

Special service to celebrate the Queen's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday – 21 April 2016

1 Kings 1.32-40 Mark 12.13-17

King David said, "Summon to me the Priest Zadok the prophet Nathan and Benaiah son of Jehoida." When they came before the king, the king said to them, "Take with you the servants of your lord, and have my son Solomon ride on my own mule, and bring him down to Gihon. There let the priest Zadok and the prophet Nathan anoint him king over Israel; then blow the trumpet, and say, "Long live King Solomon!" You shall go up following him. Let him enter and sit on my throne; he shall be king in my place; for I have appointed him to be ruler over Israel and over Judah." Benaiah son of Jhoida answered the king, "Amen! May the Lord, the God of my lord the king, so ordain. As the Lord has been with the lord the king, so may he be with Solomon, and make his throne greater than the throne of my lord King David." So the priest Zadok and the prophet Nathan, and Benaiah son of Jehoida and the Cherethites and the Pelethites, went down and had Solomon ride on King David's mule, and led him to Gihon. There the priest Zadok took the horn of oil from the tent and anointed Solomon. Then all the people went up following him, playing on pipes and rejoicing with great joy, so that the earth quaked at their noise.

Then they sent to him some Phrarisees and some Heroidans to trap him in what he said. And they came and said to him, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not? Should we pay them or should we not? But knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them," Whay are you putting me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me see it." And they brought one. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Jesus said to them, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." And they were utterly amazed at him.

At the risk of seeming to trivialize this important and dignified occasion, I want to begin my sermon by reflecting with you on something I confess I know very little about: knitting. Let me explain. Not long ago there was a TV documentary about the place of knitting in this country through the centuries. Some of you will know, and a few of you may even remember, that during the war knitting was an important way in which women and men at home were able to contribute to the war effort. They knitted socks and jumpers and sent them out by the thousand to support the war effort. As part of the make do and mend campaign, old clothes were recycled – the wool unraveled and washed and re-used. It was an activity shared by all social classes, including the royal family. And there is footage of Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother and her daughters playing their part: knitting alongside people across the spectrum of society in their shared commitment to the war effort.

As the woman who was to be anointed queen knitted her way through the war, I wonder if she yet had any comprehension of how this apparently small act would inspire and unite others. It is one of the strange things about being in a position of leadership, of having a representative role, that things that are apparently trivial – that we might not even notice we're doing – take on huge significance in the eyes of others. Many priests speak of feeling hugely exposed when they go shopping, by people noticing what is in their shopping trolleys or baskets, and seeming to draw elaborate conclusions about their values and lifestyle based on a tin of baked beans and a microwave meal.

The detail comes to be important because it is in the detail that life is lived. The role of priests and bishops, and all the more so the role of royalty, is to live in such a way as gives dignity and blessing and shape and purpose to the ordinary lives of all of us. If that's true in times of stability it is all the more true in times of hurt or instability. Recently, one of the royal princes spoke publicly of the grief he experienced when his mother Princess Diana died. His grief was that of a boy who had tragically lost his mother, but by virtue of being royalty it was also elevated. It became archetypal of the grief we all experience in our lives. Most of us never met Diana yet many of us cried with raw emotion on her death. It was as if it gave all our griefs focus, gave permission for the emotion to be released, gave the nation an opportunity to affirm its humanity.

So today we gather to celebrate the Queen's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. And you might say, so what? Many people reach the age of 90 these days; it's becoming less and less unusual. Indeed yesterday in Yarmouth I met a man who was 100 last week and this Island has more than its share of the wisdom, experience and vitality of older people. So why should we celebrate? In my view, we celebrate not particularly because one woman has reached the age of 90. We celebrate because we have seen this woman, our queen, live with us through the hurts and joys of most of the last century. She has stood with us through the devastation of the second world war, been a figure of stability in the social change that followed, suffered and grieved through family tragedies and disappointments that so many of us can identify with. She has given shape and dignity and a reassuring sense of continuity through all of this. And now she faces old age, as so many of us do, knowing that the next generation's values may be very different to our own. And even in that, we honour her, because we trust that what she under God can handle, we may handle too.

So today, highly unusually in a society that places such a great emphasis on youth and fresh energy, we gather to give thanks for the life of an elderly woman. We express our respect and gratitude that, again highly unusually in our society, the promise made on her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday has been kept for nearly seven decades, that her whole life, whether it be long or short, shall be devoted to our service. We pray in thanksgiving for the continuing health and well-being of a woman who has journeyed with us, blessed us, loved us through years that have brought the full range of emotions and circumstances. In our

Gospel reading we hear Jesus challenging his disciples, saying, "Give to the emperor what is the emperor's and to God what is God's." Today we give thanks to God for the life that he has given the Queen and her peoples. And by way of this celebration we extend our thanks to the queen for her dedicated ministry, lived out, always, in the detail of our shared daily lives.