

What a strange grief is this. The world as we knew it seems to have changed. As a nation we are bereft of that person who gave us identity and common purpose, who was our best ambassador, a global advocate of the virtues that we most treasure and yet so often fail to live by. Most of us do not recall a time when she was not the Sovereign, and those whose memory stretches back beyond her coronation speak movingly of the transforming effect of that moment, awakening in post-war Britain the possibilities of life beyond the austerity of post-war deprivation.

The recent celebrations of the Late Queen's Jubilee gave a comprehensive review of her life, her vitality, the signs of greatness already evident in childhood, the importance of family life in facing the unexpected trauma of unexpected demands that invaded privacy and freedom: the abdication, the war, and the premature death of King George VI being the most obvious.

Today, as we continue to give thanks for Elizabeth, who has been so definitively our gracious Queen, we give thanks for her in this Eucharist as an expression of the debt that we owe her, but far more profoundly and emotionally, as an expression of our love for her, with compassion and respect for her closest family in these days of grief and loss.

The Queen's image has been an icon of global recognition. It has evoked one word: Elizabeth. And in doing so, it has also, perhaps unwittingly, evoked that sequence of sacramental moments that have defined her a Christian Sovereign, indeed once described by the Pope as the last Christian Sovereign.

This name, Elizabeth, takes us directly to the waters of the font in which she was made "a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven". The spectacular string of Christmas messages that span her reign give evidence to her Christian conviction in mind and heart, and in practice.

But that is not the only point of sacramental definition and witness. We have also been served by a Sovereign who has, with consummate skill, shared with us (and reserved from our interference) the joys and sorrows of Christian marriage.

I do not think it is overly fanciful to see the death of Queen Elizabeth, a year after the death of her beloved husband, Prince Philip, an ending that is familiar to the pastoral experience of parish priests throughout this land who minister to a bereaved spouse after years of a deep and loving marriage. Theirs was a true story of love, through thick and thin. It is not for us to romanticise or probe beyond the public dimension of its life but the photographs that they shared with us tell their own story.

When St Paul speaks of marriage as a *mysterion* or *sacramentum*, in the Greek and Latin versions of Scripture, he is seeking to describe something that conveys in time and space the glory of the nature of God. The bringing together of all things in unity and love, in perfection and beauty, in bliss and delight – these are statements that find confirmation in the varied endeavours of human life, and in the sacrament of marriage, with its focus on mutual society, help and comfort and the nurture and education of children, that informs our understanding of how we might live well in a free and stable society, just as it also speaks to us about the unity between Christ and the Church, his Bride.

It is on the foundation of this human love and experience that we might understand the congruence of the vows and commitment that the Late Queen made to her vocation as the anointed Sovereign, in some sense wedded to this land and the realms beyond it, especially in the Commonwealth, that she has loved and served so outstandingly.

No other monarch is anointed and crowned as our monarch is in Britain. These sacred actions confer identity and relationship as a distinctive expression of

service that we might also identify as a uniquely authoritative form of lay ministry having its own form of sacramental character.

Like the other expressions of anointing for service, in ordination as priest and bishop, the character that is bestowed is life-long and indelible. And it is also essentially relational. It is given as a sign of the fidelity and costly love of God for all that God has made, pointing us to the mystery of redemption by Jesus Christ in which evil is finally vanquished, creation is brought to its perfection when we are all clothed in the beauty and majesty of the children of God.

The liturgical rite of coronation is properly an exceptional and solemn expression of this mystery. Its focus is on the effect that its words, actions and sacred instruments will have. We have seen the evidence of this so clearly in the way that Queen Elizabeth II reigned over us.

Tributes have been plentiful in listing the outworking of the grace of God in Coronation, through her life. There is no aspect of national and international interest from which she has been absent, in social, political and economic concerns, sport and the arts, the environment and resistance to misuse of power, and, perhaps best of all, her massive attention to the people she has met personally – estimated to be a third of the population of Britain.

It would be wrong to add at this point a string of anecdotes, but it is worth saying that the Late Queen was ever courteous but not uncritical. On one occasion a Commonwealth leader, making a State Visit, was discovered to have arrived in Windsor Castle having smuggled in a small dog that had not been through quarantine processes. Emergency arrangements were made and the Queen spoke of him thereafter as that terrible man who could have brought rabies into the house and killed the corgis. A diplomat recalls that subsequently “that terrible man” would always ask, “How is my good friend, Queen

Elizabeth?” to which the diplomat would say, “She is well: she speaks of you often.”

I spoke earlier of the Christmas messages that spanned the Queen’s reign. They are a wonderful record of changing times and of her appetite for change in which the best of our identity, character and faith remains constant and is cherished.

That record is more than a TV archive. I believe it is also evident in the commitment made by King Charles. He spoke of the importance of bringing the marginal into the centre. This is not explicitly with work of monarchs but it is the effect of how they reign well. The King bequeaths that work to the new Prince of Wales and this dimension of attention to that which is overlooked in the churn of worldly power is itself a potent reminder that the Kingdom of God is the template of governance for the Christian monarch.

But it is with words from the Queen’s final message to the nation that I wish to end: “We shall meet again.” She used these heavily freighted words to lift us out of the heavy sadness of the Covid pandemic. They echoed from a heart that knew the grief of loss and yet remained cheerful in faith and hope and love. This conviction was drawn from the words of Jesus Christ that we heard at the end of today’s gospel: “that I should lose nothing of all that has been given to me, but [will] raise it up on the last day.”

May the Lord fulfil this promise for Queen Elizabeth, raising her up from death, with angels and archangels leading her into the companionship of the Blessed Virgin Mary and all the saints, to enjoy the fulness of bliss and rest in the heavenly Jerusalem. So may she rest in peace and rise in glory.