

A Sermon
On the Occasion of the Platinum Jubilee of
Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II
5 June 2022
St Andrew's Cathedral
Sydney

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Archbishop of Sydney

Today we rejoice and give thanks to Almighty God for the 70 year reign of Her Majesty, Elizabeth II by the grace of God, Queen of Australia, her other realms and territories, Head of the Commonwealth. We are delighted to welcome Her Majesty's representative in New South Wales, Her Excellency the Hon Margaret Beazley Governor of New South Wales, and Mr Dennis Wilson; former Prime Minister of Australia, the Hon Tony Abbott; and consular representatives of independent members of the 54 nation Commonwealth of Nations, representing Bangladesh, Pakistan, Fiji, Uganda and Namibia, as well as Consul General of the United States. Thank you for joining us today.

On the 6th of February, earlier this year Her Majesty marked the 70th anniversary of her accession. On its own, it is a singular and remarkable milestone. But it is all the more so because of the qualities of Her Majesty's reign. Grace, wisdom, kindness, generosity, perseverance, humility and faith are words that spring readily to mind. We do not give thanks today only for the extraordinary longevity of Her Majesty's reign, but for the beauty of it. Republican or Monarchist, I dare say, we're all Elizabethans today.

'Monarch' is not a position to which one can aspire or apply. It is thrust upon one, in the most unhappy of circumstances. And there is no retirement age. Mark McGinness relates that when Her Majesty's father became King, her sister Princess Margaret asked her, 'Does that mean you will have to be the next Queen?' to which the eleven-year-old Princess Elizabeth replied, 'Yes, someday'. 'Poor you' said Princess Margaret. Her Majesty's biographers say she prayed every night for a brother.¹

¹ Mark McGinness, *Long Live our Platinum Queen*, Quadrant, March 2022, p42.

The bible readings recommended for this Platinum Jubilee service, which falls on Pentecost Sunday, include the reading we heard from Joshua. Its context is leadership transition. The great and first leader of Israel, Moses has gone to be with his forefathers, and Joshua, his aide, is commissioned by God to succeed his mentor. Three times the Lord exhorts Joshua: be strong and courageous - I will be with you and never leave you; be strong and courageous - be careful to obey all the laws my servant Moses gave you; be strong and courageous, do not be afraid, do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you.

Princess Elizabeth was 25 years old and on tour in Kenya on her way to Australia, when she learnt the tragic news of the early death of her father, King George VI. King George had acceded to the throne only after the unprecedented abdication of his brother King Edward VIII. It had shaken the nation, and its impact on her father, the royal family and the kingdom is undoubtedly part of the background to Her Majesty's unswerving devotion to her role. Her uncle's reign was the shortest of any British monarch. Her Majesty's eclipsed that of her great-great-grandmother, Queen Victoria, more than six years ago.

In her first Christmas broadcast in 1952, still six months before her Coronation, Her Majesty said:

I want to ask you all, whatever your religion may be, to pray for me on that day - to pray that God may give me wisdom and strength to carry out the solemn promises I shall be making and that I may faithfully serve Him and you, all the days of my life.

It is a beautifully simple but profoundly faith-filled request. Though she is Sovereign, Her Majesty does not hesitate to seek the prayers of her people. She is conscious of the weight of the promises she would make at her Coronation, and she asks for God's blessing of wisdom and strength. She understands her role as Queen to be one of service – service of God and service of the people, and her intention, desire and commitment are to be faithful to that calling for her whole life.

The Lord exhorts Joshua – be strong and courageous for I will be with you wherever you go. And the Lord says *'Keep this book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night so that you may be careful to do everything written in it.'*

Her Majesty's Coronation Service in Westminster Abbey in June 1953 was attended by more than 8000 people and lasted three hours. It was watched on television by an estimated 25 million. It began with solemn oaths. Her Majesty was asked by the Archbishop of Canterbury if she would govern the peoples of her realms according to their laws; if she would temper justice with mercy in all her decisions and if she would 'to the utmost of her power maintain the laws of God and the true profession of the Gospel'. To each she replied, 'I will'. And then she was presented with a Bible. Before she received the crown, the orb, the sceptre and the rod – the first item to be presented to the Queen immediately following her oaths – was the Bible. The Archbishop of Canterbury, accompanied by the Moderator of the Church of Scotland, gave it to her saying:

Our gracious Queen:

*...we present you with this Book,
the most valuable thing that this world affords.*

Here is Wisdom;

This is the royal Law;

These are the lively Oracles of God.

