

Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II Memorial Service – 18th September 2022 5.30pm
Bishop Martyn

Tomorrow, our country will take part in the biggest act of collective grieving in our history. And millions from all over the world will watch.

“It’s like losing your grandmother,” said one person interviewed this week. “It’s like I’ve lost part of myself,” said another “she was so inspiring and encouraging.” “She embodied all that is good about this country” said someone else, “and now she’s gone.”

Grief does strange things to us. Perhaps like me you have found yourself transfixed by the images of people queueing, in some cases for 24 hours, to pay their last respects to the Queen. Of course, the British are known around the world for being good at queueing, but this has been a whole different order of magnitude. Some have likened it to a spiritual pilgrimage to visit a holy site. 24 hours of standing, shuffling forward, chatting with the strangers stood next to them, trying to stay hydrated and warm, and then finally, reaching the Palace of Westminster. I’ve had it on livestream, and simply watching people’s faces as they enter the hush of Westminster Hall and then process past her coffin, has been a visual reminder both of how grief affects us all differently – some pausing with head bowed, some curtseying, some shedding tears, some giving a military salute, some stoically walking past with furrowed brow and pursed lips, many people making the sign of the cross – but it’s also been a sign of all we share in common. This woman, for she was mortal like all the rest of us, yet this woman, Our late Sovereign Lady held such a strong place in our collective imagination, that we grieve for her like a close relative.

Whether we met her in person or not, she has been a source of inspiration and encouragement, an example of service and dedication to duty, a symbol of stability and continuity in a rapidly changing world, and a constant reminder that faith and Christian values are what has shaped this country in the past and must the foundation on which we build in the future.

Our Bible reading this evening presents a similar picture, but this time it is diverse crowd people gathered around the throne of God. We’re told that people from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages are joined before the Lamb on the throne – the lamb being the picture of Jesus, who died for us. It’s a beautiful picture which inspires hope. For even those who have suffered here on earth, find a place of comfort before the throne of the one who himself knew such suffering – “they will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them nor any scorching heat.” This world with all its pain and all its divisions will one day be completely transformed.

And such a hopeful vision can inspire us today because it says that there is something that we can work for, something that we can dedicate our lives to, that lasts even beyond the grave. And that something is the building of a just and peaceful society where every nation, tribe, people and language work together as one, where every individual and community can flourish, and no one lives in fear or loneliness. This vision, sometimes called in the Bible, the kingdom of God, may never be fully realised in our lifetime, yet it is what we pray for – “your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven” – and it’s what Jesus demonstrated in his actions and words, and it’s what he calls us to work for, here and now.

This is something our late Queen truly understood and increasingly in her later years, she spoke more and more openly of the vision which inspired her, and the faith which guided her in the good times and the bad.

A few quotes from some of her speeches:

"Each day is a new beginning, I know that the only way to live my life is to try to do what is right, to take the long view, to give of my best in all that the day brings, and to put my trust in God."

"Over the years, those who have seemed to me to be the most happy, contented and fulfilled have always been the people who have lived the most outgoing and unselfish lives."

"We may hold different points of view, but it is in times of stress and difficulty that we most need to remember that we have much more in common than there is dividing us."

"Everyone is our neighbour; no matter what race, creed, or colour."

"I know of no single formula for success, but over the years I have observed that some attributes of leadership are universal and are often about finding ways of encouraging people to combine their efforts, their talents, their insights, their enthusiasm and their inspiration to work together."

"Let us not take ourselves too seriously. None of us has a monopoly of wisdom and we must always be ready to listen and respect other points of view."

With such simple words of wisdom, and with the kind and gracious actions that so often accompanied them, Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth fulfilled what she believed to be her own vocation, her calling from God.

The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams has written of the parallels of her calling and that of priests in the church. At the outset, both are anointed with oil - in the

coronation service and the ordination service, and this anointing is a sign of someone being given a new place in the community, as Sovereign, or as priest. Rowan Williams goes on to say that they stand in a different place in the community, so that “we can gather around something other than our own preferences and anxieties and prejudices; around a gift of ‘kinship’ in which we can stand together before God.”

The Queen has many legacies, one of the most important is her work in bringing people together, uniting us in something more than our preferences, anxieties or prejudices. We need this in Leicester at this time, in all our diversity, and across all our faith traditions, and we need it in the world. So let us commit ourselves to living out this legacy, not only by coming together to mourn our former monarch who reigned for so long, but also to work together under the authority of a new monarch.

Today we are united in our grief. Tomorrow the whole nation, together with many other peoples around the world, will be united in watching her funeral. And so, as we give thanks for her life and for all she gave us, may we be inspired to work for that same vision which inspired her, and may we place our trust in God, just as she did.

+ Martyn Leicester