

*Sermon preached at St Philip & St James Church on Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> May 2023.*

*The Gospel text was John 14: 1-14.*

Before she died and went to heaven, Mary, my mother-in-law, got Alzheimer's and went to live in a care home. The care home was lovely in many ways. It was housed in a lovely old Victorian building. It had really nice grounds and many of the staff were really nice. But actually, we came to realise that it wasn't especially well run.

One thing they did at the care home was that in the morning they would bring all the residents out of their rooms and sit them in a big circle in the biggest room in the house. And always in the same place in the circle. So Mary was always sat in the same place when I went to see her and she was always sat next to the same lady and unfortunately this lady wasn't very nice to her and would react scornfully and irritably to everything Mary said. The fact that everything Mary said was very likely to be a repeat of what she had said half an hour earlier may have had something to do with that.

It probably made operational sense for the care home to sit all the residents in the same room in the same order, but I don't think it suited the emotional needs of the residents at all. It certainly didn't suit my mother-in-law who would often worry about what people were saying or thinking about her.

Our Gospel reading today is a well-known passage about the promise of eternal life. Jesus says to the disciples, 'In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places'. These comforting words are often read out at funerals. Why do we find these words so comforting?

I wonder why we like to think about the Kingdom of Heaven as a place with lots of rooms? The Kingdom of Heaven is not like a care home where they make you all sit in the same room. There are different rooms. Lots of different rooms. So, when you are in heaven, you don't have to deal with all those people that you would rather not spend eternity with.

That's quite helpful isn't it? I find it helpful. It means that I never have to think, 'I hope they don't go to heaven, I couldn't bear to spend eternity with them.' Which for a vicar especially would be a terrible thing to be caught thinking. Instead, I can think, 'I hope they do go to heaven, and I expect God will make sure they are in a different room to me.'

Because a heaven with many dwelling places is a heaven that has room for many people; even people that are not very compatible with other people; even people who are barely compatible with anybody. In other words, heaven is a place of diversity. God's love can embrace all of us.

And this idea of heaven can help us to embrace diversity on earth. It can help us to be tolerant of others; to be forgiving. And when we are tolerant of others, when we forgive each other, when we are willing to embrace diversity; that is when we can achieve genuine unity.

The whole world has been thinking in recent days about the curious institution that is the British monarchy. Because I am half German, I have often had to explain the monarchy to German people. They bring it up. And they usually say something like; 'It's not very democratic to have a hereditary monarch as your head of state. How can Britain call itself a democratic country if you don't elect the head of state?'

And I have usually replied by saying something like, 'Well, the monarch doesn't really have any power as head of state. It's a symbolic role.'

To which I will often get the follow up, 'Well, why do they make such a fuss about it all then?' To which my reply will usually be along the lines of, 'Well. It's a tradition you know, and people like to keep traditions going.'

And that answer usually satisfies because they love their traditions in Germany which almost always involve people sitting on long wooden benches drinking wine or beer or both, eating sausages and singing while wearing fancy dress of some kind, so really not too different from Britain when there is a coronation or a royal jubilee except that the sausages are better and, if I may say so, greater care has been taken with editing the lyrics of some of the old songs.

But thinking about it all again in the run-up to the coronation I wonder whether this really is a satisfactory explanation of the monarchy. There have been opinion polls haven't there which have concluded that around 55% of British people are currently in favour of continuing with a monarchy and around 20% don't know what they think about it. But the majority of 18-24 year olds are in favour of getting rid of the monarchy. And there is strong republican sentiment in three parts of the country: Scotland, Northern Ireland and London.

And you can see why they carry out these opinion polls can't you? Because it is a bit odd that we have a monarchy. We tell our young people to believe in democracy and equal opportunities and we promise them equal opportunities and then we show them a head of state who is a hereditary monarch. We are told we are all taking a pay cut because of the state of the nation's finances and then we watch the pomp and circumstance of the coronation on the TV. It seems like it doesn't quite stack up. And young people being young people can spot the inconsistency.