In her annual Christmas broadcasts, Her Majesty has regularly referred to Scripture and the teaching of Jesus, and she has frequently chosen to speak in a personal and gentle way about her faith. In 2016 she said, '*Billions of people now follow Christ's teaching and find in him the guiding light for their lives. I am one of them because Christ's example helps me see the value in doing small things with great love, whoever does them and whatever they believe.*'

It would be possible but quite mistaken to think that Her Majesty is merely fulfilling her role as Supreme Governor of the Church of England when she speaks in this way. Although Her Majesty has met with every British PM and US President, and most Australian PMs, her discretion is legendary. She has never expressed an opinion about them.

But in her annual Christmas messages she has chosen to speak with warmth and affection of the many 'ordinary people' whom she has met who quietly go about doing good work, whatever their background or faith may be; and she has often chosen to offer a personal reflection on the life of Jesus.

In 2014 she said, 'for me, the life of Jesus Christ is an inspiration and an anchor in my life', and on another occasion she said 'it is my prayer that ...we may all

find room in our lives for the message of the angels and for the love of God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Perhaps no single word better encapsulates the character of Her Majesty's reign than the word 'service'.

Our second reading from Luke's gospel captures Jesus' words to his disciples when they are embroiled in a dispute as to which of them is the greatest. Jesus said, 'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them....but you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest and the one who rules like the one who serves....I am among you as one who serves.'

Her Majesty quotes these words of Jesus in her Christmas message from her Diamond Jubilee 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.'*

The service that Jesus offers the world is his life of perfect obedience and his death for our sins. He lives the life we owe to the God who gave us life; in death, he willingly suffers the penalty that our sins deserve.

HM reflected on the unique ministry of Jesus in his life and death in this way, in her Christmas message of 2011:

'Although we are capable of great acts of kindness, history teaches us that we sometimes need saving from ourselves - from our recklessness or our greed. God sent into the world a unique person - neither a philosopher nor a general,... but a Saviour, with the power to forgive. Forgiveness lies at the heart of the Christian faith....It is in forgiveness that we feel the power of God's love.'

'Being in very nature God', the apostle Paul says of the Lord Jesus, 'he did not consider equality with God something to be grasped but humbled himself even to death on a cross.' It is precisely the death of the man who was God, on the Cross for our sakes, that inverted the ancient world's adulation of power and glory and made the way of humility and service a virtue in Western culture.

Her Majesty's commitment to service as her vocation preceded her accession to the throne, and it has characterised her entire reign. In a broadcast to the Empire made on her 21st birthday she pledged: *'I declare before you all that*

my whole life, whether it be long or short, shall be devoted to your service and the service of our great imperial family to which we all belong.'

Over the 70 years of her reign, Her Majesty has met weekly with each of the fourteen British Prime Ministers who have served during her reign, and until recently she dealt with government papers personally on a daily basis. She has visited Australia 16 times including several visits to this Cathedral. She is Patron to more than 600 charitable organisations across the Commonwealth spanning diverse areas of endeavour including agriculture, children and youth, health, faith, animal welfare, the environment, science and industry, sport, the arts and education. Yet, she has regularly commended the service of 'ordinary people who quietly go about improving the lives of others' in her Christmas messages.

To this day, as we are all too grimly aware, there are 'rulers who lord it over their people' – tyrants, dictators and despots who exploit privilege and position for self-interest and self-exaltation. They are the antithesis of the pattern of Jesus the servant King and, we might respectfully add, the Queen who serves him.

In the foreword to a book published to commemorate Her Majesty's 90th birthday she recalled her first Christmas address, broadcast six months before her Coronation :

In the last 90 years, we have witnessed triumphs and tragedies. Our world has enjoyed great advances ...but it has also endured war, conflict and terrible suffering. In my first Christmas broadcast, I asked the people of the Commonwealth and Empire to pray for me as I prepared to dedicate myself to their service at my Coronation. 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.

With gladness and reverence, we give thanks today for the 70 year reign of our Sovereign Lady, Queen Elizabeth.

Let us pray

Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Way, the Truth, and the Life, we give you thanks for your servant Elizabeth our Queen, and for the example of loving and faithful service which she has shown among us. May she ever be provided with all she may need for her ministry among us, strengthened to meet every demand

which her office may make, and in all things nourished by your word and example, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit live and reign, world without end. Amen.

Coronation Prayer of Thanksgiving (adapted)