

Cathedral and Civic Sermon on the Occasion of HRH Queen Elizabeth's 90th Birthday

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April 21st 1926 - marks a significant birth. But that day, over ninety years ago, also presents us with a familiar picture. The UK steel industry was weak. There were controversies about the size of the bonus pool for senior executives in one of our then largest companies – Dunlop. There was hectic trading reported in foreign securities. On foreign affairs, Greece was experiencing some economic difficulties. Germany and the Soviet Union were squaring up to each other. Britain, was on the edge of industrial strife. And in the USA, Route 66 was opened – just for kicks.

In ninety years, we have seen a lot of changes. But a lot remains the same. And it is in the midst of change and continuity that our monarchy sits. To some, its very survival is a curious anachronism. To others, it is an enduring symbol of power. But I do not mean the power of privilege. Rather, the power of the monarchy lies in the persistence and resilience of character and virtues that are often quite inchoate – and yet essential to a civilised society. Here I speak of wisdom, sacrifice, patience, public-spirit, restraint, measured-ness, kindly interest, and duty – values and behaviour that are not easy to manufacture, much less fake.

And yet we find these in the monarchy, and perhaps especially in our Queen. The long term value of an institution lies in its social architecture – the ethos, values and virtues it embodies. The monarchy persists as a good institution; it embodies virtues that all can aspire to. To be sure there is less deference than there once was. But despite our more egalitarian society, we still find it helpful – perhaps necessary – to look beyond ourselves for the inspiration of exemplary lives, and ones that provide a frame of reference for the good and right ordering of society. It is extraordinary, and perhaps even a little miraculous, that after ninety years, and sixty-four of which have been as monarch, that we can look to one individual – our Queen – as an exemplar by which we can orientate our social, civic and national life.

Like all of us gathered here today, I marvel at the Queen's schedule – her tireless devotion to duty, and the range of people and places she visits and engages with in any given year. And even her ninetieth. Of course, we should not be surprised at all by this. On her 21st birthday in 1947, she announced in her broadcast to the nation that 'I declare before you all, that my whole life, whether it be long or short, shall be devoted to your service'. I think it is hard to imagine a more sacrificial and vocational pledge. And she has kept her word; and she has honoured her pledge. She has remained an enduring symbol of service, resilience and duty.

And so for what is supposed to be a secular age, the Queen's deep and profound Christian faith can be surprisingly apparent at times. As Supreme Governor of the Church of England, she has extended the hand of friendship to people of all faiths. As head of the Commonwealth, she promoted inter-faith dialogue, and deeper understanding between religious faiths. She was the first monarch, in 1982, to welcome a Pope to our shores since the Reformation (John Paul II). We would do well to remember that such gestures – against a background of tribal religious violence in Northern Ireland ('The Troubles', as we once meekly referred to them) are not only significant, but also profound, prescient and quite prophetic. She has visited the Vatican five times. Pope Benedict's visit in 2010 was a state occasion – the first as such for over four hundred years.

In her state visit to Ireland in 2011, she went out of her way to begin a process of healing rifts that have been there since the birth of the Irish State. She bowed her head in silence at the Garden of Remembrance in Dublin, which commemorates those Irish who lost their lives to the British in the struggle for freedom and independence, just a few years before the Queen herself was born. Her remarks (deep, simple, perceptive), that 'there are some things one would do differently – or perhaps not all' showed not only the wisdom of historical hindsight, but also a gift for being able to pour balm on old wounds that might still fester. She is a reconciler.

It is not only the restoration of such ties that matter. It is the calibration of the Queen's warmth, humanity and sovereignty that make her such a unique and iconic figure. In all this, she has not been immune from own struggles and suffering. She had to endure her London in the blitz, the death of much-loved daughter-in-law, Diana, Princess of Wales. And, of course, her *annus horribilis*, which saw the Prince of Wales separate from Diana, his first wife; the separation of the Duke of York's freshly estranged wife, Sarah, amplified in the media; and finally Windsor Castle almost burned down. All of which precipitated an uncommon public tear to well in the regal eye. As the Queen reflected, with masterly understatement, 1992 was *not* a year she would look back on 'with undiluted pleasure'.

But we have seen her humour too. A guest appearance, not a body-double, in a riff on a James Bond movie, in order to open the 2012 London Olympics. She has a subtle, rich demeanour grounded in good humour and levity. She needs this for the endless parade of events, garden parties, meetings – not to mention the day-to-day work of being a monarch. In all this, the Queen conducts herself with composure, dignity and grace. Such characteristics are part of our national locker of values. There is a relationship between authenticity and authority.

And it is perhaps that equation, more than anything else, and its endurance in her Majesty, that we celebrate today. In our own county, we have been blessed with many visits by her Majesty. Only recently, she has been to Oxfordshire for a wide variety of visits. For example, many openings, including the Diamond Light source at Harwell; a new Leonard Cheshire Home in Banbury; a new Paediatric Unit at the John Radcliffe Hospital; and the new building at the Ashmolean museum. Just a few days before our service here today (June 11th), the Queen will have re-dedicated at Didcot station, a steam locomotive originally dedicated to her when she was still Princess Elizabeth. And of course, the Queen came here for the Maundy service in Christ Church. Every one of her visits to this city and county has been special, and given enormous pleasure and great pride, as well as a huge sense of civic involvement with our Monarch, and to all who attended them. Today, the collection at our service is for the Oxford Community Foundation Jubilee fund, set up at the time to enable people to mark the Queen's then 60 year reign.

So finally, I want to return to her faith. For the Queen is a Servant of the People. And she is someone who, as a person, and in her role, understands that what flows through the monarchy and to the people, ultimately comes from God. As she remarked in her Christmas broadcast of 2012:

This is the time of year when we remember that God sent his only Son 'to serve, not to be served'. He restored love and service to the centre of our lives in the person of Jesus Christ. It is my prayer this Christmas Day that his example and teaching will continued to bring people together to give the best of themselves in the service of others.

In 1986, her Christmas message reminded us that Jesus' life began in humble surroundings, and that 'you don't have to be rich or powerful in order to change things for the better, and each of us can make our own contribution'. And at the turn of the millennium, she simply remarked that: Many will have been inspired by Jesus' simple but powerful teaching: love God and love thy neighbour as thyself – treat others as you would like them to treat you. Jesus' great emphasis was to give spirituality a practical purpose...'

Few would have predicted that the monarchy would have such a powerful, practical purpose in a modern, democratic, multi-ethnic, multi-faith 21st century country. But it does. It embodies goodness, service, hospitality, graciousness, resilience, restraint, humanity and humour. For that, we thank God, and thank the Queen – and wish Her Majesty God's blessing in this, her ninetieth year. And to Christ Church, where she is our Visitor, we of course wish her 'many happy returns'. **Amen.**