

Trinity 3 Queen's 90th Birthday Commemoration

There is an essential way in which commemorative events prompt us to rehearse and consider our own life journey and its key moments. And on this occasion of the official marking of the Queen's 90th Birthday, I expect that while those of us in our eighties or nineties may feel a particularly strong affinity with what is happening publically for Her Majesty, all of us will be prompted to think back across the years and remember where we were or how life was at certain times that were important for her and for the nation. Commemorative events, be they individual, family or collective ones, allow us to achieve perspective, recollect, be thankful, be thoughtful, and also to re-discover people, places and occasions that have either shaped us or served to frame our lives and provide meaning.

For me the Queen's 90th commemoration brings back some interesting memories. I was born in Windsor in Berkshire, and as a family we lived not far from Ascot racecourse. Once I learned to ride a bicycle, the first trip I was allowed to make on my own, was to bicycle up the road – on the pavement of course! – on a route towards a friend's house. On that route were the 'Golden Gates' – and it was here that I used to ride to, at the beginning of Royal Ascot Week, to wait for the Queen's carriage to come through the gates to mark the start of the races. From the gates the carriage would make its way up the long mile of racecourse turf and the Queen would make her grand entrance in front of the main stand to rapturous applause from the crowds.... Once I got a bit older I would bicycle that little bit further into Windsor Great Park, and on this same occasion of the beginning of Royal Ascot, I would cycle to the spot in the middle of the park where the Queen would make her transfer out of her car and into the carriage. This was done without any sign of security guards, and the beauty of it for us locals was that no-one else knew this went on, so there was only a small cluster of us which made it even more fun! Growing up next to the Great Park, walking running and cycling in it, watching Prince Philip and Prince Charles playing polo at Smith's Lawn,

watching the changing of the guard at Windsor Castle and looking out for the royal flag on the Round Tower to indicate that the Queen was in residence meant that somehow she felt part of us – of course at one remove, but nonetheless we were sort of ‘neighbours’! And as I’ve thought about this, the funny thing is that owing to the Queen’s very warm and natural sense of presence and friendliness, as has so frequently been remarked upon, it is as though she is actually *everyone’s* neighbour. Which means we ‘Windsorites’ can’t have her all to ourselves!

If you have acquired one of the commemorative Bible Society booklets, ‘The Servant Queen’ – and there are some more available today for a donation of £1 each – you will have read about the many occasions in Christmas broadcasts that the Queen has referred either directly to the parable of the Good Samaritan, or spoken of the priority of serving one’s neighbour, living selflessly in the community and working for the common good. Extracts from her broadcasts in 2012 and the year 2000 provide an interesting theological underpinning. In 2012 she said, “this is the time of year when we remember that God sent his only Son ‘to serve, not to be served’. He restored love and service to the centre of our lives in the person of Jesus Christ.” And in 2000, “Many will have been inspired by Jesus’ simple but powerful teaching: love God, and love thy neighbour as thyself – in other words, treat others as you would like them to treat you. His great emphasis was to give spirituality a practical purpose.” These are *her* assessments. Two examples in 1980 and 1986 express her emphasis on the value of living out this calling, “as I go about the country and abroad, I meet people who, all in their own ways, are making a real contribution to their community. I come across examples of unselfish service in all walks of life and in many unexpected places;” then, “You do not have to be rich or powerful in order to change things for the better and each of us in our own way can make a contribution.”

And thinking of this matter of power, it seems to me that as someone who has occupied a position of power herself, and has rubbed shoulders

regularly with people of influence, one of her most enduring and admirable qualities has been her apparent unwillingness to abuse power, unlike so many of her royal predecessors – not least that other founding figure of the Church of England Henry VIII – or indeed the wicked King Ahab and Queen Jezebel from our reading. And one of the ways, arguably, that she has done this is to identify herself so strongly with grass roots life, albeit often adorned with great splendour or dressed in beautiful, expensive clothing, that she has very simply and very emphatically made a huge statement that this is the kind of life that matters most. And this priority for honest generous living is reflected of course in the Buckingham Palace garden party invitations to all and sundry, and in the honours lists that attempt to reward and value public service. We could say that hers was or is a genuinely incarnational theology and practice.

The Queen's rejection of self-aggrandisement was well illustrated some years ago in her acceptance of the advice given to her by Tony Blair, at the time of the death of Princess Diana, of the need to respond openly. A lesser person might have resisted his entreaty, but she chose to concur and to a significant extent be humbled in the process. This was I think a decisive moment for her and marked a turning point in her public perception. And when we look back on this critical time for the Queen, I think we have reason to be grateful to Tony Blair for acting as courageously as he did in helping her to see things differently and embrace change – and so does she I expect.

On the theme of neighbours, it has been one of the Queen's outstanding achievements to maintain and nurture a vision of the Commonwealth as a great family of neighbours. For some people there have been questions about the ethics or political appropriateness of the notion of our Queen as the titular head of a whole cluster of nations, many of which Britain ruled over years ago. But the fact is that she has remained faithful to the vision and has thereby indicated to all of us that here is a worldwide community

that has an enduring capacity to signify unity in diversity which has perhaps more to say to us of intrinsic value than we might at times have supposed – and perhaps especially in the present as we contemplate the possibility of fragmentation in both Europe and the United Kingdom. And the affection that is felt for the Queen across the world in many Commonwealth nations is deep indeed. What I take away from this, and what I feel I take from her, is a message to say that whatever ambivalence of history may lie behind us, this has not prevented deep friendship from being generated and sustained across decades. And when we look around us at the fracturing of international relationships or tribal ones or communal-religious ones, where there are relationships that are strong enough to bridge the hurts or confusions of history, these are probably worth their weight in gold. Many of us found it both salutary and liberating to hear Bishop Fanuel speak of the great affection felt for the impact of British presence in Malawi when he was here recently. And on my recent visit to Zimbabwe, after all the controversy over the Rhodes Memorials in Oxford and Cape Town, it was very interesting to visit the grave of Cecil John Rhodes in the Matobo Hills outside Bulawayo with my friend Bishop Cleophas and to hear him speak, as I have often, calmly and generously, of how this is their story as well as ours and how through honest and open appreciation of shared history we are most likely to move forward in our friendship as nations. There is a case to say that the Queen, no doubt with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, has kept alive a story and a web of relationships to our very great benefit. Her testimony would appear to be that a neighbour, one to whom we are attached through bonds of friendship and obligation, is a neighbour both next door and across the world. And in relation to Zimbabwe who knows if our historic relationship may not be called upon to do service in the next great transition that will be faced by that nation.

This week, when I was meeting outside church with Calthorpe representatives looking towards the Christmas lights switch-on I was struck by the words on our peace garden plaque, 'Remember the past:

live for the future'. Today, it seems to me, this is indeed a time for remembering the past with gratitude and thoughtfulness. There is much to be thankful for in the extraordinary example that the Queen has set as a servant of her subjects. My instinct is that one of her own concerns now, would indeed be that we her subjects should be living for the future, looking to how we can continue to live after her example for a secure and stable future for our nation – the one for which she has spent herself with such good grace. In doing so, we would of course be following in the example of Jesus, her Saviour and ours.

In her Christmas broadcast of 1975 she said, “The responsibility for the way we live life with all its challenges, sadness and joy is ours alone. If we do this well, it will always be good for our neighbours.”

1713 Words
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12.6.2016.