

The Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity

On the Eve of the State Funeral of the late Her Majesty
Queen Elizabeth II
Gloucester Cathedral, 2022

Revelation 21:1-7

Luke 22: 24-30

The Benedictine monks who established the Abbey Church of St Peter here Gloucester in about 678 knew about stability. The Benedictine monks who inhabited this current house of prayer, completed towards the end of the 11th century, knew about stability. And I have often remarked that this extraordinary nave in particular, with its huge Norman pillars, speaks clearly about stability. During the seven years that I was Precentor of Salisbury, temporarily away from my spiritual home here in Gloucester, I used to remark that Salisbury Cathedral, slender, vertical, Gothic, with its great spire pointing towards heaven, speaks of the transcendent, of transport, of ascension. But Gloucester, with its heavy nave and big pillars speaks of permanence. Speaks of the incarnation, speaks of the irrevocable promises of God. This is a Christmas Cathedral. God is with us. A Cathedral of the Incarnation, telling us the story of stability.

And those Benedictines who said their prayers in these halls and cloisters knew that. For Benedictines make three oaths, three vows: of obedience, of conversion of heart, and of *stability*. We learn of God's love for us best when we are stable. We learn of our love for God best when we are stable. We are Christians best when we have stability.

Like many of you I have been glued to my television and radio over the past eleven days. I was watching some interviews the other day with people either waiting in the queue for, or coming

out of Westminster Hall after viewing, the lying in state. And when asked why it mattered to them go to London and pay that act of respect to our late Queen, you may well have noticed, as I have, that the majority of the comments about Queen Elizabeth II are about her *stability*. The words are words like faithfulness. Duty. Constancy. The majority of the comments are not actually about the specifically *monarchical* things, but rather more about the Christian virtues. And above all; that seemingly inexhaustible faithful stability. No matter what else might be happening in the country.

Monarchs are a mixed bag. We only need glance at the history of our own nation with a reasonable amount of objectivity to realise that. The Bible, too, is highly suspicious of monarchy, as it is suspicious of human power in general. Because power brings with it temptation. That is what Jesus is talking about in today's gospel reading. The kings of the Gentiles lord it over their subjects. Authority and power are very difficult things to wield well by poor fallen humanity with our almost insatiable capacity to be selfish, to put self-preservation ahead of moral good, to daydream about the power, popularity, and preferment that might one day be ours, and the people over whom we might need to climb to attain it.

And the Bible is clear, also, that the key to unlock all of this is the person and nature of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ who, as the Interim Dean reminded us last week, is the Servant King. Jesus Christ who so completely inverts what it is to be a Monarch. Jesus Christ whose crown is made of thorns, and whose rubies are the drops of blood falling from his pierced hands and feet.

The Bible knows, our Benedictine forebears knew, and it is crystal-clear that our late Queen knew, that the only way to exercise what power, what decision-making, what influence

might be given to us, is to immediately give it back to Christ the King. To be very aware that it is he who sits upon the throne of our heart. William Cowper knew that, when he composed that extraordinary text, 'O for a closer walk with God', which contains that line, 'the dearest idol I have known, whate'er that idol be, help me to tear it from thy throne and worship only thee.'

Being very clear what we are going to put on the throne of our heart is what brings us Christian stability. The Collect for the Sovereign, which I must have prayed thousands of times at Book of Common Prayer Holy Communion, which now of course has been updated, of our late Queen, said, "that she, knowing whose minister she is..." Canon Andrew said, quite rightly, in his sermon last week that our late Queen "was the best of us". But I take you back to those thoughts shared by people queuing along the South Bank. She was the best of us not actually because of the things that were distinctly Royal about her. But rather because she knew whose minister she was. Because she placarded for us what a Christian life well lived looks like. Because from a place of privilege and influence, every action was oriented towards the throne in her heart where God sat. And so she was humble, in the midst of riches. Stable, through 70 years of extraordinary change. Because she knew whose minister she was. And that stability rubbed off on the nation and the world, and the queue snaking through Southwark Park.

The call, consistently, every day, for the Christian is to check that *we* know whose minister we are. As we wake every morning, as we reach out our hands to receive the sacrament, as we close our eyes each night. And that builds stability. And stability builds in our hearts a throne fit for our King.

I chose the hymns that we are singing today three months ago. And we haven't changed them. Because actually when we look through them we notice that what they say about thrones, and kingdoms, and service, is just as true in these unprecedented days as it was three months ago. We sing about the sort of kingdom which God is building, and which is the treasure that leads our heart. 'The kingdom of God', we sang at the beginning, 'is justice and joy'. And the King of that kingdom, as George Herbert reminds us in that wonderful poem that we have just sung, is one who rules and reigns in all things, and in everything. And so our prayer to that King is "in all things thee to see." I think our Benedictine forebears would have enjoyed George Herbert. A life of stability, a life that points directly to the throne of God, can brighten and clean everything. Can make drudgery divine. Can sweep a room, and that simple, mundane, even boring action can become an offering of praise and prayer. In which every in-breath is an 'Alleluia', and every out-breath is an 'Amen'.

And building that sort of kingdom means that we can join with the author of our offertory hymn, in all his high Victoriana, in celebrating that even in the darkest days, "on thee alone relying we will not be afraid."

As we receive communion the choir will sing Palestrina's exquisite setting of part of Psalm 42, which for centuries would have been used at the very beginning of every communion service in this building, up until the Reformation, and which reminds priest and people that our orientation, our direction, is to point always towards God, with the thirst of a hart longing for the water brooks.

And then Charles Wesley, as we finish. Most hymn books leave out verse three. I'm pleased that ours doesn't. "Preserve me

from my calling's snare, and hide my simple heart above, above the thorns of choking care, the gilded baits of worldly love.”

Stability means recognising the snares of our calling, and each of us have them, things that tempt us, that want to rock and buffet our stability. Gilded things, shiny things. But no, Wesley joins his voice with George Herbert, and Palestrina, with Scripture, with our late Queen, and with the echoes of the Benedictine prayers all around us. The Christian way is the way of stability. The way that looks unceasingly, faithfully, away from all those lesser thrones, that sees through the trappings and towards the throne of God. May we, inspired by our late Queen's example, aspire to that stability. May we know whose minister we are. May we, in the depths of sorrow as in the heights of joy, whether called to high office or to the simplest life, fulfil the task God's wisdom hath assigned, and be faithful.

Amen.