

A TRIBUTE TO QUEEN ELIZABETH II

Père Abbé, many thanks for your warm welcome, for your invitation to give the homily this morning, and for your sympathies on the death of Queen Elizabeth. This is a sad time for us, and also for many others around the world. Many have paid tribute to her, among them President Macron in a very personal and moving tribute, and this morning I would like to add my own.

I watched the Queen's coronation as a young boy – like many families that was the reason we bought a television! I remember the cry *Vivat Regina!* ringing out from the choir, and the feelings of joy and goodwill. Those same feelings were much in evidence earlier this year when she celebrated her seventieth jubilee, but now is a time of sorrow and of grateful reflection.

The Queen was a symbolic figure like no other. Whatever the occasion, and whoever else was there, the Queen was the centre of attention. She was someone we all felt we knew, and there was a genuineness about all she did. The Queen was not an actress playing a role: what we saw and experienced was her true self. And at the centre of her life was the ideal of service. There is nothing automatic about this version of monarchy; too often monarchy has been about power and privilege, as you have known in France, as we have in England. Elizabeth showed a different way. Before she became queen, on her twenty-first birthday she made a vow that her whole life, be it long or short, would be dedicated to serving her people. She was true to her vow. Her message on her seventieth jubilee was signed, 'Elizabeth, your servant', and her personal achievement has been to root the monarchy firmly in the ethic of service.

Living under vows lies at the heart of the Christian life. Each of us live in the world under our baptismal vows. We promise at our baptism to turn to Christ, to repent of our sins and to renounce evil. Those who are married live under their marriage vows, and the monks of this community live under the Benedictine vows of stability, conversion of life, and obedience. There is something basic about being human expressed in these Benedictine vows – they have meaning not just for monks – and the Queen's example helps us to understand what they mean for us who live outside the monastery.

Obedience is about acknowledging a source of authority outside of our self. Too much of life persuades us that we should live by our own lights, according to our own set of values and our own version of truth. The Queen lived by the light of Christ, by the values and truth of the gospel. For her, Jesus was the way, the truth and the life. At her coronation, before the crown was placed on her head, she knelt before the high altar in Westminster Abbey and pledged her allegiance to God before others pledged their allegiance to her. Throughout her life

she has witnessed to her personal faith and trust in God, particularly in her broadcast at Christmas each year, when she always spoke of the religious origin of the festival and linked it to the needs of the times. If we wonder why our life, and the life of our nation, are confused and conflicted, we need to ask to whom, or to what is our obedience pledged.

The Queen pledged herself to the ideal of service. Ideals are important, like those of liberty, equality and fraternity that lie at the heart of your nation, but we all know that however noble, ideals are not enough. If they are to take root and shape our life, they have to have more than intellectual assent; those who espouse ideals have to live them; they have to take root in our hearts and not just in our minds, and this is what the vow of conversion of life is about.

Both Benedict and the Queen believed you can't divide public and private life into separate moral compartments. Morality is one, but we try to keep the different aspects of our lives apart: public and private; business and family; but this is not the way of God. We heard the powerful denunciation by the prophet Amos of those who let their desire for money trump all other considerations, cheating and scheming, exploiting the poor and those in need – the kind of sharp practice, calculating personal advantage, shown by the dishonest steward in today's gospel reading. The same personal and moral qualities should mark the whole of our life, allowing them to shape us, as the Queen has done. It's not enough to be committed to our ideals; we need also to be converted.

Many people have spoken about the sense of stability the Queen provided, particularly at difficult times, most recently during the Covid pandemic, when she looked forward to the time when we would be together again, giving hope and encouragement. The Queen spoke of duty and responsibility in an age when most people speak of rights. She lived by an ethic of service in an age that demands attention, pointing to Jesus who said, 'I come among you as one who serves.' From that she never wavered; she showed what it meant to be committed to one another, here and now, whatever the situation, for better, for worse, and that is what the vow of stability is about. If we wonder where we are going as a Church, a nation, or as a world, we need to ask if we are really committed to one another.

Jesus had no temporal or political power; his power lay in his example, in the way he lived and died. This is the power that endures, that shapes people's lives. It was the same with the Queen, and as we honour her life, we pray we may learn from her example. For her life, for her example, and for her faith, thanks be to God!