

## **BORN TO SERVE**

- Mark 10: 35-45

### **A Sermon to Mark the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II**

*“...whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be the slave of all.” - Mark 10:43-44*

I was ordained to the ministry at the age of 24 and was promptly settled in my first pastoral charge. In my first week on the charge, I had the duty of performing three funerals. During that week, as I struggled to get done what needed to be done, and attempted to offer both in the home and from the pulpit some sort of comfort and consolation to bereaved families in their grief, and as I worried about whether or not I was getting anything right, I found myself often muttering, “I’m not ready for this. I’m not ready for this.”

I wonder if Princess Elizabeth might have said something like that to herself when, at age 26, she received the news while on a trip in Kenya that her father had died, and that she was now Queen and responsible for her people in Britain and throughout the Commonwealth. Hers was a very young age to come into a very high office. Well, whatever qualms, fears, and anxieties might have troubled her in becoming monarch long before she would have desired it, she rose to the occasion and made a simple statement of commitment that she would be there for those whom she governed, that she was dedicating herself to them.

In that she was repeating a commitment she had made when she became an adult. On her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, she had addressed the peoples of the Commonwealth with this promise: “I declare before you all that my whole life whether it be long or short shall be devoted to your service.” If we wanted to make a pithy assessment of the 65 years that have intervened since those words were spoken, we might simply say, “Promise made. Promise kept.” Because Her Majesty has seen through her commitment, we are privileged to gather today to give thanks for her unflinching devotion and to offer in return our admiration and love affection.

In our contemporary world, so many relationships are marked by brokenness and impermanence, but this relationship between the Queen and her people has grown stronger and deeper as time has passed. One reason for this, I think, is that in an era of rapid and remarkable change, in which the pace of technological development often threatens to overwhelm us, the Queen has been a figure of constancy and has blessed us with the gifts of continuity and stability. It is reassuring to know that, come what may, she is always there and can always be relied upon.

A second reason for the Queen’s growing popularity in a culture that generally seems obsessed with celebrity and with youth is that, having long ago reached the age when we feel people are entitled to begin to take it easy and to rest on their laurels, she continues to work as hard as ever on behalf of her people. In this her jubilee year, she has, in several

speeches, rededicated herself to the service of her subjects. She needn't actually have said anything. We know it is true. We know that, for her, it will never be any other way.

"My whole life whether it be long or short shall be devoted to your service." Let us take some time to reflect upon that commitment. *Serving* and *service* are not perhaps the first words that come to mind when we think of the world of the highly born. Indeed, for Elizabeth, other possibilities were available. Born to wealth, born to privilege, born to comfort, she had the position and resources to choose a life focussed on herself. Yet, that is not how we know her.

*Born to service* is, in fact, a better description. Perhaps she was shaped by the wonderful example of her parents who graciously accepted the duties of the Crown that were thrust upon them in such an unwelcome way by King Edward's abdication; and who, during the blitz and throughout the war, remained in London and kept Elizabeth and Margaret with them in order that the Royal Family might be with the people in their time of extremity and need as they struggled to endure and carry on.

Perhaps there are other reasons why *born to serve* has become an apt characterization, but, however the Queen came by her values, she seems instinctively to have understood the glory of service as it is emphasized in our gospel lesson, in which Jesus says "whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Those are challenging words, the more so because they were spoken by our Saviour and are therefore not to be regarded merely as a matter of opinion, but as the truth of God. It was the conviction of Jesus Christ that true greatness finds its full expression in serving others. That truth was reflected in his life and ministry. So also it has been reflected in the Queen's reign. In our Lord's commitment to service and in our Queen's commitment to service we have seen not the diminishment of life, but life lived to the fullest measure.

