

2012 1st June, Salisbury Cathedral:

Diamond Jubilee service for HMQ Elizabeth II

In the weeks leading up to the Coronation, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Geoffrey Fisher, who was educated at Marlborough College here in Wiltshire and retired to Trent near Sherborne, preached a series of sermons about the spiritual significance of the monarchy. The foundation of the British understanding of monarchy is deeply Christian and the Queen's coronation was a religious act in which spiritual power undergirds temporal power. In our constitutional monarchy the Queen has a responsibility to govern according to the laws and customs of her Peoples and for Law and Justice being upheld with mercy. Archbishop Fisher spoke about the searching demands of spiritual power: "the power to lead, to inspire and to unite, by the Sovereign's personal character, personal conviction and personal example." In a radio broadcast after the service the Queen said, "Throughout my life and with all my heart I shall strive to be worthy of your trust."

Sixty years on, and this has been fulfilled more than any could have hoped in her remarkable and remarkably long reign. The monarch has given this nation remarkable service symbolised by her giving the annual Maundy money to pensioners from various Christian churches for their service to their churches and communities. On this eve of the Diamond Jubilee weekend, with people all over the county, Wiltshire gives thanks to God for Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

Sixty years ago, Britain was a very different place to Britain now. Sir Winston Churchill was Prime Minister again, of a country still dominated by the impact of the Second World War. Though food rationing would not end for more than another year, Constance Spry and Rosemary Hume created Coronation chicken to help the celebrations. In Jo Lyons' Corner Houses Welsh Rabbit cost 4d and a meat pie 7d. In the Hit Parade, itself less than a year old, the American Frankie Laine topped the Charts for nine consecutive weeks with 'I believe'. The major items of foreign policy were to do with the Korean War, Operation Ajax in Iran, the emergencies in Malaya and with the Mau Mau in Kenya. The Commonwealth was experiencing the strains that would lead its countries to independence and to the growth in the British population from the Commonwealth.

One Queen but so far in her reign, there have been, six Archbishops of Canterbury, eight Lord Lieutenants of Wiltshire, twelve Prime Ministers, and twenty-one Chiefs of Defence Staff since that post's inception in 1959. Some of the conflicts and the opportunities of our world have changed. We now feel the environmental challenge, the international threat of terrorism, the inequality of the widening gap between rich and poor, and the economic and social impact of the double dip recession but the Queen has been both steadfast and has shown a remarkable capacity to grow and change with us.

For example, in one of the first visits of this Diamond Jubilee year she went to Lambeth Palace to meet with leaders of the faith communities. The manner of the occasion and what was said would have been unthinkable sixty years ago yet it also showed the thread of stability and continuity. About the religious role that is central to the monarchy and to Queen Elizabeth personally, the Archbishop of Canterbury said:

A clear and explicit commitment to Christian doctrine does not mean an anxious or arrogant spirit that seeks to exclude the commitments of others. Instead it is a reason to be generous, to seek to exercise responsibility for the good of an entire national community, made up of very diverse parts. Our Christian faith tells us that no-one flourishes unless all flourish; and this ought to turn us away from any attitude of superiority or partisanship as Christians. Strong Christian faith should be a guarantee for the well-being of all.

*Archbishop Rowan Williams, 15th February
2012*

This Christian commitment to others, which is part of the wisdom of all religions, is necessary for people to flourish. It is the same instinct that has put a community meal at the heart of many local celebrations this coming week with the Big Barbeque organised by Salisbury Churches Together tomorrow night and the Big Lunch in many communities on Sunday and the parties in local communities all over the county, as well as the lighting of beacons, the planting of trees and the Big Thank You in which this diocese of Salisbury, like every diocese in the Church of England, is collecting the signatures of all who want to thank Her Majesty for these sixty years.

When I was a child, on Saturday mornings my mother would sometimes tell my sister, brother and me to tidy our rooms “in case the Queen comes to visit”. It was an unlikely thought in suburban North London, but one of the roles of monarchy is to set the standard by which we deal with one another. As Vicar of London’s Royal Parish Church of St Martin-in-the-Fields, I knew that a royal visit did indeed entail a certain amount of clearing up, and every visitor, every homeless person benefitted, a bit like St Benedict telling us to greet everyone as we would greet Christ. When Her Majesty the Queen visited Salisbury and this cathedral last month as part of the Diamond Jubilee tour, the people of Wiltshire got themselves ready and turned out to cheer and celebrate. We wanted to be at our best. It was good for everyone.

John of Gaunt’s speech in Shakespeare’s Richard II has helped define our understanding of England: “This royal throne of kings, this scepter’d isle... This precious stone set in a silver sea... This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England”. It was Shakespeare’s Richard II who also articulated the humanity of kings: “I live with bread like you, feel want, taste grief, need friends”. As for any family and any community, the sixty years of our Queen’s reign have not all been gloriously free of personal or family difficulty. Perhaps those occasions have deepened our sympathies and affection for the Queen and our gratitude for her devotion to duty and service.

We have gathered for this Act of Thanksgiving for her Sixty Year reign in the week of Pentecost, the Festival of the Holy Spirit. God’s breath, energy, Spirit gives direction to a life in which the gifts of love, joy and peace are the gifts that make for communication between people who do not speak the same language and have a huge capacity to be divided and live in enmity. The Queen’s deep personal Christian faith has helped to sustain her to keep the oaths made at her Coronation. Today we give thanks for everything and, as at her Coronation, but if anything with even deeper affection and gratitude, we pray and acclaim: God save the Queen; and repeat, this time together, God save the Queen.