

O Almighty God, who alone canst order the unruly wills and affections of sinful men: Grant unto thy people, that they may love the thing which thou commandest, and desire that which thou dost promise; that so, among the sundry and manifold changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed, where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

(BCP Collect, The Fourth Sunday After Easter)

When Fr Peter asked me if I would deliver a homily on this occasion, I confess that I was at something of a loss about what I could possibly say - not because there was so little to be said about Her late Majesty, but because there was so much. What's more, so much of it has been said over the last few days that I know there is little or nothing new that I can add, save, perhaps, for a few personal remarks as one who had the great privilege of meeting Her Majesty on a number of occasions.

Among the comments that have resonated with me is the frequently repeated observation that however relaxed and informal The Queen could be you were, nevertheless, always aware that she was The Queen.

When I was the Chaplain of the Fleet I undertook many duties that could have been done by anyone. But there is one duty that the Chaplain of the Fleet alone can perform, and that is the Consecration of Colours - that wonderful ceremony in which the Royal Marines Band builds an altar of their drums upon which the new Colour is draped. In 2003 I consecrated a new Queen's Colour for the Fleet on board a ship anchored in Plymouth Sound, in the presence of Her Majesty. As with any ceremony attended by the Queen there was meticulous preparation, and a full rehearsal the day before the event,

with Lady Mount Edgcumbe playing the part of The Queen - and when I say a full rehearsal I mean full, even down to eating an identical lunch to the one we would have the following day.

We might have expected the day itself to feel like a simple rerun of the dress rehearsal - but it was not. Lady Mount Edgcumbe had done a good job as understudy, but she could not prepare us for the astonishing quality of the presence of The Queen herself, of which I was always aware whenever I met her. She truly had an unmistakable aura which it is hard to describe. It was not the aura of celebrity, nor the fascination of seeing in the flesh a familiar face from the media. It was something that came close to holiness, to sanctity, a quality that emanated from her very being and that is, perhaps, peculiar to an anointed Sovereign.

And at the same time it has been said by so many that she herself was easy to be with, making those around her feel entirely comfortable in her presence. I sat two places away from her at lunch, and the conversation around the table flowed as easily as if she were someone we had always known. However I remember noting two things. One was that she kept her hat and coat on throughout lunch, and the other was that the hands one might have expected to be exquisitely manicured were in fact those of a countrywoman - and somehow all the more human and engaging for that. She was far from spoilt and pampered.

It has also been often repeated that no matter whom she met she was always genuinely interested in them and always made them feel special. Of all the people I have met in my life, she was one of only two who had in spades that gift of making you feel that you and she were the only two people in the world. When I was an ordinand on exchange at the English College in Rome, I remember seeing some

archive footage of Pope Pius XII. He was being carried on a sedia gestatoria through the crowds, many of whom were passing him a white zucchetto, which he would briefly put on his head before handing it back - people could say that they possessed a skull cap once worn by the Pope. But what was most remarkable about that film, I found, was that the Pope never once looked at the person who had passed the zucchetto to him, but simply passed it totally impersonally while looking at something else. Her late Majesty would never have done such a thing. She was always intensely engaged with the person before her, always interested, always empathetic, and always putting the needs and feelings of others before her own. Even on board the aircraft carrying her back from Kenya in 1952 after the death of her father it is reported that she said "I've ruined everyone's trip". She never regarded herself as important, only the role she occupied.

And when she smiled - oh my! That smile and the sparkling eyes lit up the whole world.

My training incumbent would often say that he thought the best thing about holidays and days off was to make elaborate plans for the following day and to wake up in the morning and think "I don't think I'll bother". I think we would all recognise indulging that particular luxury, and we sometimes forget that our freedom of will involves deciding not just what we will do but also what we will not do. How would any of us cope with being unable to exercise that luxury not just for a few days or months but for an entire lifetime? Yet The Queen uncomplainingly and, indeed, cheerfully, endured such a life for more than seventy years. Every day mapped out weeks ahead, every day filled with engagements to be undertaken not for pleasure but for duty's sake. And even in Sandringham and her beloved Balmoral, though she was free for a time of the

demands of her official diary, we easily forget that not one single day went by without the arrival of the red boxes filled with the official papers that she would diligently and carefully read through and, where necessary, sign - some of it dreary routine stuff like approving the appointment of a new Chaplain of the Fleet!

She learned her powerful sense of duty from her father, but training alone cannot sustain a person through such a life. We all know that it was her unwavering faith that supported her throughout. She often spoke of God as the mainstay of her life and of Jesus Christ as her example and her guide. Her faith shone through her Christmas broadcasts, which, it seems to me, became more deeply spiritual as years went by, and which often spoke of the importance of faith in God more eloquently than most of us clergy can manage. And she believed with all her heart that she had been called to be Queen by Almighty God, that she should respond to that call by doing her duty to the very best of her ability for the whole of her life, and that she would in all things be sustained by God, who does not call us to endeavours that are beyond our power to fulfil.

It was in The Queen's Christmas message in 2000 that she perhaps expressed the importance to her of her faith most fully and eloquently. "Today we are celebrating the fact that Jesus Christ was born two thousand years ago; this is the true Millennium anniversary. To many of us our beliefs are of fundamental importance. For me the teachings of Christ and my own personal accountability before God provide a framework in which I try to lead my life."

What an example of Christian discipleship to us all. Had history fallen out otherwise she would have lived out her days as a minor royal figure, blissfully happy in the countryside with her dogs and

her horses. Though her life as Queen may have seemed to some to be a life of privilege and comfort, in reality she followed the command of Jesus Christ, gave up all that she had and followed him. Few of us can claim to have been as consistently faithful as she was.

I suggested when I began that there was little to say that had not already been said, but there is, perhaps, one word that I, at least, have not heard spoken about her relationship to God and to her people. It is a word of particular religious significance, a word which resonates through Holy Scripture back to earliest times. It is the word "Covenant". In Scripture it refers to the promises made by God Himself to His people, and in more recent times it came to refer to the commitments made in marriage - the "vow and covenant betwixt us made". When 21 year old Princess Elizabeth made her famous broadcast in which she promised to serve her people faithfully for the whole of her life, a promise repeated in the oaths taken at her Coronation, she was not making some empty promise of the kind that we human beings find so easy to break. She was entering in to a Covenant with her people, just as, at her anointing, she entered into a Covenant with God - a profoundly theological commitment which permeated her being and shone out throughout her long life. I cannot help feeling that this was, in large part, the source of the special aura that surrounded her. She was a conduit of the love of God, poured out in her love of her people and her devotion to their service, and in that she, in turn, gave us a glimpse of the divine love.

And now she has gone to another kingdom, whose Sovereign she always acknowledged as greater than she, where it is our hope and prayer that she has been received with joy and thanksgiving, and where we trust that she now enjoys the reward of her long life of duty and service and of obedience to the King of Kings. We may, I

feel sure, say with confidence "May she rest in peace and rise in glory".