Ten years ago, in his sermon at St. Paul's Cathedral at the Service of Thanksgiving for the Golden Jubilee, the then Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, reminded us that the Queen's vocation was one which she did not seek, but it was one to which she was anointed. He said that it was, as she publicly acknowledged, required of her, not just by her people, but by God. As people of faith, we understand this to be true. Her office, as head of state, is not a secular but a Christian office, for which the Sovereign is anointed and consecrated at the Coronation. Consider these words spoken to her by the Archbishop of Canterbury as he anointed her head with oil during her enthronement at Westminster Abbey:

Be thy Head anointed with holy Oil:  
as kings, priests, and prophets were anointed:  
And as Solomon was anointed king  
by Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet,

so be thou anointed, blessed, and consecrated Queen  
over the Peoples, whom the Lord thy God  
hath given thee to rule and govern.

At her Coronation the Queen became the servant of the servant. That is the symbolism of the orb that was placed in her hands. As he delivered it to her the Archbishop said:

Receive this Orb set under the Cross,  
and remember that the whole world  
is subject to the Power and Empire  
of Christ our Redeemer.

To fulfill her Christian duty and service, the Queen has continually relied on her faith to sustain her. As she said in her Christmas message on the eve of the Millennium, "The teachings of Christ and my own personal accountability before God provide a framework in which I try to live out my life."

In following the teachings of Christ and living her life as the servant of her people, the Queen has discovered what anyone who follows Christ's way will discover, that service and self-giving are not depleting, but fulfilling; are not loss, but gain. The current Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, was getting at this on Tuesday's Jubilee Service at St. Paul's Cathedral when, in preaching on the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans, where Paul calls on us to present our bodies as a living sacrifice and to focus our lives on the good of others, he said that

we are not being encouraged here to develop a self-punishing attitude, relentlessly denying our own goals or our own flourishing for the sake of others. What's put before us is a genuine embrace of those others, a willingness to be *made* happy by the well-being of our neighbours.

He continued,

I don't think it's at all fanciful to say that, in all her public engagements, our Queen has shown a quality of joy in the happiness of others; she has responded with just the generosity St Paul speaks of in showing honour to countless local communities and individuals of every background and class and race. She has made her 'public' happy and all the signs are that she is herself happy, fulfilled and at home in these encounters. To declare a lifelong dedication is to take a huge risk, to embark on a costly venture. But it is also to respond to the promise of a vision that brings joy.

Indeed, friends, the Christian call to service is about joy. The Queen's life illustrates this. When one has been as deeply engaged as she has been in the marvellous range of human experience and potential found in her subjects, what can be the outcome for her but joy?

Service is at heart a way of expressing love. It is our opportunity to complement the love that is revealed in the sacrificial gift of Jesus Christ. We find in that gift of love that the fundamental impulse of God's creation is self-giving. Thus, service allows us to be in harmony with the creation. Moreover, service recognizes love as the power to transcend and transform all as the cornerstone of our hope for the future of humankind. It calls us to look to that future, with all the challenges and changes it will bring, not with fear and faint heart, but with openness and expectation. This is what Her Majesty has done and teaches us to do. And I truly believe that is why at the age of 86, after six extraordinarily challenging decades as our Queen, she has an evident joy in her countenance and a spring in her step.

Archbishop Williams went on to say,

We are marking six decades of living proof that public service is possible and that it is a place where happiness can be found. To seek one's own good and one's own well-being in the health of the community is sacrificially hard work – but it is this search that is truly natural to the human heart. That's why it is not a matter of tight-lipped duty or grudging compliance with someone else's demands. Jesus himself says, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me", and that's what is at the heart of real dedication.

To this I would merely add what the Archbishop was implying: The Queen's dedication to service has been her food, her sustenance. She has learned our Lord's open secret. May we learn it as well.

The Archbishop concluded with a sentence that cannot be improved upon: "We give thanks today for Her Majesty's sixty years of utterly demanding yet deeply joyful service." To that I would only add, on behalf of us all, a prayer to God:

Thy choicest gifts in store  
on her be pleased to pour.  
Long may she reign.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*Given by Rev. Robert Campbell at Westminster Church, Winnipeg, June 10, 2012*  
*<http://westminsterchurchwinnipeg.ca/assets/b10jun12.pdf>*