

“THE CROWN”

Feast of Christ the King

Trinity College

23rd November

A (Very Brief) History of Christianity in Britain in Seven Objects

There is only one disadvantage to the extraordinary longevity of the reign of Queen Elizabeth II and that is the majority of her subjects and certainly all those under the age of sixty have never witnessed a coronation. The pageantry, pomp and circumstance belong to history books and fading newsreels, and are consequently lost to the imagination of this generation.

Societies perpetuate themselves through the rehearsal of rituals and symbols. But those rites which are to be found in the Coronation of the Sovereign, because they have not been recently repeated, no longer inform the public imagination.

There have been memorable anniversaries of the Coronation which have been hugely popular. But the open hearted and contagious fervour that exploded in the great acclamation inside Westminster Abbey of “God Save The Queen” was a unique experience.

Without the reinforcement of the ritual and the symbol of the Coronation we fail to remember or to recognise the roots of our history, the story of our governance and the Christian character of our nation which find their summary in two words – The Crown.

The landscape, language, literature, leisure, learning, liberty and laws of our nation have been indelibly inked by the pen of Christianity.

The history of the Crown itself begins in the Bible. Although, it has to be admitted from the pages of the Old Testament that God was a reluctant convert to the concept of kingship.

He had to be persuaded that it was right for his people. Perhaps he had in mind those future kings who would abuse their position!

In the New Testament Our Lord also appears to be diffident about being a king. He escapes to the hills when after feeding the thousands they come to make him king. And those oft repeated words of Jesus, “My kingdom is not of this world” seem to suggest a certain coyness about temporal power.

But the better and more accurate translation finds Jesus saying something subtly different. Not “My kingdom is not of this world” as if he were distancing himself from the realities of his earthly existence but “My KINGSHIP is not FROM this world”. In other words, standing face to face with Pontius Pilate and on trial for his life Jesus challenges the authority of his earthly judge by remonstrating that the authority of his own kingship comes not from Pilate but from a higher source.

On this Feast Day of Christ the King we see that the source of his own claim to reign over peoples’ lives is also reflected in the Coronation Service where the Sovereign’s authority derives explicitly from God.

Therefore after the Crowning and before the Enthroning of the Sovereign the Archbishop prays:

“Hold fast henceforth

The seat and state of royal...dignity

Which is this day delivered unto you,

In the Name and by the Authority of Almighty God.”

Although you will not find this modern word anywhere in the text of the service the theme that is implicit is that of ‘Accountability’. The Sovereign derives her ‘wisdom and government’ from the Spirit of God who is also asked to fill her ‘with the Spirit of thy holy fear’.

But the Coronation Service recognises that the source of the Sovereign's authority is not just from above but also from below. She comes to the Abbey having first signed the Declaration prescribed by Parliament in the presence of the two Houses. On taking the Oath she promises to govern her territories 'according to their respective laws and customs.' What unfolds in the service is a sense of power being vested and exercised in two directions – from below and from above.

It is this binary accountability, uniquely acknowledged in the Coronation, which has evaporated from much of our modern and common life.

What we have seen recently in our banks, in Parliament, in the press, in the NHS, in the police and elsewhere is the evaporation of accountability, and with it the erosion of trust. We have witnessed the patronising disposition of unaccountable power, and it has led to demands for greater transparency and more structured systems of accountability.

Over the last five years I have been asked by the Government to chair three separate Independent Panels (Hillsborough, Forests and Gosport). The creation of these and so many other Independent Panels is in itself symptomatic of a breakdown of trust and the demand for greater transparency in our public institutions.

But I believe that the pursuit of transparency and accountability in itself is no substitute for conscience, for personal ethics.

When, for example, a public official is tempted to lie they will be aware that one day their actions may come to light. This might well inform the choice they make. But deeper than that lies conscience. If it is sensitised to doing that which is right then it will contribute to a very different outcome.

Now, I readily concede that a person can be possessed of a sensitive conscience without any reference to God. But I also believe that a person of faith finds their conscience sensitised by their belief in and experience of God.

This is the golden thread to be found in the Coronation.

Thus, the Sovereign promises before God to use her power to “cause Law and Justice, in Mercy, to be executed in all (Her) judgements”

With the giving of the Sword of State the Archbishop charges the Sovereign to “do justice, stop the growth of iniquity...keep and defend widows and orphans, restore the things that are gone to decay.”

Then delivering into the Sovereign’s right hand the Orb surmounted by the Cross he calls her to “remember that the whole world is subject to the Power and Empire of Christ our Redeemer”.

With the giving of the Royal Sceptre he adds,

“Receive the Rod of equity and mercy

Be so merciful

That you be not remiss,

So execute justice

That you forget not mercy.

Punish the wicked,

Protect and cherish the just

And lead your people

In the way wherein they should go.”

This is the immediate prelude to the Crowning.

