

HM Queen's Commemorative Service

Exeter Cathedral

18 September 2022

Readings: Ecclesiastes 12.1-7; 1 Cor.15.51-58

'The years of our life are three score and ten, or if we have strength four score. Our days soon pass away and we are gone. So teach us, good Lord, to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.'

Words from Psalm 90 which, along with our first reading from the book of Ecclesiastes, remind us of our mortality and the preciousness of life. Do not fritter away your life on the pursuit of trivia, says scripture. This is not a practice run. This is your go.

It is a salutary message for each of us to contemplate on the eve of a funeral, but particularly on the eve of the funeral of our late Sovereign Lady Queen Elizabeth, whose passing we mourn in company with millions of people in this country and across the Commonwealth.

We have seen this day coming a long time ago, but we liked to think that it would never dawn. In spite of the Queen's increasing and evident frailty since the death of her husband, the Duke of Edinburgh, she seemed strangely invincible and I, for one, find it difficult to speak of her in the past tense.

Barely three months ago, we gathered here in the cathedral to honour Her Late Majesty's platinum jubilee, her seventy-year reign of this 'sceptred isle', 'this precious stone set in the silver sea', as Shakespeare described her kingdom. We celebrated her historic reign with a mixture of affection and admiration.

In a fast-moving age, Queen Elizabeth was surprisingly adept at adapting to modern mores. She weathered the fickleness of public opinion, trimming her sails and riding turbulent waves of political intrigue.

When we see pictures of the war in Ukraine, where the infrastructure of that nation has been systematically destroyed and millions of its citizens displaced, we realise how fortunate we are in this country and how precious peace is.

The stability and the continuity which Queen Elizabeth embodied has been an enormous gift, and I like to think that her dying in Scotland, at a time when the union of our nations is under such pressure, has been one of her parting gifts to us. By any stretch of the imagination, our late Sovereign was a remarkable person.

To give but one example, recall the Queen's state visit to the Republic of Ireland in 2011. Given the assassination of her cousin Lord Louis Mountbatten by the IRA, that visit took considerable personal courage. All sides of the political divide heralded her four-day state visit as the greatest diplomatic achievement of her reign. The tectonic plates of history shifted.

Queen Elizabeth was a private person who was public property. Queen, wife, mother, grandmother, great grandmother: the ups and downs of her family filled the gossip columns of our newspapers. She was the glue that held the Royal Family together and us as a nation. As one member of the public put it, having attended the lying in state in St Giles' Cathedral, Edinburgh, 'She was everyone's grannie'.

The Queen was someone whom everyone felt they knew. She was local to everyone. She was a person of extraordinary stamina, unpretentious and surprisingly frugal. She hated obsequiousness and, in spite of the pomp and circumstance that surrounded her, disliked fuss.

She had a prodigious memory for people and places and faces, as I discovered for myself when I was appointed Bishop of Exeter nine years ago. I had to go to Buckingham Palace to pay homage and kiss hands with the Queen, at the end of which the Queen said to me: 'Is that oak tree still growing outside your palace in Exeter?'

The Queen had a unique way of generating goodwill, of celebrating the work of ordinary people, voluntary organisations and charities. She encouraged service to the wider community. Her tenacious commitment to public service rebuked those who see life simply as having a great time.

Famously, on her 21st birthday she broadcast to the nation from South Africa in words that have been recalled many times during the past week:

'I declare before you all that my whole life, whether it be long or short, shall be devoted to your service and the service of our great imperial family to which we all belong.

'But I shall not have strength to carry out this resolution alone unless you join in 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 in it.'

It was an invitation to partnership: future monarch and people working together for the common good. Throughout her long reign, she often signed her letters, 'Elizabeth, your servant'. I don't think Henry VIII signed any of his letters that way.

'Whether my life be long or short.' Aged 21, I'm sure the then Princess Elizabeth, never thought that seventy-five years later aged 96 she would still be signing a daily round of state papers arriving on her desk in her red box or inviting a new Prime Minister to form a Government.

As Simon Armitage, the Poet Laureate, says in his poem celebrating her reign, 'A promise made and kept for life – that was your gift.'

Although the 'great imperial family' of which the Queen spoke on her 21st birthday has long since been transformed into a Commonwealth of Nations, public service, duty and her devout Christian faith remained the hallmarks of her reign.

Queen Elizabeth had a quiet, unfussy faith which always made room for others. Her trust in Jesus Christ was central to her life, but she wore her faith on her heart, not on her sleeve. In one of her Christmas broadcasts, she said:

'I know just how much I rely on my own 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.'

The commemorative cover of our Order of Service today carries a beautiful picture of Queen Elizabeth: bright-eyed, smiling, greeting well-wishers. It is how we will always wish to remember her.

The photograph on the back cover is of her coronation in Westminster Abbey. The young Queen, dignified and regal, sits on the coronation chair, holding in her hands the orb and sceptre of the monarch.

But the photograph that sticks in my mind today is the last photograph we have of the Queen, taken at Balmoral, barely 48 hours before she died.

The Queen stands by the fireside, a radiant smile lighting up her face, her left hand holding not a sceptre, but a walking stick to steady herself. Performing her constitutional duty right to the end, she holds out her right hand in welcome to Liz Truss, her 15th Prime Minister.

And it was that right hand that I noticed. It was so badly bruised. Seeing it, I immediately remembered my own mother at the end of her life, her skin bruised, stretched translucent across her hand like tissue paper.

For me, that last photograph spoke volumes. There stood our monarch: our sovereign: our Head of State: frail, dignified,, vulnerable yet gloriously strong.

Moving though that final photograph is, it is not the picture that I would like to leave you with today. There is another, more intimate picture of the Queen that I would like to share with you.

Five years ago, I was privileged to spend the weekend with the Royal Family at Sandringham. On Sunday afternoon, after Prince William, Catherine and the children had left, I wandered into the saloon, attracted by the sight and sound of a roaring log fire, burning in the grate.

There sat the Queen by the fireside, wearing a cardigan, doing a jigsaw. She looked up as I entered the room. 'Ah, bishop,' she said, 'pull up a chair and come and help me. I'm stuck.'

+ Robert Exon

For the next 35 minutes, the Queen of England and I sat next to each other, chatting about this and that, trying to sort out the sky in the top right-hand corner of what turned out to be a fiendishly difficult jigsaw.

‘It’s a tricky one, isn’t it?’ she said. ‘The trouble is, I think some of the pieces may be missing and it’s difficult to make sense of it.’

I have thought a lot about that exchange over the last few days because, in many ways, I think it was emblematic of the Queen’s role as Head of State.

Queen Elizabeth was someone who brought together the scattered and confusing bits of our nation’s jigsaw into coherence. It was a lifelong enterprise and it was tricky because pieces of the jigsaw kept going astray, but she persevered.

She went on going on, right to the end, making a picture in which we could recognise our identity as a people and a nation under God, and today we feel our loss.

But let the final words today be not of loss, but of hope and fulfilment in Jesus Christ. I close with words of St Paul, from the end of our second reading: ‘Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.’

Our Queen trusted in God and did not labour in vain.
May she rest in peace and rise in glory.