

The Death of Queen Elizabeth II

Sermon by Bishop Richard Harries

St Mary's, 8am service on Sunday 11th September 2022

As a teenage member of my school cadet corps in 1952, I was one of many in uniform lining the route of the three mile Long Walk up to Windsor Castle. I stood there, rifle reversed and pointing downwards, eyes lowered, when, to the sound of slow drumbeat, the cortege of the late King George VIth passed slowly by. There was one word, in particular, in 1952 which characterised the best of that generation as displayed so notably by George VI. Duty. You were expected to do your duty, to God, to the country and if you were a citizen, to the monarch. That word seems to have dropped out of current usage, even from the Scout promise. But her late Majesty took it from her father and revealed its reality and crucial importance over 70 changing and challenging years.

To do one's duty is to accept the responsibilities of the role one inhabits-as a parent to a child, as children to parents, as citizens to the country, as employers to employees, and vice versa, as Christians to the church to which we belong. To accept the responsibilities of a role, is to put aside one's personal feelings, ones likes and dislikes, to do what the role requires. It involves daily sacrifice.

We saw this pre-eminently in our much-loved late Queen. She did not ask to be monarch, certainly not at that young age. But from the first she recognised it was a responsibility she had to accept and from the first she pledged herself to fulfil its duties, which she did faithfully to the end.

And that steadfast faithfulness was rooted in her Christian faith, as was made increasingly clear in the royal broadcasts of recent years. It wasn't pushed in your faith, it did not make those without faith feel uncomfortable, but it was clearly real, and at the heart off her life of service to the country. If she had been asked what that faith was, I

suspect she would have pointed to the words in today's Gospel, to love God with all that we are, and our neighbours as ourselves.

That service included her role in relation to the Church of England, which again she faithfully carried out. She opened every new Synod of the Church of England. She appeared at numerous big services in Cathedrals round the country, she invited every Diocesan Bishop once in their tenure of office to stay with her for a weekend at Sandringham.

The word duty seems too stern for our tastes today but in the late queen it went with a great sense of humour and fun. I love the story from a stay at Balmoral which could be informal when she popped into the local shop. A lady came in, looked at her and said,

‘You look very like the Queen.’

‘How very reassuring’ the Queen replied.

It was a humour which revealed her underlying humility. At a meeting of the Privy Council someone's mobile phone rang. As they fumbled to turn it off the Queen looked at them and said ‘Hadn't you better answer it? It might be someone important.’

She was always alert to what was going on. At the Sandringham weekend, the visiting bishop preaches at the local church on the Sunday morning. When I did it, the lesson was read rather well by a member of the congregation and after the service a group, including the Queen and myself, gathered round her to congratulate her.

Looking at me, she suddenly said ‘You weren't listening Bishop’

Like many a nervous preacher I had taken the opportunity to take a surreptitious look at my notes during the lesson. ‘I was doing both, Ma'am’ I replied. She missed nothing.

One of the aspects of the monarchy that the Queen did so well, was to be both a serious member of the Church of England and a monarch for all faiths, and she both reflected and re-enforced a vital role played by her church over the last 70 years. As she told bishops in 2012, ‘the

Church certainly provides an identity and spiritual dimension for its own many adherents. But also, gently and assuredly, the Church of England has created an environment for other faith communities and indeed people of no faith to live freely. Woven into the fabric of this country, the Church has helped to build a better society – more and more in active co-operation for the common good with those of other faiths.’

As the new king has made clear some years ago, it is an aspect of the role, he will be particularly pleased to affirm.

So, we thank God today for a life wonderfully well lived, for a Christian faith which, following the example and teaching of Jesus, motivated a life of service to her church and country. May flights of angels indeed sing her to her well-deserved rest.

So, we pray for the new king, His Majesty King Charles III who has already indicated that he has a new role, whose responsibilities he accepts. He has, as we say, a very hard act to follow. But it is a role-model he aspires to, and he shares his mother’s Christian faith in his desire to be faithful to it.

We live in difficult, fragile times in which the monarch has a crucial role to play. Our prayers for him are more than formal.

Bishop Richard Harries