

The Queen's Passing and the Christian Vision

Sermon for the 14th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C, 11 September 2022

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

Exodus 32: 7-14; Psalm 51: 1-10; 1 Timothy 1: 1-2, 12-19a; Luke 15: 1-10

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Perhaps like me you woke to news of Queen Elizabeth's death on Friday and were surprised to find a tear in your eye. Not just for the late Queen herself, I suspect, but for the many fine things she represented that are now everywhere under threat. Now we're faced with nihilism rather than goodness, with entrenched shamelessness rather than decency, with cynicism rather than hope, with populist autocracy snapping everywhere at the heels of democracy, with aimless individualism drowning out the common good, and with social media undoing the social contract. Even Republicans like Keating, Rudd, Turnbull and Prime Minister Albanese felt it, though hopeful that the post-monarchical Australia they favour might still reflect the same values.

I was struck during the late Queen's Christmas messages that she always referred to her Christian faith, and to the vision for unity and peace that she found in the teaching and example of Jesus. She couldn't say too much as head of state in a multi-religious country, but it was clear that the good news of Jesus Christ underpinned her vision of what was important and what was possible. The late Queen, and the new King, along with faithful Christians in leadership everywhere, are united by a stubborn faith that reality is good and peaceful at heart, that might does not make right, that hatred and violence have met their match in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and that human prospects are different as a result. The sub-Christian alternatives of Trump and Putin are shown up as embarrassing and shabby by comparison with the witness of a true Christian sovereign, lived out over a long lifetime marked by faithfulness.

In our readings today we find a hope for humanity that doesn't rest on unaided human prospects as much as on God's mercy and help. When an angry God is diverted by a compassionate Moses, in our Exodus reading—by Moses presented essentially as God's conscience, standing up for God's beloved people, Israel—it's more likely that what we see in this text is the beginning of a new understanding of God, who isn't like an angry and capricious human sovereign but who represents something more remarkable and gracious than had ever been imagined. Instead of an angry God deflected by Moses, we're really dealing with a loving God *discovered by Israel* who goes on to lead and transform an angry, conflicted people—that is, a people much like us. And the loving God needs the loving leader to spread that love around, to give it legs, to make it visible and credible.

Jesus in the Gospel today shows that we're not locked up in our sins, we're not throttled by our past, we're not cursed by our weakness, or put last by God just because others have always put us last, or we ourselves. Today's Gospel image of rejoicing in heaven over a human change of heart is a powerful reminder of how God's dream for humanity comes to birth, one imaginative breakthrough at a time. We're not caught in the downward spiral that's everywhere celebrated today, because one by one we can get free of it, knowing that heaven rejoices with us as we do.

Our Epistle today to Timothy, a young church leader—an epistle traditionally ascribed to St Paul—is quite explicit about the triumph of hope over experience that the Gospel brings. The writer describes himself as “formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of

violence”, like so many we see in the news every day. Yet God makes saints from such as these, as Christ overcomes the fear that makes us look out for number one, and the Spirit leads us into a bigger conception of the human task through the Church. This is the miracle that Timothy is encouraged to pursue in his ministry, guiding Christians away from the potential shipwreck of their faith that comes from believing and dreaming too small.

Friends, the goodness of God, the forgiveness, the remarkable possibility that peace and justice might just constitute the heart of reality, are what we celebrate in this and every Eucharist. In a world where it’s increasingly a matter of everyone for themselves, the Church still summons us to take up this hope in word, sacrament, prayer, and in the visible fellowship that the world needs to see—the Holy Church of God as a sacramental sign of God’s personal investment in our world coming right. And if young people, perhaps your own children or grandchildren, tell you that they don’t need to be part of it, then tell them from me that it’s either this or it’s Instagram; it’s either lining up together with our lives devoted to God’s new creation, or its hijinks among the ruins of civilization, until we die as pointlessly as we’ve lived.

So, in taking leave of Queen Elizabeth we dare not take leave of the vision that sustained her—the stubborn hope for a better human future that her Christian faith inspired. She made a lifetime’s cause of it and so, please God, can we—especially the young, to spare them lives of frustrated unfulfillment. And as for the late Queen, may it be as the King prayed in his broadcast yesterday, in words from the Requiem mass, that flights of angels may guide her to her rest.

The Lord be with you ...