

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



County Coronation Service

Sunday 7 May 2023

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Sermon by the Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich

A coronation is a rare historical moment, and we were all acutely aware of that as we watched the extraordinary service yesterday. From the procession, the entrance, and the words of greeting spoken by the young chorister, to the most solemn moment of anointing, to the crowning, to the sealing for the King and Queen as they received holy communion, to the magnificent procession to the Palace, to the appearance on the balcony, we all knew we were witnessing something that was not only deeply rooted in history, but was making history.

Rooted in history through so many elements. The sixth century St Augustine Gospels connect to our Christian origins in this land, the artefacts used or presented to the King, some dating from the 12th century, connecting us to coronations through the centuries, and as well as the historic role of the Archbishop of Canterbury, and indeed the role of the Bishop of Bath and Wells is traced back to the coronation of Edgar in Bath in 973.

As well as rooted in history, the coronation was making history: in the inclusion of people of other faiths, the presence of women bishops, the king himself praying in public, the participation of a Roman Catholic prelate for the first time since the Reformation, the array of music. But it was making history above all because, paradoxically, the coronation was pointing us to our future.

The ceremony, rituals and pageant were declarations of intent for the future. They opened up for us a new chapter and bid us look forward in hope.

And with the Prince of Wales and Prince George participating, the coronation took place with two generations of heirs – pointing us even farther into the future.

I think it is important for us to recognise just how profound and significant this looking forward and the expression of hope is, and how important it is for us as a nation.

I know not everyone agrees, but it is hard to dispute that our identity as a people is tied up with being a monarchy, indeed, a constitutional monarchy.

After the long and extraordinary reign of her late Majesty, there were those who anticipated at least some sense of discontinuity, but that has clearly not been the case, and the coronation has served as a declaration of hope for the future, and of the values that sustain that hope.

That hope for the future, and the identity that comes with it, is possible because it is rooted in traditions and values that have sustained us into the present.

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Those traditions and values were clear in the coronation service itself, in actions and artefacts, presenting courage, fortitude, justice, and the wisdom we heard about in our first reading, the wisdom of Solomon, to tell between good and evil, symbolised by the Sword of State, borne unflinchingly by Penny Mourdant.

And as we look to King Charles' reign into the future, three other qualities, symbolised by elements in the coronation ritual, stood out for me as essential for our hope for the future.

The first is mercy. There were four swords used in the service, the Sword of State, dating from the coronation of Charles II, the Sword of Temporal Justice, the Sword of Spiritual Justice, and the Sword of Mercy, all dating from the coronation of Charles I.

The Sword of Mercy has a blunted tip, symbolising the sovereign's mercy. The same value is embodied in the Sovereign's Sceptre with Dove, known as the Rod of Equity and Mercy, and symbolises the monarch's spiritual role. And that quality was reflected in the presentation of the glove, symbolising gentleness and grace.

In our world today, mercy, compassion and kindness, are preeminent qualities of and for our King, not just to embody himself, but to encourage us all to live by.

Secondly, the value of inclusion. The orb presented to the King symbolised the world, and a sense of the embrace of the whole world in its diversity and complexity.

That recognition of a wide embrace, an inclusive view of the world, was reflected in the ecumenical consecration of the oil of chrism and the presence of the Anglican Archbishop of Jerusalem to present the oil in the coronation.

That wide embrace crossed historic divisions with the unprecedented gift of Pope Francis to the King of fragments of the true cross, incorporated into the Cross of Wales that preceded the King's procession in the service.

And of course this wide embrace and inclusive perspective was seen in the role of people from other faiths in the service and the greeting faith leaders gave the King as he left the abbey.

The third quality was the one that struck me the most. It was there from the opening words uttered by the King, in the Archbishop's exemplarily to-the-point and brief sermon, and supremely in the anointing. That quality is the quality of service.

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The King's first words, using words of Jesus, were, "In his name, and after his example, I come not to be served but to serve."

There was for me no more moving moment, in a deeply moving two hours, than when the King removed his outer garments, left in just a shirt, and in that extraordinarily vulnerable state was hidden from view and anointed.

And that to me held what this was about, a man, a human being, in his human frailty, giving himself totally to his vocation to serve.

These three values, amongst others, enacted during the coronation, shaping the King and Queen's reign, are I believe the particular foundation of our hope for the future: mercy, inclusion, and service.

And we know, and the King knew in that most vulnerable moment of his anointing, that he and we do none of this in our own strength.

As we witnessed one symbolic artefact after another, clothing and then presented to the King, we saw the weight of the calling placed on this one man.

And as we look to the future, we feel the weight of our own calling to lives of mercy, inclusion and service.

King Charles' role is to embody the hope upon which we can rely. Which is why the coronation is not a secular ceremony but a profoundly religious one, as hard as it is for our age to apprehend that, our hope is not founded on our own abilities, but on our reliance on the one who holds us all.

There is a horizontal dimension calling us to lives of mercy, inclusion and service, and a vertical dimension, pointing us to trust the one on whom all hope is founded, have faith in the one in whom our future consists, and believe the one who himself came among us not to be served but to serve.

As we look into the uncertainties of the future, we do so in the hope that shaped yesterday's magnificent service, a hope animated by mercy, inclusion and service, a hope made sure by the one who creates, transforms and sustains us.

And so, with the concluding words of our second reading "to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations for ever and ever."

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God save the King! Long live the King!