

**Sermon Preached by the Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich**

**HM The Queen's 90<sup>th</sup> Birthday Celebration Service**

**St Edmundsbury Cathedral**

**Saturday June 11 2016**

*Readings: Ephesians 1: 15-23; Mark 12: 13-17*

From our first reading from the Letter to the Ephesians, read by our Lord Lieutenant, Her Majesty's representative in Suffolk, let us take the first verse and make it our own, addressed to the Queen: "We have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints, and for this reason we do not cease to give thanks for you and remember you in our prayers."

It is an immense honour to preach on such a remarkable and wonderful occasion as this. It is an honour to try to say some of the words we would all wish to say in gratitude, respect and love for Her Majesty on the occasion of her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday.

I have never known another monarch, and that is the case for a great number of us in this cathedral today. Others of us may remember George VI, and some even George V and perhaps the brief reign of Edward VIII. But for all of us, Queen Elizabeth has been our Queen for most if not all our lives.

And extraordinarily, our Queen continues to exercise her role fully and actively, with great strength, wisdom and care, working we are told some 40 hours a week in her 91<sup>st</sup> year.

To be personal for a moment, the single most remarkable event in the overwhelming series of ceremonies and events that lead to my becoming your bishop a year ago, was paying homage to the Queen – a private ceremony in Buckingham Palace. It was a year ago, on June 2<sup>nd</sup>, the anniversary of her Coronation. She delayed the start of the ceremony because it coincided with the gun salute in Hyde Park for the occasion. She thought it might disturb us, she explained.

In what could have been a nerve wracking experience she put me at ease, moving the conversation quickly on from her anniversary to the occasion at hand. After the ceremony, the conversation led by the Queen ranged from the oddities of ecclesiastical attire to the state of road signs in Suffolk, and she was engaged with real interest and indeed humour. As I left she wished my children well in the move to Suffolk.

Some others of you will have your own accounts of meetings with the Queen, and still others, the experience mediated through the television or the press. And I wonder what each of us would be wanting to say, to give thanks for on this day?

Her presence through our lives has been an anchor, perhaps without us especially realising it, her presence has been an anchor, a constancy,

that has been a source of reassurance and fortitude, through the years. Somehow, by the role she holds, but also by the way in which she holds it, by the qualities she embodies, she has held for us characteristics and qualities we most value.

We think of some of those qualities – self-giving, service, care for others, courage in adversity, calmness in the face of danger, regard for all people. These are the gifts she lives out and seeks to live out in her life, and she has been very clear about the giver.

We rightly do not know her views on many topics, but we do know about her faith.

In her 2002 Christmas broadcast she said, “I know how much I rely on my faith to guide me through the good times and the bad...I draw strength from the message of hope in the Christian gospel.” In 2014 she said, “For me, the life of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, is an inspiration and an anchor in my life.” And in 2012, “God sent his only son ‘to serve, not to be served’. He restored love and service to the centre of our lives in the person of Jesus Christ.” This understanding and commitment we see in her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday address, “ I declare before you all that my whole life whether it be long or short shall be devoted to your service...God help me to make good my vow.”

She returns again and again to the theme of service, to Jesus’ commandment to “love God and love thy neighbour as yourself” and the encouragement for us to each do likewise. She described Jesus living “an outgoing, unselfish and sacrificial life” and that “he makes it clear

that genuine human happiness and satisfaction lie more in giving than receiving, more in serving than being served.”

Through her attention to others, to volunteers, for those in the serving professions whether health or the military or community organisations, she has influenced how we as a nation value those who give their lives, their time, their commitment, for others. And she has been clear that each contribution we make is of value. She said, over 40 years ago, “[Jesus] showed that what people are and what they do, does matter and does make all the difference...Kindness, sympathy, resolution and courteous behaviour are infectious....And the combined effect can be enormous...We may feel powerless alone but the joint efforts of individuals can defeat the evils of our time.”

Her faith in Jesus Christ, and seeking to follow his example, decade after decade, has helped shape our values and priorities. And we are here to give thanks for that, for all she has given and all that she is, but above all I give thanks that it is her Christian faith that has shaped her and her devotion to Jesus Christ that has shone through.

I opened with a verse from our first reading, and you may want to ask, what are you going to do with the second reading? Well, first you should know that the readings we are using were recommended by the Palace. The reading about rendering to the emperor what is the emperor’s and to God what is God’s was not my mischievous choice. But let’s think for a moment: when we take one of our coins, whose image is it but, of course, the Queen’s. And whose inscription – the

Queen's, but there is more to it. The inscription – have a look – reads Elizabeth II D.G. Reg F.D – Deo Gratia Regina Fidei Defensor – By the Grace of God Queen, Defender of the Faith. The words are historic, but for the Queen completely contemporary. There is no distinction between rendering to Caesar or rendering to God – her life is given to God in God's service.

We are celebrating and giving thanks today for the answer we have been given so far to the prayer we pray every time we sing the National Anthem – and we will continue to pray with heart and voice – God save our gracious Queen, long live our noble Queen. Thanks be to God.

+Martin Seeley  
11 June 2016