

**A sermon preached on 9 June 2013  
by the Bishop of St Albans  
in the Cathedral and Abbey Church of St Alban  
to celebrate 60 years since the  
Coronation of Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II**

Unlike the coronation of Queen Victoria in 1838, the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 went like clockwork. On the occasion of Victoria's coronation, Archbishop Howley, the last Archbishop of Canterbury to wear a wig, managed to jam the coronation ring on the wrong finger of Victoria's hand and was heard to mutter under his breath, 'I knew we should have had a rehearsal'. Later that day Queen Victoria had to bathe her swollen hand in iced water before she could remove the ring.

Rehearsals were very much the order of the day in 1953. They were conducted under the eagle eye of the hereditary Earl Marshal, the Duke of Norfolk. Everyone was well behaved with one exception: the bishops. At the end of one all-day rehearsal the Duke could hold back his frustration no longer. 'My Lord Bishops,' he exclaimed, 'we are going to be here all day if you can't learn to walk in step with each other'. 'What's new?' you may ask.

The coronation rite has changed little from that which was composed over a thousand years ago by Archbishop Dunstan for the coronation of King Edgar the Peaceful. That first English coronation took place not in Westminster Abbey but in Bath, one of the strongholds of the Kingdom of Wessex, in the year 973. According to a contemporary account, Edgar 'convoked all the archbishops, bishops, all great abbots and religious abbesses, all dukes, prefects and judges, and all who had claim to rank and dignity from east to west and north to south over wide lands' to witness the event. They were summoned so that 'the most reverend bishops might bless, anoint and consecrate him, by Christ's leave, from whom and by whom the blessed unction of highest blessing and holy religion has proceeded.'

The service began with Edgar entering the church and prostrating himself before the altar. What is interesting, both from a political perspective as well as an historical one, is that from the first English monarchs, unlike their French counterparts, were never deemed to be absolute monarchs. Monarchs reigned and served under the authority of God.

Since that first coronation in Bath there have been minor changes to the rite. For example, King Henry V was the first king to make his coronation oaths in English, as opposed to Latin or Norman French. Then in the sixteenth century the entire rite was translated into English, in keeping with the principles of the Reformers, that it should be understood in the language of the people.

The year 1953 saw another change. For the first time in history television brought this ancient ceremony into the living rooms of ordinary people up and down the country. Seeing the newsreels again recently, you sense the drama of the event as the Archbishop of Canterbury placed the crown upon Elizabeth's head and everyone shouted 'God save the Queen'. It was a spine-tingling moment. Spiritually and theologically, however, the climax of the service is not the crowning but the anointing of the monarch with holy oil.

Dunstan drew on the Old Testament when he composed the rite in which kings and priests were anointed in order to set them apart for God's service. At the anointing of Edgar in 973 words from the First Book of Kings were chanted: 'Zadok the Priest and Nathan the Prophet anointed Solomon King.' The same words have been sung at coronations ever since, now immortalised in that wonderful setting by Handel. At the anointing the monarch is divested of most of the splendid robes. He or she is anointed on the palms of the hand, the breast and the head. Anointing is about being set apart for God's service and it symbolises the gift of the Holy Spirit on the monarch to lead and to guide.

There is also an interesting parallel between a coronation and the marriage service. The ring that is put on the finger of the newly anointed monarch is often referred to as 'the wedding ring of England.' As in marriage, husband and wife are called to a life of mutual service, so too the monarch is called to a life of commitment to the nation. When Queen Elizabeth II was anointed she made a solemn commitment to God and to the people she was to serve, and in response the people were asked to make a solemn commitment to her.

In the speech that the Queen broadcast to the Commonwealth on the evening of her coronation she said: 'The ceremonies you have seen today are ancient, and some of their origins are veiled in the mists of the past. But their spirit and their meaning shine through the ages never, perhaps, more brightly than now. I have in sincerity pledged myself to your service, as so many of you are pledged to mine.'

In our age of more transitory relationships, such a commitment to the public good, such a covenant to life-long service, makes us pause and reflect. Her Majesty the Queen has been a shining example of one who has put the good of the nation above her own personal good, and who has been unswerving in her duty for over six decades.

What struck me re-reading the transcript of her broadcast that day, however, was that she did not take the people's trust in her for granted. As she put it: 'Throughout all my life and with all my heart I shall strive *to be worthy of your trust*'. The Queen knew only too well that there were two sides to this covenant and that she could not presume on people's unswerving trust unless she showed herself worthy of it.

In the intervening sixty years our nation's wealth and prosperity have increased dramatically. Over the same period there has been a massive shift away from 'my duty and my responsibility' to 'my rights'. There has also been a move away from solemn life-long commitments. Some people now find it expedient to keep their promises only as long as it suits them. Among some of our leaders there has also been a sense that they should be able to do what they like and that they don't have to earn and maintain trust of the public by their lives and their examples. All this is symptomatic of a deeper malaise, but it contributes to the mistrust of politicians and authority figures that is felt in parts of Britain today. By contrast, I have no doubt that it is the Queen's sense of duty, her constancy and her knowledge that she can never take the trust of others for granted which has made her such a deeply respected and loved monarch.

And what of the future? No doubt there will be huge pressure to radically re-write the 1000 year old coronation rite when it comes to it. Certainly many of our current leaders seem to exhibit little historical perspective or sympathy. Whatever is decided, personally I am sure that our constitutional monarchy will only thrive to the extent that a future monarch

embodies the same sense of service and duty that we admire in Queen Elizabeth. The trust of people has always to be earned. That is true of the monarch and in every walk of life.

Which is why the same challenge to integrity confronts us all. What is our role in making society and our nation flourish? Our preoccupation with 'my rights' to the neglect of a sense of personal responsibility, duty and service will inevitably lead to a breakdown of civilized society. Without mutual commitment and service, without a strong sense of the common good to which we all contribute, there will be no meaningful sense of society. As we remember with thanksgiving our Queen's coronation today and pray for her well-being, we do well to ponder these deeper questions, lest our celebration dissolve into nostalgia or mere antiquarianism.

I close with words of the second chapter of St Peter's first letter, which were read at our service this evening, just as it was read at Queen Elizabeth's coronation: 'Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king.' May our words and lives embody these words of scripture to the greater glory of God and the welfare of our nation. Amen.

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