One thing that has become clear to me in recent years is that, with a monarchy in a parliamentary democracy, whoever the actual monarch is, you can be pretty sure of one thing, none of them want to be the last one. And because they don't want to be the last one; they want to hand the country and the institution of the monarchy onto their heir; they need to be thinking very deeply about what relevant leadership they can be offering the country over the medium term. In other words, they need to be thinking about what kinds of things they should be saying now in order to still be relevant in 30,40 or 50 years' time.

It's a kind of long-term leadership that a parliamentary democracy can sometimes struggle to generate on its own. For politicians who feel the need to win the next election in a few months' time at all costs and nothing else matters, the temptation to say things that are divisive, harmful, misleading and just plain wrong can be too strong to resist. From time to time, we see the politicians whom we elect give in to that temptation to stoke up hatred in ways that have lasting adverse effects on our nation.

But a Queen or a King doesn't do that. They don't have to win an election. They just have to concentrate on staying relevant and making sure that what they say will stand the test of time.

With our new King we benefit enormously from the fact that he has been preparing to be King for a very long time. This means that we can easily see what the themes of his reign are because he has been developing them before our eyes for quite some time. I am going to remind you of these themes, but I am sure they are familiar to you.

The first is Diversity and Inclusion. Just as the Kingdom of Heaven has to be a place of diversity if it is to be heavenly, so the Kingdom over which Charles reigns has to be tolerant of diversity if it is to remain a United Kingdom. We

saw the commitment to embrace diversity many times during the coronation service. And in the work of the Prince's Trust, and in the choice of which communities in our country our King especially seeks to remain in close contact with, we can see that we have a King who understands this and has a long-term commitment to it.

The second is Public Service. People who work in public service often feel that they have few champions among the politicians who wind up running the country. In King Charles they do have a champion. We can see this in his first Christmas broadcast with its strong emphasis on the importance of public service and in the prominent role given to members of the armed services and people working for charitable organisations in the coronation. Ever since the Second World War there has been a clear consensus in this country about the importance of public service which is, in itself, a Gospel value, based as it is upon loving your neighbour and valuing each person as a brother or a sister, a child of God. Our King understands that and regards the values upon which public service rests as being part of our nation's future.

The third is Climate Change and Natural Diversity. When our King first started to champion these causes, he was sometimes dismissed as a crank. Now he seems more like a prophet. When our nation gets to the point where we finally realise the enormity of the task that faces us, we will find that our King is already there, waiting for us.

And finally I come to the King's commitment to affirming the Role of Religion. Alistair Campbell, speaking on behalf of the Tony Blair government, said, 'we don't do God.' But the royal family have always dared to do God in a supposedly secular society. And King Charles manages to do God in a way that embraces the religious diversity of our nation without retreating from his Anglican identity. He displayed this commitment in the service yesterday but it has been a commitment he has maintained for quite some time. In doing so he is having an effect across the public life of our nation and is shaping the future of our children and grandchildren.

So far, I have invited you to reflect on all these ways in which our King has a profound impact on shaping the life of our nation as positive things that arise from the self-interest of the monarch. And I have invited you to consider them

as things which in some ways serve to correct some of the short-comings of our parliamentary democracy.

But I wonder whether there is something else in play here? I wonder what the Holy Spirit is up to? I wonder how the Holy Spirit is working through our King? How have these themes of diversity and tolerance, good neighbourliness and public service, faith in a living God and a love of his creation, which have been developing during the king's long years of preparation; how have they been brought to the forefront of our minds, even as the leaders we have elected seem to have been proved so inadequate for the tasks that lie ahead?

As we continue to celebrate the coronation today and tomorrow let us all try to weave these themes into our celebration; and especially the idea of tolerance of diversity and people who do not think like us, I think that is especially important on a day like this.

Remember that Jesus told his followers that those who believe in him will do the works that he did and, in fact, even greater works than he did. If we can do these things today, tomorrow and for the rest of King Charles' reign, I believe we will have truly responded to the promptings of the Holy Spirit who is at work in our King and in all of us. And we will be able to say with true spiritual depth and real meaning, 'God save the King'.

God save the King.