

## **Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney**

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**At a Requiem Eucharist of Thanksgiving  
For Her Late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II**

**21 September 2022**

The political story of Britain has been one of movement from rival warlords to invasions, to absolute monarchs, a republic, a restoration, and finally to constitutional monarchy. Today the monarch is bound by convention to act on the advice of the Government and cannot initiate their own political agenda. While they have no real coercive political power, he or she can nevertheless exercise a high degree of leadership and influence.

### **In Times of Crisis**

In 1939, Europe was facing tumultuous times as the world descended into the darkness of the Second World War. The Christmas Speech given by King George the Sixth that year included a poem written by Minnie Haskins; it begins:

*And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:*

*“Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.”*

*And he replied:*

*“Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God.*

*That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.”*

*So I went forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night.*

*And He led me towards the hills and the breaking of day in the lone East.*

The devastation of the First World War remained in the minds of many people at the beginning of the Second. Nevertheless the King sought to instil hope in the hearts of his people by suggesting that we can enter the darkness with God leading us through it to the breaking of a new day.

George the Sixth was not born to be King, yet he, his Queen and the Royal Family went on to provide leadership and support to the allied forces, the people of Britain, and most particularly the citizens of London during the anxious times of the Blitz. It was a supreme ministry of presence, even when it might have been better to relocate to a safer location. Our Late Queen was part of this effort, serving as a driver and mechanic with the Auxiliary Territorial Service.

These actions offered moments of light in the darkness of crisis and instilled the importance of duty and service as the foundation for monarchy in the second half of the twentieth century. It, no doubt, had a profound impact on the young Princess Elizabeth herself.

## **In Times of Stability**

Since the death of Queen Elizabeth almost two weeks ago, we have heard much of her loyalty, service, and faith. Earlier this year we celebrated her Platinum Jubilee, when we recognised her as the longest serving British monarch - and by extension the longest serving Queen of Australia and many other Commonwealth countries. Much has changed in the world during her time as Queen, yet Elizabeth and her consort Phillip Duke of Edinburgh provided continuity and stability, even in the face of great personal challenges.

Elizabeth's Coronation provided the clue to her devotion. The special office to which she had been called commenced with her willingness to take an oath of obedience to God's will. Similar to an act of ordination, at a coronation the monarch makes a religious vow and is set apart for the service of God and the people. This is sealed through an act of consecration where the monarch is anointed with holy oil. It is a link to the ancient Hebrew practice as when King David was anointed by the prophet Samuel, and King Solomon by the priest Zadok. Such a consecration is indelible and was defining for the calling of the late Queen.

Elizabeth the Second gave astounding service as a world leader. As Queen for over seventy years she travelled and engaged with other monarchs, presidents, prime ministers, popes, and the public at large.

People have speculated on what motivated the late Queen to persevere in her calling – even to the end. It is clearly a demanding position requiring high levels of concentration, discipline, and attention to the needs of other people. It is also, no doubt, a work that is sometimes performed in a context of ambiguity - requiring an ability to operate in social situations where the outcomes are not always predictable coupled with a capacity to represent political positions that are not necessarily one's own. Such is the life of a constitutional monarch.

Our goal as a community is to seek the common good, and we need leaders who can help us to achieve this. Goodness, as a motivation, seems somewhat underrated these days, yet it has an enduring and binding quality when exercised, such as seen in times of crisis when responding to floods, fire and the like.

The Prophet Micah wrote the duty statement for community leaders:

*'He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.'*

(Micah 6: 8)

The gifts of humility, discernment, self-sacrifice, and awareness are central to the achievement of goodness. In the light of this, a fundamental question to ask is ‘who benefits from a leader’s actions?’ Leaders of all sorts are rightly criticised when it is apparent that their actions are capricious, self-serving, or for the benefit of a few.

Good leaders therefore need to overcome self-centredness and the undue influence of factions and sectional interests. Instead, there is a need to focus on the good of the whole. In this way, leadership functions as a partnership between all members of a community – both great and small. This is an exemplary approach to leadership that our late Queen demonstrated consistently through her life.

## **A Servant Leader**

Jesus introduced the idea of servant leadership when he said:

*‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.’* (Matthew 20:25-28)

The sign of a good servant can be seen firstly in the capacity to discern and anticipate what is going to happen next, secondly the ability to remain focussed on the task in hand, and finally in the desire to act for the good of others. On the other hand, a bad servant is often concerned with self-promotion and self-protection, which soon segues into a desire to accumulate power, wealth, and status for one’s own benefit.

Our late Queen has the capacity to lead without recourse to the power of coercion. A monarch has the opportunity to influence through example and advice, but nothing more. It reflects the servant leadership lived by Christ himself and what he encouraged his followers to emulate.

As is the case for all of us, Queen Elizabeth was a person with her own strengths, weaknesses, and failings; but it became clear through her reign that she sought to serve for the good of all. She did this with attentiveness, humility, and wisdom – not always getting it right, but nevertheless with a desire to lead for the benefit of all.

## **A Christian Monarch**

The foundation for the Queen’s approach to life was her Christian faith; which shaped her, guided her behaviour, and informed her role as monarch. In recent years she became more forthcoming in the public domain concerning this aspect of her life – not least of which was her Christmas speeches, in which she described how the life of Jesus Christ was an inspiration and an anchor in her life, saying, "Christ's example has taught me to seek to respect and value all people, of whatever faith or none."

Our Christian faith can have the capacity to give confidence in life and hope in death. We know that we will not live forever, and a consciousness of mortality can help us to focus on those things that are most important. As Jesus approached the end of his ministry on earth he said to his disciples,

*“Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”*

(John 12: 24).

The image is one that draws on the seasonal cycles of sowing and harvest and reminds us that the flourishing of new life often follows the dying of an old one. It is therefore a reminder of the resurrection of Jesus that stands as God’s promise to all who put their faith in him, just as Elizabeth herself did.

### **In Times of Change**

The Second Elizabethan Age has flourished but now must fade. As we have seen over the past two weeks, monarchy continues despite death. The Accession ceremony had a bitter-sweet aspect to it as a new King was proclaimed even while the former Queen was mourned.

As Elizabeth the Second received the example of her father George the Sixth, so too Charles the Third is informed by his mother’s life and witness. The wheel has turned, and a new era arrives with its challenges and opportunities. Yet monarchy has demonstrated its capacity to develop and adapt to changing circumstances from warlords to the current constitutional arrangements. As we stand at the gate of the year, we look forward to a third Caroline era – God save King Charles the Third!