

Sermon for Sunday 11 September 2022 – The Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity

Sunday during the period of mourning for Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II

Lamentations 3.22-26,31-33; 2 Corinthians 4.16–5.4; John 6.35-40

Very Revd Dr Philip Buckler

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Many, many words have been spoken these past few days. Vivid memories, thoughtful evaluations and generous tributes. All in honour of her late Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, following her death on Thursday at Balmoral Castle. She died as she lived, rooted deeply in her Christian faith, sure in the promise of our Lord that we heard in that gospel reading. This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in Him may have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day.

Although hardly unexpected in reality, nevertheless, it has come as a shock to us all, just as any death, however anticipated, has that sense of unsettling and disturbing us. There is a natural outpouring of grief, the other side of the respect and love in which our late Queen has been held, not only in this land, but across the world.

No shortage of words, then, but also a variety of actions, from the very young and the very old, gathering and laying flowers at the gates of royal palaces, to the pageantry that accompanies the peaceful transference of power to the new sovereign. Pageantry that has evolved over the centuries, stabilising expectation and quelling past disputes. The transference of power; yet strange power it is. Our new monarch spoke of serving in the strength of God, and God himself has shown us a new shape of power. Indeed, it looks very like powerlessness.

As we look to Jesus Christ standing before Pilate, we ask where and what is power? As so often at their best, our human traditions reflect something of God himself; we are, after all, made in his image. So power is redefined as a strength not of force, but of love. How past and present sovereigns openly declared that they are rooted in that power of love. And that's not something that is reserved exclusively for the privileged. It's a power in which each one of us is invited to share, by the grace of God, the power of love.

Today we come as individuals and as members of this community at Lavenham to acknowledge our sadness, yet to offer our thanks, for the life of Elizabeth, the only monarch known to the majority of our people. It is a time of great change, yet her reign itself has seen unimaginable change. Throughout it all, we appreciated her steadfastness and constancy, ready to adapt, yet remaining true. Again, we see in that an image of God himself reflected in those words of the well known hymn, 'Change and decay all around I see, O thou who changest not, abide with me.'

Of course, times change, and we have benefited from a monarchy that has itself changed over the centuries. Looking back to mediaeval times, we see monarchs of very varied quality in very difficult times. Go further back to the Old Testament age and we find monarchy in a very different perspective. The early prophets railed against the desire for a king. It was thought to be usurping the place of God amongst his people. When they finally got a king in Saul, they found the reality a very mixed blessing. Even David, in some ways a flawed king, yet later to become the ideal of kingship, even he faced temporary exile when his son Absalom tried to wrest the throne from him.

But in our time, we have never imagined that the Sovereign has tried to take the place of God. Indeed, Elizabeth would often more and more speak of her deep faith, on which all she did was based. Profound faith breeds sincere humility, and that is the ground in which love may flourish and abound. Duty, a word much maligned in today's world, yet that was a constant for her, and for that we give thanks today, and hope and pray that her example may go some way to rehabilitate that idea of unwavering service to others. The duty also had a twinkle in its eye, as many of us may remember. It suggests a wider grasp of reality and truth that can see absurdity and fun as very real parts of our rich human existence.

Many of us recall the Jubilees of celebration. The Silver Jubilee, a sovereign, shining example reflecting a metal superior in conductivity, the channel of a higher power. The Golden Jubilee, a sovereign precious like gold, valued around the whole world. The Diamond Jubilee, a monarchy sparkling and reflecting glory, yet hard and resonant in its strength. And finally, this year, the Platinum Jubilee, acknowledging a monarchy so precious and rare that has adorned this nation for 70 years, the biblical span of life, three score years and ten. On those occasions, and now, at the end of her reign, we give thanks to God for such blessings.

Any death interrupts our lives. For a moment, time stands still. It encourages or even demands that we look again beyond the immediate issues, however pressing they may be, beyond ourselves and our own interests, and even beyond time itself, to look into eternity and that promise of God's everlasting love into which he calls us all at our lives' end.

It has been observed how much Queen Elizabeth felt the responsibility of the anointing at her coronation. For each one of us, there is an anointing in the waters of baptism. May we prove as loyal in our commission as did she in hers.

Many, many words have been spoken. Yet there is also the time for silence. Otherwise we shall fail to hear that one word which remains above all; the word of God, that we see incarnate made flesh in Jesus Christ, our Lord, the Lord who was the source of strength for our late Queen and is the inspiration for our sovereign King Charles III. So today we make our prayer in words so familiar, yet nevertheless so profound. Rest eternal grant unto Her Majesty, O Lord, and let light perpetual shine upon her. God save the King.

Amen.