

Service of Commemoration and Reflection upon the Death of Queen Elizabeth II

St Edmundsbury Cathedral September 17th 2022

Sermon preached by The Bishop, The Rt Rev'd Martin Seeley.

This has been a week, now ten days, which we have all experienced as time out of time. The world has slowed, even stopped at points. In those first few hours, first couple of days, we seemed stunned into almost unbelieving silence. After all, we had seen her, smiling, hand stretched out in welcome, just two days before, greeting her new Prime Minister.

But then what we had all hoped would never happen, happened, leaving us muted in grief and shock. And ever since, though many of us here have had much to do, it is as if we have been doing so in slow motion. Keeping pace with the hearse as it made its way from Balmoral to Edinburgh, from Buckingham Palace to Westminster Hall. Keeping pace with the queue of those filing past Her Late Majesty's coffin.

Time out of time, and during this we have had plenty of moments when we have found ourselves caught off guard, when what has happened, the death of our beloved Queen, has hit us afresh.

Seeing the coffin for the first time; listening to our new King speak to us last Friday evening; hearing the tributes from leaders from around the world, and the tributes from people like us with memories, stories, of love and affection; then, singing God Save The King for the first time; and for a few of us even, singing God Save The King in front of the King in Westminster Hall; seeing him, his brothers and sister keeping watch at their mother's coffin; seeing the long lines waiting to file past. Moments that have choked us up, caught us off guard even while others keep guard.

We have pieced together memories, stories, a tapestry of who Her Late Majesty has been for us individually and together. We've told maybe the same stories, but in a different tenor, and for a different purpose, than when we told them just a few months ago celebrating her Platinum Jubilee. For some, as we have heard from Lord Tollemache, those stories are very personal indeed. For others, they are stories of fleeting glimpses, or memories of events we were not part of but in which she made a lasting impression on our hearts.

For myself it is a mixture – and includes the extraordinary privileged encounters that you have as a bishop because Queen Elizabeth quite simply wanted to know her bishops. The conversation after paying homage when we compared country roads in Suffolk and Norfolk, and when she asked so kindly about how my children were adjusting to the move to Ipswich. Or sitting next to her on the sofa at Sandringham watching the news on the television – just the three of us, Her Majesty, Prince Philip and – I pinch myself – me. Or that same evening playing patience and the Queen leaning over to move my cards since I was doing such a bad job of it.

And in all of our memories, immediate or at one removed, we have found ourselves in this time out of time, this slowing down of time, wondering who it is she has been for us all. What has she embodied for all of us, held for us, carried for us and indeed at times carried us through, across the seven decades of her reign?

What has she embodied for us?

Of course, it was there in her character. We have heard a great deal about her wisdom, her fortitude, her courage, her kindness, her humour. We know about her

commitment to family, to our families and to all of us as family – her commitment to community, to welcome, inclusion, diversity, to a wide embrace.

The seeds of her character have always been there, nurtured by her family, by her beloved parents. And through her long reign, her character has been at the forefront, and was honed and shaped and deepened and deepened yet again through all these glorious years.

Who she was has been honed and shaped and deepened because of one crucial decision she made. Because of her “yes”, her resounding “yes” to the vocation to which she was called, the vocation that was not her choice but the choice of destiny, or let’s be real about this: the choice of the one who calls each of us, beckons each of us, to be the person we are made to be. The choice of God. God’s call.

From the moment when she pledged, on her 21st birthday, “I declare before you all that my whole life whether it be long or short shall be devoted to your service,” from that moment she voiced the call she knew had been placed upon her. And she was very clear that at her coronation her anointing, that sacred act that takes place out of sight of the congregation, was the sign and seal of that calling.

Being faithful to her calling, determinedly faithful, and mindfully renewing her sense of her vocation, has meant that she has been for us an example, the supreme public example in our life-time, of constancy and self-giving loving service. By saying the profoundest yes to her calling she turned her privilege into a life of Christian service.

And when you have a sense of calling you stop thinking that it is all up to you, stop thinking you have to turn yourself into something; stop thinking it is about what you

have, or your achievements. It's about saying yes, and faithfully following. She did that and did that for us, saying yes to God and faithfully following his Son.

Our late Queen made an impact by not doing anything to make an impact. In a world where we are geared up to think that controlling activity is what matters, what makes an impact, she, paradoxically as our Queen, demonstrated by her disposition of selfless service, that the opposite is what is real, what really matters.

So for us now, by who she was, living out her deepest vocation, what has she bequeathed to us? What remains, what has she left for us? I have been struck in myself of a growing sense of reassurance as the days of this past week have slowly given way one to the next. As my own sense of shock and bewilderment has slightly receded it has made space for a growing sense of reassurance, a reassurance about what she has left us.

At the moment I see three things she has bequeathed us. First, she has bequeathed to us a sense of ourselves as a people and a nation, and as individuals and families and communities, and a sense of what our truest deepest values are, made evident, enduringly evident because she lived them her whole life. Constancy, endurance, fortitude, fun, kindness, undemonstrative care for each other, selflessness. Living lives not for ourselves but for others.

I believe it was her selfless dedication to her vocation that has so touched the deepest longings and hopes of our hearts. And that dedication sprung from her own deep understanding that it was God who had called her and upon whom she could depend. That never wavered, so our experience of her as our Queen never wavered.

The first thing she has bequeathed to us then is who we are and how to live, and the second is an heir who willingly says yes to the same call from God and will follow the same path, just as she followed the same path as her father. We have even in these last days the same dedication, the same clarity about from where his strength comes, in our new King.

Certainly my sense of reassurance has grown these past days through seeing his at-easeness with his own embodiment of Christian calling to be one who serves his people with fortitude, courage, humour and kindness. And who has a perspective on the world rooted in what really matters, which is always the gift of vocation.

A sense of who we are and our deepest values to live by; a King to focus and embody that for us. And thirdly, she has left us in life and in her death, a sure sign of the life to come. Just listen to the number of times people have remarked how she is now reunited with her beloved Philip. Instinctively we know that must be true. And think back to last Tuesday and the smile as she greeted her new Prime Minister, a kind smile, a kind smile of one who surely knew she was going to die soon and was not afraid. "Where, O death, is your sting?" She was answering that question for us.

Her sure belief in the life to come shaped the way she lived-out her calling throughout her life. God who so passionately loved our beloved Queen holds her in love in the mystery of the life that is beyond this life, in the ultimate time out of time, eternity. Our age is reluctant to acknowledge or believe that. And yet over and again this week we have touched this reality, experienced a different sort of time, and through her life and her death glimpsed the time of eternity.

Our late and beloved Queen has given us so much, and it will endure. She knew the joys and hopes, and the trials and tribulations of this life, and yet her sense of vocation placed her in a time out of time, to hold up for us aspirations of goodness, kindness, selflessness which are the deepest and truest dimensions of our God-given calling as human beings. May each one of us be welcomed when our time comes, with those same words that surely our Lord rejoiced to declare to Her Late Majesty, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

We thank God for giving us our late and beloved Queen. May she rest in peace and rise in glory. Amen.

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