

Bishop of Chichester

Sermon preached at Chichester Cathedral on Sunday 7 May at a special service marking the Coronation of King Charles III

I wonder what Sarah Hebbes, a devout member of the Church of England, made of this statement by King Charles: ‘In the first year of the Late Queen Elizabeth, there was one Uniform Order of Common Service, and Prayer, and of the Administration of Sacraments, Rites and Ceremonies in the *Church of England*.’”

In 1748 Sarah inscribed her name in a newly printed Book of Common Prayer, during the reign of George II. It was, of course, King Charles II whose statement she read, commending the 1662 Book of Common Prayer.

The 1662 BCP is still an authoritative text for the Church of England today. It came into existence after the calamitous upheavals of the Civil war and the Commonwealth, and its origins lay, a century before that, in the Brexit orchestrated by Henry VIII, when the broad intellectual, cultural and spiritual life of catholic Europe was narrowed to English interests that prioritised the rupture of independence above diversity and continuity.

The Coronation of King Charles III now offers us an opportunity to reflect on who we are as a people, living together in these islands, and what contribution the Church of England makes to sustaining our common life as we face the upheavals and uncertainties of the 21st century.

As the crowning-place of monarchs, Westminster Abbey holds within itself the nation’s history. When William the Conqueror was crowned there on Christmas Day in 1066, the coronation tradition was already a hundred years old.

Yesterday’s Coronation, though streamlined to meets the needs of today’s

society, nonetheless followed a tradition set out by the Abbot of Westminster, Nicholas Lytlington, in a book called the *Liber Regalis* ('The Royal Book'), dating back to the 1380s and still in the Abbey's library.

But we would be mistaken if we think that the coronation ritual was merely a re-enacted pageant. Its words and actions had intentional meaning and effect. And that, in itself, should remind us of how far we have drifted in our collusion with today's disregard for public words and symbolic actions, often cheapening them to mean whatever the user of them wants them to mean. That is the grammar of 'fake news'. It makes us unaccountable to each other and to the serious business of history by which we measure what has made us who we are, and to which we entrust for the future an intelligible narrative of how we have lived and behaved.

So the first contribution to public life that I hope we might have witnessed yesterday was the Church's affirmation, on behalf of the whole nation, that words and symbolic actions done in public should have the beneficial effect of building attention to truth and accountability as the foundation of our society and common life.

It should be no surprise that this affirmation comes from that strand of our inheritance that also asserts the importance of the practice of faith by which human dignity is defined.

At the very outset of his reign, King Charles identified himself as a Christian, following the example of his mother, the Late Queen. It was she who memorably reminded us during her Diamond Jubilee celebrations that the Church of England's duty 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'.

This insight directs us to the second contribution that the Church of England can make, which is honouring the use of public space. In an age that shapes its perceptions through the ever-changing patterns of social media, there is an ever-greater need for asserting the value of human assembly, the right and the ability to gather in a particular place in order to participate in those moments that define and celebrate our common life.

The *Liber Regalis*, the Royal Book, identifies this sense of assembly as a fundamental element of the coronation. It states, ‘the bishop that is to consecrate the king, shall address the people at the four sides of the stage, inquiring their will and consent’. Of course, this has always been a symbolic moment of enquiry, like the question that a bishop also puts to an assembly to ask for their consent to ordain a deacon, priest or bishop.

In our televisual culture, millions can see the ceremony and identify with it. But that is always less than the live participation of huge numbers on the streets of London, and subsequently at acts of worship such as this one, or in the myriad street parties that will mark this weekend.

On-line presence does, without doubt, connect people in remarkable ways. But it remains characteristic of the Church that we claim in the name of Jesus Christ to be a living, human, accessible presence in every community. Public worship in Church buildings, Church schools, and Church institutions such as the Mothers’ Union and our Diocesan Family Support Work, together with a wide range of youth work, are all orientated towards the importance of the irreducible importance of live human association. Jesus Christ is the paradigm of human dignity. He constitutes the material and spiritual scope of human personhood and so gives us the mandate to order our society according to the patterns of justice and mercy from which no one is excluded.

Thirdly, and finally, the Church of England has a sacred and awe-inspiring responsibility for the presentation to the people of this land the truth and reality of God. The Coronation's ritual use of jewelled symbols, scented oil and the sacrificial offering of the Eucharist in bread and wine will mean little to the vast majority of this nation. But it has ever been central to the experience and conviction of the Christian Church that faith in God is not built on social or democratic consensus.

The reality of God is not given credibility because sufficient numbers believe in God. Sacred words and actions have power because they assist us to recognise that what we call reality is itself God's gift to us and God will perfect this gift from the fragility of our finite lives into something yet more glorious than this coronation. For crowning is a description of God's promise to each and every person, the destiny for which are made in the crowning of all our longing for what is good and true, with the enjoyment of life that is possessed in unlimited beauty and freedom.

The 20th century poet and theologian, Charles Williams, wrote a play about Thomas Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury who gave origin and shape to the Book of Common Prayer as Charles II commended it in 1662, and as Charles III has so often commended it himself. Williams was aware that, alongside the work of Shakespeare, the Book of Common Prayer is significant in the formation of our language, through which 'the blessed beauty of the shaped syllables enfranchise Christ into English speech'.

Charles Williams was a mystic who delighted in the use of language and drama to communicate the challenge of Christian faith. I pray that reflection on the Coronation might have stirred that challenge in your heart. Bridging the divide between time and eternity, between mortality and God, was something for which Thomas Cranmer gave his life. One of the characters in the play about Cranmer turns to the audience, believers and

non-believers alike, and throws down the challenge of faith like a gauntlet, saying: 'There is this to be said for my Lord of Canterbury, he dimly believes in something outside himself...which is more, I can tell you, than most of you do'.

So, God grant us courage, faith, liberty and peace. God save the King.
Amen.