings of royal protocols. But fundamentally, as her public words testify, she is a servant queen; she serves our Lord, Jesus Christ, and she is convinced that life to the full is to be found, not in secular power, but in the Kingdom of God.

So today, we celebrate the Queen and congratulate her on her official ninetieth birthday. It is a grand and patriotic occasion, a family occasion, and throughout the country, there will be many picnics, teas, and fun and games like those organised in Blean and Tyler Hill. It is a time for patriotism and nostalgia; a time when we must be grateful for the faithful way that Queen Elizabeth has led the nation by her example, by her faultless personal life and her genuine graciousness.

Let me end by saying that I hope you will all look beyond all the royal glitter and pomp, the flag waving, the grand ceremonies and the grandeur of the monarchy. All that is good, but

we should also be able to discern behind the façade a modest and self-sacrificing lady who is an earnest Christian. And we should remember her, the Duke of Edinburgh and all the royal family regularly in our prayers. For, although the Queen is of course the ultimate celebrity, she nonetheless has her feet firmly on the ground when it comes to the Christian faith and the God whom she serves.

Let us reflect on her example, and emulate her steadfast faith.

Amen.