

Sermon by The Right Reverend Richard Hurford OAM, KStJ
Choral Evensong on Sunday, 6 February, 2022
70th Anniversary of the Queen's Accession to the Throne

"I declare before you all that my whole life, whether it be long or short, shall be devoted to your service."

The then Princess Elizabeth's famous 21st birthday radio broadcast from South Africa in 1947!

The evolution of the monarchy during the 70 years of the reign of Queen Elizabeth II, and, indeed, during the years before, when King George VI was on the throne, make a fascinating study in the on-going history of the monarchy not only in Britain but in the wider Commonwealth of Nations.

The monarch herself would now seem to be increasingly divested of power, yet the Queen seems to demonstrate a kind of powerless majesty—a strength apparently arising out of weakness. So that she, who in herself has no power over life and death, no power to change policy or guide national strategy, is yet much more a centre of unity and stability than the dictators and generalissimos who think they wield unlimited power, yet who only cause dismay, disunity and distrust, and are themselves in constant peril.

When Queen Elizabeth visits Australia, she speaks and acts as Queen of Australia. And as a constitutional monarch, the Queen acts entirely on the advice of Australian Government ministers, who are responsible to Parliament. She is represented in Australia at a Federal level by a Governor-General who is appointed by the Queen on the advice of the Prime Minister of Australia and is independent of the British Government.

Do you remember that famous scene in another imperial palace? Here is Pilate, proud, aloof, Ambassador Plenipotentiary of the Roman Emperor. And standing before him, stripped and wounded, is a carpenter from Galilee?

'Do you know,' says Pilate, 'do you know that I have power to kill you and power to let you go free?' And the carpenter replies: 'You would have no power at all if it were not given you by God in trust.'

Pilate the all-powerful faces Jesus the powerless one. But it is Jesus who is the majesty. It is Jesus who reigns as king - not Pilate.

This is portrayed so graphically in the account of the trial of Jesus Christ in the 19th Chapter of St John's Gospel.

Power and authority—authority is a tricky game—not least for those who have greatness thrust upon them.

We quickly begin to discover that authority depends less and less on the handle other people choose to give us; more and more on what it is we are ourselves. Real authority does not come simply by putting on a crown, a wig, an epaulette, a mitre, a chain.

The great Roman Catholic theologian, Professor Hans Kung, once said this about authority. He was, I think, talking about bishops and church leaders, but he might have been talking about any of us who, in one way or another, care to think of ourselves as in authority. *“Authority,” he said, ‘can no longer be allowed to rest on external title or office, but on inner authority. And this inner authority must be based on three things—personal quality, factual competence, and partnership.’*

In other words, authority rests on what you are like as a human being; on how competently you do your job; and on how well you work in partnership with others.

In the past some very odd characters have sat on royal thrones, episcopal chairs and seats of justice - odd characters shielded and protected by the outward trappings of office.

One of the many things that gives hope for the days in which we live is that it is less easy now to get away with bogus authority. In the end it is not the office that counts, but the man or the woman who holds the office. There is no substitute for personal integrity, and no cover up for the lack of it.

We can count ourselves most fortunate that this could not be better illustrated than in the life and service of our Queen.

Today as we remember the untimely death of her father King George VI at just 56 years of age that thrust Princess Elizabeth, then a mother of two, and just 25 years of age, into what is arguably one of the most challenging roles in the Commonwealth, we can rightly give thanks to God today for the dignity, integrity and grace with which she has continued to fulfil her high and difficult office during the past 70 years.

The Queen has at all times continued to prayerfully live into her Christian faith though even she, as all mortals must be, is only a pale reflection of Jesus Christ—powerless majesty indeed—Jesus Christ who became the humblest servant of all, and in that servanthood showed what it is to be King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

And now to God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit be ascribed all might, majesty, dominion and power now and forever. Amen.