

Queen's 90th Birthday

This weekend is one of celebration for the Queen's 90th birthday: Nationally with a Service of Thanksgiving, Trooping the Colour and a street party in the Mall; Locally with a Crazy Crown Tea Party / Big Buckland Picnic not to mention this morning's services.

Not a lot of people know this but the Queen and I go back quite a long way.

There are two reasons for that. One is the reason we are here today – she goes back a long way with pretty much everyone. She has been Monarch for most of our life times; 90 years young and still going strong.

The other reason is that my grandfather was in Royal service. He was a game keeper and gate keeper in Windsor Great Park. He wore a silk top hat and green great coat and sometime gaiters. My father grew up in the Park and it made a big impression. He saw the royals of the day around the Park. So as I grew up most of what there was to know about them was on our lips and in our hearts. We were definitely royalists and not round heads.

So there's a little bit of royal connection in my family which engenders affection. But of course many families feel the same.

Many families, like mine, crowded into one of the houses on their street that had a TV in 1953 to watch the Coronation. You can get it on DVD now and it's still reverting stuff: a young woman in her twenties is crowned Queen by Archbishop Geoffrey Fisher and supported by the saintly Michael Ramsey, then Archbishop of York. It is the best of ecclesiastical drama and liturgy which carries great moment and symbolism. The cry goes up as she moves towards the altar in Westminster Abbey: vivat regina – long live the Queen – and the hairs go up on the back of your neck, well they do mine.

Today we celebrate the Queen's long life. But there was something captivating about the Queen when she was young and setting out.

The Coronation was the moment the Queen promised to serve her people as a servant of God. This was symbolised not so much in the crowning as in the anointing with holy oil. The actual moment of anointing wasn't shown because it was considered too sacred to be seen on TV.

As Handel's anthem *Zadok the Priest* was sung the symbols of the Queen's status were removed – the crimson velvet robe, the diamond diadem, the coronation necklace; she was left in a simple white dress. She looked like a bride – young and beautiful – there was a ring but no groom. Elizabeth was not giving herself to her husband but to her people.

It was then that the anointing took place with holy oil by the Archbishop who poured it onto her hands, her chest and her head to show she was being set apart to serve her country and to love God.

When she was 21 she had made a public declaration knowing that one day she would be Queen:

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

But I shall not have strength to carry out this resolution alone unless you join in it with me, as I now invite you to do.

God help me to make good my vow.

From the outset the Queen saw her reign as one of Christian service. She has often reiterated this in the years since and it is this we particularly celebrate and give thanks for today.

Being given to service and to God means that you seek to rise again, to overcome, to love to the uttermost, and this is what the Queen has offered both her own family and the nation as a whole.

She had her own *annus horribilis* but she understood today's gospel. Human weakness is occasion for love and forgiveness not condemnation. The monarchy is popular, and it is popular partly because it is human and vulnerable just like the rest of us.

We could be a republic, we could have a president but perhaps monarchy works for us because it gives us a link and continuity with the past. We like that. We need that. We can see where we come from and who we are:

This royal throne of kings, this scepter'd isle,

This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,

This other Eden, demi-paradise,

This land of such dear souls, this dear, dear land. (Richard II)

Monarchs used to have all the power and now they have none. Power lies with the people. But it doesn't mean there isn't a place for a monarch to represent the nation and to personify the nation.

It keeps national life personal and human. When the monarch is Elizabeth II it strips out intrigue and replaces it with integrity, faith and dedication.

So - as we celebrate the Queen's long life we do so for a number of reasons:

The historical link with the past and its continuity in the present

Her personal qualities – Her service, her dedication and devotion. She has hasn't brandished her faith before the nation but she has lived it in word and deed, just as she said she would at her Coronation. She was then, and is now, Supreme Governor of The Church of England.

Her humanity - The qualities the Queen holds speaks clearly of what it means to be human. There are many competing claims. Public service has gone out of fashion, dedication can seem like old hat. But in our national and Christian tradition they hold centre stage. Being Christian is defined by the best of being human. She is a pilgrim Queen on a journey of faith.

And we also celebrate the way in which the Queen personifies the nation.

God Save the Queen is a prayer. We sing it for her, of course, but it is a prayer of affection and loyalty for the country that we love and of which she is Head of State. This dear, dear land.

The Queen has made respect possible in that role in the way that a political president could not. What makes a country great is not the might of its armies or its wealth - but the humanity of its people. That's why having a person who embraces the best of humanness at the centre of national life matters and works.

In her constitutional role the Queen honours those we applaud and plays a central role in national life. So that at the heart of the country is a head of state we can believe in and so believe in ourselves. When national leadership is bankrupt the people become cynical and patriotism sounds a hollow note.

What of the future? What will we celebrate in another 90 years? The monarchy has succeeded because it has been open to change.

In an egalitarian age it will perhaps need to slim down.

It will need to continue to be above partisan politics although no less involved in national life. The Princes Trust sets a very good example of what that can mean.

If the monarchy is to continue to personify our country it will need to be open to the diverse nature of our national society both in faith and culture. Young people don't always get it in the way old duffers like me do. We must recognise faiths, other than Christian, as legitimate.

The future can be faced with confidence, because of all we celebrate today and all that the present Queen has set in place - by her personal example, and by her deeply religious and symbolic role within national life.

Thanks be to God.