

The Fifth Sunday of Easter
Coronation Weekend
St Thomas, Salisbury, 2023

Zechariah 4:1-10
Revelation 21:1-14

Alleluia! Christ is risen.
He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

I don't imagine that high up on the list of priorities for the members of the Coronation committee, which presumably has met for a number of months, and put together that extraordinary experience of pageantry, symbol and text that we experienced yesterday - I don't imagine that high up on their list of priorities was checking whether what they did in Westminster Abbey on the morning of Saturday, 6 May would mesh nicely with the readings for Evensong the following evening. But actually, as is often the case with Christian Scripture, there are clear themes for us to pick up.

One of the most striking images from yesterday to me was of the moment where the king was stripped of all of his finery, until he was wearing a simple white shirt, and then the screens were placed around him for his anointing with holy oil. Such a sacred moment, such a personal moment, that as with his mother before him, the public were not invited to witness this touch of intimacy. And you might have noticed that the image on the screen that was placed around the King was the tree.

Zechariah's prophecy, written almost certainly in the early 500s BC, speaking to people just returning to their land from captivity, just beginning to put together a nation, a system of government, a national religion, after an extraordinary hiatus, offers the image of olive trees, and a seven lipped, seven wick'd, light, an oil lamp.

I think it's helpful to read the Coronation as a particular, a kind of 'amped-up', example of the fundamental relationship of the Christian to their God. It is about humility. It is about getting clear the relationship of power. And what saves the British Coronation service from being a bizarre fossil of an imperial age is that central, vital moment where the king is stripped of all his finery, and places himself in simplicity in front of the altar to be touched by the holy Oil, by the Holy Spirit. Which is precisely what happens, in our tradition anyway, to every single Christian at their baptism. And at their confirmation. Oil is not principally a symbol of monarchy or power. It is a symbol of grace. It is the symbol of identity. It is there to remind us that God comes close to us, and for that to happen we need to allow ourselves to be vulnerable. We need to divest ourselves of all of the robes of status and power and control that we clothe ourselves in, and we must stand exposed before the altar, and simply wait to be graced. Wait for God to come to us.

Though the scholars argue about it a bit, I think at least one of the images that Nehemiah gives us this evening is of the oil lamp burning, with its seven flames, fed by the oil of the two trees standing either side of it. We are to be fed by the Spirit. We are not the source of the oil. For that we need the tree. We are not even the lampstand. We might be one of those flickering flames. We are called, as Scripture tells us, to be lights in the world, but the fuel comes from the trees. Whether we are kings, prophets, priests, or not, we are fundamentally simple faithful Christian people, so like King Charles, we need to be willing to put off the accoutrements of all of our self-constructed status and authority, and stand before the altar in simplicity. And be surrounded by the source of the oil which is the only thing that will lead us to the new heavens and the new earth of the prophecy of Revelation. The oil of the Holy Ghost. And to simply receive that blessing. Receive that anointing, which is the birthright of all Christian people.

Because it is the only thing, in the end, that makes us Christian.
That the God who can roll aside great stones from the tombs of
our own pride also comes as close to us as a kiss, if we allow
ourselves to be utterly open to that Spirit - then we find
ourselves drawn into a Kingdom where Christ reigns alone.

For alleluia! Christ is risen.
He is risen indeed. Alleluia!