

Sermon for Sunday 7 May 2023

Acts 7: 55 – end; 1 Peter 2: 2 – 10; John 14: 1 – 14

I wonder what has been your most striking impression of the Coronation weekend so far?

For me it was seeing the King and Queen and the two processions to the abbey and back – and standing in Whitehall for hours in the rain!

And then we came home, dried out and watched that magnificent Coronation service. The music, the colour, the robes and jewels – and the symbolism of it all. It was a new service, written for our times, but very much drawing on the traditions from the past.

So – what do we learn from the Coronation service we witnessed yesterday?

What struck me first was the close connection between our monarch and the Christian faith – and the Church of England in particular. One of the first things that happened in the service was that King Charles was presented with a Bible – as

“the most valuable thing this world affords”. As well as promising to govern well, he also had to swear to maintain the particular status of the Church of England, of which He is the head. At the same time much was said and done to reflect the inclusion of other Christian denominations. And those of other faiths were included too and statements were made about our country being a place where people of all religions are freely able to practise their faiths.

But for me, the most striking thing about the service – right from the beginning was the emphasis on service. These were the opening words – from a chorister

“Your Majesty, as children of the Kingdom of God we welcome you in the name of the King of Kings”

To which the King responded: “In his name, and after his example, I come not to be served but to serve.”

Words which echo Jesus’ words in the Gospel of Matthew;

“whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20: 26b – 28)

And the main thrust of the Archbishop’s sermon was also about service. The King’s and ours too.

Yesterday, the King was anointed, set apart and consecrated for service to His people – and Queen Camilla shared in this too. The King and the Royal Family have all sorts of honours and privileges by virtue of their position. They also have to accept many limits and constraints. If William and Kate, for example, choose to visit a London pub – as they did on Thursday – it isn’t just for a quiet drink with friends. There are security cordons and a helicopter hovering overhead. And the conversation is hardly normal. For most of their time they can’t be private people as we can.

The model of monarchy we were presented with yesterday in that magnificent ceremony, wasn’t

about celebrity, but about self-giving and service. It wasn’t about our Royal Family being clever or interesting or novel, but about maintaining an enduring presence at the heart of our national life, and about encouraging all of us to keep giving of our best whatever we do. And many of those who had been invited to the Abbey were already doing just that.

Yesterday we saw a few ‘Not my King’ placards about. There were some protests. And there was a bit of controversy about the oath of allegiance we were invited to join in with. But the message of the service was clear for us all.

At the heart of the service was the anointing of King Charles. I wonder if you noticed some of the words that were used –

The oil was blessed “that it may be for thy servant Charles a sign of joy and gladness; that as King he may know the abundance of thy grace and the power of thy mercy, and that we may be made a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for thine own possession.”

Those words about us echo some words in our second reading today –

“like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” (1 Peter 2: 5)

And

“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.” (1 Peter 2: 9)

Yesterday Charles III was anointed and crowned as our King. But as the Archbishop said – each of us is called by God to serve whatever that looks like in our lives. As part of our Christian discipleship, we are all to offer those spiritual sacrifices to God and to proclaim God’s mighty acts.

What those sacrifices are is individual to each of us. For Stephen, in our reading from Acts, it meant sacrificing even his life as the first martyr

in the early church. For us it is much more likely to be our time invested in voluntary or charitable work within the church or the community – or our money. And if “proclaiming the mighty acts of God” sounds more than we can manage – what about being ready to tell a friend or acquaintance what our faith means to us – and what a difference Jesus makes to our lives? And inviting them along to church or a church activity.

So let’s continue to enjoy and celebrate the Coronation this weekend. And let’s also take it as a challenge to ourselves. How are we going to serve God and our neighbour now and in the future?

Amen

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