

Galatians sermon series week 3

Queen's 90th birthday Choral Evensong

12/06/16 18:30 St Peter's

For many, today has been a day of celebration and partying. Some of us here this morning raised a glass and ate some cake in celebration of the 90th birthday of Her Majesty the Queen. Perhaps you have watched the service from St Paul's, or the Trooping of the Colour, or the birthday party from the Mall?

Birthday's are always special, and 90th birthday's more special than most. The Queen is now our longest serving monarch and, from the age of 82, had already been our longest lived. She is also the most widely travelled and surely, in this media age, the most recognizable and the best known. And now she has reached the age of 90. We have, the majority of us, grown up with the Queen as a fixed point in our lives, and we all have our personal memories of her place in them.

These moments of celebration are perhaps also moments to pause a little and ask ourselves, what exactly are we celebrating when we celebrate our monarch's 90th birthday?

Well, first and foremost, it seems to me, at least, that reaching a grand age should itself always be a cause of celebration. Too much of life passes by in a rush, and even more so in an age of instant communication. A long life, well lived, with its share of accomplishments and difficulties faced and overcome, is a source of joy to all. So the Queen must look back over her 90 years, as anyone would, and be thankful for all that she has lived through. She will be mindful of all the struggles she has faced as well. The redefining of Monarchy; the testing of her family through illness and death. How might we learn always to look upon our life, through its highs and lows, and reflect?

But with the Queen at 90, we also remember a life spent in service. I am always taken back to the coronation. With millions watching on television, many for the first time having bought TV's for this purpose, the one part of the coronation service not shown was the most intimate moment. At the altar, surrounded by bishops and Lord's, the Queen was anointed with oil. In words directly parallel to those used at confirmation, and the ordination of deacons, priests and bishops, the Archbishop of Canterbury prayed

"by his holy Anointing pour down upon your Head and Heart the blessing of the Holy Ghost, and prosper the works of your Hands: that by the assistance of his heavenly grace you may govern and preserve the Peoples committed to your charge in wealth, peace, and godliness"

And it was during that anointing that we heard one of tonight's anthems sung "Zadok the Priest" from Handel's Coronation Anthem. It uses those words from 1 Kings we heard earlier - Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet anointed Solomon King. The Queen's life needed consecrating, or dedicating to God, for all the challenges of service ahead. The Queen pledged in that same service "Throughout all my life," she said, "and with all my heart I shall strive to be worthy of your trust." Her long reign has been marked by that striving to build and maintain trust, by an indefatigable spirit of service. At the time of Her Diamond Jubilee, The Queen was patron of over 500 charities, particularly favouring those that deal with civic or community issues. As many of those involved in that charities will tell you, her patronage is not that of a figurehead, but of someone who is actively involved, seriously engaged. She offers counsel to them, she acts as an ambassador for them. Successive Prime Minister's also tell of those weekly meetings with the Queen as being the only times when they can be undefended, and truly gain some impartial advice from someone who will never challenge them politically.

Whilst none of us, presumably, will ever live such a life of privilege and public importance, might we learn a thing or two from the Queen about selfless giving and service? As she allowed God to minister to her at the start of her reign, might we too allow God that space in our lives to minister to us, that we might be consecrated for his service?

On this 90th birthday, the Church also encourages us to reflect on faith that has undergirded the Queen throughout her life. The book "The Servant Queen and the King she serves" has been put together to illustrate how the Christian faith affected and guided the Queen's life - do buy a copy. In it we hear the Queen reflect, "I have been – and remain – very grateful to you for your prayers and to God for his steadfast love. I have indeed seen his faithfulness." Those opening words from our second reading, from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, give a gentle hint of the Queen's faith:

"I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers".

We do not cease to give thanks for the woman Elizabeth, who has walked the journey of a Christian disciple trying, as we all do, to make sense of her life and her calling from God. May she be an example to each one of us to place our hands into God's, to offer our lives in service, and to recognise the importance of God working in us.