

Monarchy and the Diamond Jubilee

It's not my intention to list the Queen's private or public virtues by way of tribute this evening. I want to avoid the merely sentimental (for all that it has a place in our lives). I don't even want to convert convinced republicans to anything. But I do want to make a case for taking monarchy seriously as a force for good now and in the future – most particularly in the light of our Christian faith and inheritance.

This weekend, regardless of the weather, the nation and the Commonwealth find themselves caught up in what for all of us is a unique event. The Diamond Jubilee of a reigning monarch. The Queen has now achieved the remarkable stage in her reign where very few people can recall a time when she wasn't Queen and still fewer can recall a world without her.

Simple longevity is hardly enough cause for all the excitement but the oft repeated comment that the Queen has come to represent the nation points to something both personal to her achievement and to something about monarchy at its best – absolute and constitutional.

But at the core of what I want to say is that monarchy in general and the Queen's reign in particular make the most sense in the context of the Christian faith. The Queen is a Christian monarch and if we fail to factor that into our judgment and understanding we will miss a vital component of what this weekend is all about. The media circus, the concerts and pageants will roll on but at the heart of all this is the Queen's relationship with Almighty God.

It tickles me that commentators express amazement that in 1953 a third of the Queen's subjects believed her to have been chosen by God. It distresses me somewhat when priests, called by

God and chosen by the Church show so little understanding of what vocation might look like for an hereditary head of state.

There is certainly no doubt that the Queen understands that she has been called and anointed by God. Why else should a woman be working so hard a quarter of a century after most of her contemporaries put their feet up?

But the Queen didn't make this up. Just look at the Coronation service with its solemn vows and promises and, at its heart, the anointing – the bit that makes the monarch what he or she is and which the crowning merely symbolizes. From Solomon onwards the distinctive act that makes a monarch a monarch is the anointing. The character of the monarch is not so very different from the character of deacon, priest and bishop – each one called, affirmed and created by word, sign and action. The monarch is even vested in alb,

dalmatic, stole and cope. How religiously significant can we get!

The monarch has a sacramental character which for me is the only rational explanation for the power that a monarch can, at times quite unwittingly, express. So it was that Ramsay MacDonald, after attending a reception for Dominion prime ministers to celebrate George V's Silver Jubilee, could say that: "We all went away feeling that we had taken part in something very much like Holy Communion."

Forgive a purple passage from me but the sight of the Queen has an effect on me similar to what I feel (and it is a feeling not a thought) at Benediction when looking on the Blessed Sacrament.

Yes there is upbringing, temperament, politics, media coverage... every sort of influence but all those things heaped together won't quite explain things away.

There is something about our investing in the figure of the monarch what we would like to be at our best as individuals and as a nation. The Queen embodies these things to a remarkable and quite possibly self-sacrificial degree but it isn't about celebrity and individuals any more than the Church and its ministry is about personalities, elections and opinion polls. A king is a king is a king – the role and the calling are bigger than any individual.

The monarch is called to be the embodiment of a people or nation – a figure who can transcend and unite – one who is the incarnation of Christian, serving kingship – the fount of justice, the source of authority, the ultimate commander of navy, army and airforce. As Churchill shrewdly noted, the value of the monarch lies not so much in the power he has but in the power he denies others.

And all this investment is made in frail earthen vessels – as frail as the parent, the politician and

the priest. The monarch is utterly “other” and yet is completely one of us – therein, perhaps, lies the fascination, the awe and the wonder. Anointed, consecrated and set apart but subject to every human frailty as we are.

So what do we and the crowds make of all this? For some it will be about patriotism, for others it will be about ceremonial and tradition. For others it will mean a party or two and getting in touch with an aspect of people and nation it is easy to let slip in the everyday way of things.

I ask one thing of those of us who claim to be Christian – to see that at it's heart is a life of Christian service whose ultimate authority comes not from the passing fads and currents of political debate but from God – the only ruler of princes as the Prayer Book carefully and politically reminds us.

The monarchy can point beyond itself to the glory of God and it can act sacramentally to a nation

bringing out in symbol and action the things that touch us most deeply as human beings. Birth, marriage, death, joy and sorrow. Recalling us to what matters most.

It's often said by religious people that there is a spiritual hunger in this country (which often means that we hope people really want to come to church if only we could work out how to get them in) but there is, too, a deep spiritual instinct that the Queen releases in people. It's why the dry rationality of republicanism finds no real echo in our hearts. We are told that the Queen embodies the problems of this nation and that the answer is more politicians. That isn't really how it looks to people!

We aren't even post-modern nowadays; we're probably post post-modern at least and that means that systems, rules and assumptions are up for grabs as never before. There is also a neo-conservatism around that people of my generation

ignore at our peril – we can't take liberal progress for granted – but there is, too, a deep, often rather subjective pragmatism that will ask how something feels, whether something works and which will cherry-pick from past and present regardless of the political creeds that spawned them.

In this developing atmosphere the monarchy and those who believe in it have a wonderful opportunity to restate the “affective” elements of society – the hard to define things that unite, move and motivate. Like good liturgy and ceremony we can't bottle it or define it very easily but we all know what it feels like when it works. In the hands of a benevolent monarchy steeped in the values of service (the welfare monarchy as it was once dubbed) this nation and all its peoples stand a better chance of finding unity and peace than under any other system currently available.

The Queen, her immediate heir and his successors are all embodiments of how good leadership can be when it is imbued not with a sense of worldly power but with the profound understanding that the greatest call is to serve. The monarchy proves that democratic legitimacy is not the sole criterion for good government and that, by seeking its ultimate call from above rather than from below, it reminds us all that there is something, someone, bigger than all of us.

Amen