This high liturgy of vows, symbol and ritual reinforces the personal and public ethics of the Sovereign. Not only are these to be the standards of the Monarch, they are also by devolution the standards of all those institutions that derive their own authority from and bear the name and symbol of the Crown – the Government, Parliament, the Judiciary, the Armed Services, the Police. But this is precisely where latterly these Coronation virtues of Justice, Mercy, Power and Equity and the cause of defending the weak have been sometimes singularly missing.

The Sovereign stands as a symbol of public service. Foundational to understanding that concept of service is both the example of Christ and then teachings of the Bible. When the Sovereign is given the Book the Archbishop advises her:

“To keep your Majesty ever mindful of the law and Gospel of God
As the Rule for the whole life and government of Christian Princes
We present you with this Book,
The most valuable thing that this world affords.”

To which the Moderator of the Church of Scotland adds:

“Here is Wisdom;
This is the royal Law;
These are the lively Oracles of God.”

This high view of the Bible leaves no one in any doubt about its basis not only of the Church but also of the State.

The fact that it is the Moderator of the Church of Scotland endorsing the Archbishop’s high opinion shows not just a regard for the Sovereign’s role with the Church in Scotland but also a nice ecumenical touch.

It raises the question as to what should be the role of other denominations and indeed other faiths in a service that is not only robustly Christian but most definitely a Church of England Service of Holy Communion. In a society and Commonwealth which is characterised by such a diversity of religions what part can the different faiths play without compromising their own convictions? It seems inconceivable that in the 21st Century other religions could be excluded from the crowning of the Sovereign.

It seems to me that the key that unlocks the conundrum lies in the rubric of the Coronation Service. Advising on those who might be invited to hold different items of regalia the rubric suggests that they are given “to any other that (the Sovereign) pleaseth to assign.”

This royal discretion creates the opportunity for the Sovereign to engage whomsoever they chose of whatever religion. This would be consonant with the Speech that the Queen gave at Lambeth Palace at a Reception for Faith leaders in her Jubilee Year when she spoke of the role of the Church of England in protecting the rights of all faiths to practice their beliefs.

The Queen said, “The concept of the established Church is occasionally misunderstood and, I believe, commonly underappreciated. Its role is not to defend Anglicanism to the exclusion of other religions. Instead, the Church has a duty to protect the free practice of all faiths in this country.”

It was a significant speech for her to make as Defender of the Faith and as Supreme Governor of the Church of England and one that echoed the thoughts of the Prince of Wales who has for some time seen the Sovereign’s role exactly in protecting the role of faith in public life and the rights of different believers.

If anyone were to object by saying that this was an evolution of the concept of the Crown then the history of the Monarchy is nothing but the story of an evolution.

For example, any student of history will tell you that when it comes to Constitutional change the role of, say, King William IV in the 1832 Parliamentary Reform Act was played out very differently from that of Queen Elizabeth II in the vote about Scottish Independence!

Such a Coronation Service which affirmed the place of faith in public life and gave a formal role to the leaders of other Faiths would underline the role of the Sovereign as a unifying symbol in an increasingly diverse world.

The power of this symbol cannot be exaggerated. Diversity, badly managed, could become a threat to the cohesion and stability of a society.

For the last sixty years The Queen and The Prince of Wales have been in the vanguard, both in the Commonwealth and within the United Kingdom, affirming different faith communities, cultures and minority ethnic groups. The role of the Crown in the 21st Century as an instrument of integration and cohesion could therefore be properly reflected in the Coronation Service.

Of course, some might interpret this as the demise of the history of Christianity in Britain. But nothing of the Christian symbolism needs to be subtracted from the service. All that is required is for hospitality to be extended to brothers and sisters of faith in a way that does not compromise their own convictions. Therein lies the way of harmony.

It is perfectly expressed in a Benediction at the end of the Coronation.

“The Lord give you faithful Parliaments and quiet Realms;

Sure defence against all enemies;

Fruitful lands and a prosperous industry;

Wise counsellors and upright magistrates;

Leaders of integrity in learning and labour;

A devout, learned and useful clergy;

Honest peaceable and dutiful citizens. Amen”.

“May Wisdom and Knowledge be the Stability of your Times

And the fear of the Lord your Treasure. Amen”.

But before I conclude, the Coronation serves people of faith on another level. The Orb and the Sceptre are symbols of the world and its sovereignty.

I remember vividly as a young man, shortly after I had graduated, listening to one of the great evangelical preachers of the 20th Century, The Revd John Stott, Rector of All souls Langham Place in London.

It was about the kingship of Christ.

He ended the sermon by challenging us as to who was the king of our own lives. He talked about our personal worlds and our ambitions. He gently asked into whose hands we had placed the orb and the sceptre of our lives. He pressed the challenge. Were they held in our own hands with an ever tightening grip or had we handed them over into the hands of Christ the King, the King of Kings?

In that moment I knew I had to let go, to hand over and to yield to Christ the sovereignty and rule of my life.

It's a challenge that I humbly leave you with on this Feast of Christ the King.

Whom will you serve with your life in this life for life eternal?

May Christ the King

Crown you

With the gift of Life Eternal. Amen.

The Right Reverend James Jones.