

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Service of Commemoration

for

Her Late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II

17th September 2022

Sermon

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

So many moving and beautiful words have been written about Her Late Majesty over the last few days. All over the world people have been recalling the events which marked her life and her extraordinary reign of seventy years, her devotion to duty, her unwavering service both to the United Kingdom and to the family of nations, the ways in which she was able both to be close to the people she was amongst and also to maintain a distance that enabled her to be a unifier and reconciler of peoples.

One characteristic that was perhaps surprising about the Queen was her humility. It may seem strange to use that word when reflecting on someone who was surrounded by pomp and grandeur, but she never looked for status or fame for herself. She regarded her role as a gift from God, approaching it in the way of a vocation. In a much-quoted speech given on her 21st birthday in Cape Town, she said: 'My whole life, whether it be short or long, shall be devoted to your service.'

She understood that her role involved a sacrifice of self for the greater good of the communities to which she was responsible. There was a Christ-like quality to that. St Paul notes how Christ did not regard his exalted status as something to be exploited, but emptied himself. The Queen gave herself up to her role in the United Kingdom and Commonwealth, where her task was to be consulted, to encourage and to warn, but not actively to intervene. She kept her private opinions to herself, so that few people actually knew what they were – reticence and impartiality were her hallmarks.

But there was one area in which she did make her views known, and that was in relation to her Christian faith. She spoke of it with increasing openness over the years, particularly in the broadcast messages she gave at Christmas, describing in direct and sincere terms the inspiration and strength she drew from the life and teachings of Christ. Those teachings informed her embrace of all the people over whom she reigned, irrespective of all the markers of human difference - status, background, ethnicity, faith tradition (or absence of one), age, gender, ability, to name a few. There was a place for everyone in her vision of the kingdom of which she was the sovereign.

One also sensed that she found in the teachings of Christ a source of freedom that was denied her in other, more formal, areas of her life. The Church of England's Book of Common Prayer contains a prayer known as the Collect for Peace, which refers to a God 'whose service is perfect freedom'. The original formulation of those words, written by St Augustine in the fourth century, refers to a God 'whom to serve is to reign'.

At the end of our service, we will sing the hymn written by Sir Cecil Spring-Rice, the British ambassador to Washington during the First World War, which describes what it means not only to love your country in a sacrificial way, but also to hold on to a vision of heaven. For the Queen, a practical example of the 'service of her love' was the energy and commitment she brought to the many charities and organisations of which she was patron – six hundred of them, at the last count. That is why we chose the reading from St Matthew's Gospel for this service.

In her Christmas broadcast of 2016, the Queen said this: 'Jesus Christ lived obscurely for most of his life, and never travelled far. He was maligned and rejected by many, though he had done no wrong. And yet, billions of people now follow his teaching and find in him the guiding light for their lives. I am one of them because Christ's example helps me see the value of doing small things with great love, whoever does them and whatever they themselves believe.' Small things with great love: 'I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me'.

As Her Majesty pointed out, any of us can do this. On another occasion she said: 'Despite being displaced and persecuted throughout his short life, Christ's unchanging message was not one of revenge or violence but simply that we should love one another. Although it is not an easy message to follow, ... it inspires us to ... be thankful for the people who bring love and happiness into our own lives, and to look for ways of spreading that love to others, whenever and wherever we can.' We might make that our tribute to her in the time left to each of us in this life: a renewed energy and commitment to the service of others in love, 'whenever and wherever we can'.

Much has been made of how young the Queen was when she took on the role to which she dedicated the rest of her life. It was therefore somehow fitting that she died on the day the Church celebrates the Nativity of Mary, the mother of Jesus: another young woman called unexpectedly into a life of service to God at a tender age, a life that she knew would be costly, yet who responded: 'Be it unto me according to thy word.'

So, as we approach the day of her Funeral and the official end of this time of mourning, what hope does the Christian faith hold out for us? I would like to suggest it is the hope that lies in the Communion of Saints, the mystical bond that unites us in hope and love with those who have gone before us. In the darkest days of the Covid pandemic, during the first lockdown when as yet there were no vaccines or respite from the isolation many were feeling, the Queen gave a television broadcast that was a matchless example of her ability to console a nation facing turmoil. She offered comfort, strength, understanding, resilience and hope. Her speech concluded with a phrase sung by Dame Vera Lynn during the Second World War: 'We'll meet again.' That is the Christian hope, in and through the resurrection of Christ. That is the faith of which the Queen was the Defender with such steadfastness and constancy. And for her life and witness we give thanks.

Meanwhile, I suspect the words that best sum up what many have been thinking, since hearing the news that her earthly life was at its end, are some words which Jesus himself spoke when he told the parable that appears in St Matthew's Gospel immediately before the passage we heard today: the parable of the talents. The Queen was gifted with many talents, and she put them to

the best possible use for the benefit of others, in ways that will live on in the memory long after these days of mourning are past. The words Jesus spoke were these, and they might have been written for her:

‘Well done, thou good and faithful servant: enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.’

Amen.