

Sermon preached by the Bishop of Portsmouth on the Diamond Jubilee of Her Majesty the Queen

Portsmouth Cathedral, Sunday 3 June 2012

This gathering and service honours Her Majesty the Queen on the 60th Anniversary of her accession to the throne. Echoing the words of the national anthem I have referred to her as The Queen, but, although it is less proper, I believe I speak for us all when I prefer to call her Our Queen. This occasion and the events of the year (highlighted over this weekend) express both our gratitude and also our affection. It is remarkable to note that in a society which is so restrained about so much, so cautious about institutions and authority, we hold our Queen in the deepest honour and with fond respect, and we celebrate with joy. Part of that may be reckoned to her outstanding service and unfailing devotion to duty over so long a period, but longevity does not by itself ensure respect. So alongside our thanksgiving for the sheer quantity of the Queen's duties and service to our nation and commonwealth – for she is not only our Queen - we add another distinction. We may measure her reign by the number of audiences granted, visits made, honours bestowed, hands shaken, or boxes of government papers considered – nearly 22,000 of those by my reckoning with only two days off a year. Statistics cannot measure what we want to say today.

The second reading we heard, from St. Matthew's gospel, was read at the Queen's Coronation, which was a Eucharist. It is a familiar passage but possibly the most misunderstood and misinterpreted of all Jesus' teaching. Responding to a question about authority and government – “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” – Jesus exhorts his hearers, in the traditional words, “render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things which are God's.”

As if life could be separated into bits; this part for the emperor, another for ourselves, that part for God. Life is just not like that, neat and boxed, nor are our obligations and privileges that simple. Apparently straightforward answers rarely cope with the complexities of real people and actual events.

It is not, as some claim, that the Gospel read this morning and at the Queen's Coronation is an example of Jesus giving a vacuous diplomatic response to a difficult question. He was not a smart operator with a clever way with words. He offers instead a substantial answer to a challenging and important question. The Pharisees were plotting to trap Jesus, so they send their younger colleagues and protégées – the Herodians – with a tough question. In reply Jesus asks to be shown a coin, drawing attention to Caesar's image on it “Give to the emperor what is his,” he says, “and to God what is God's.” The image on the coin is that of Caesar, so it is his. It is human beings who bear the image of God, for we are made in his image and likeness. Give then

to God, what is God's; and what bears God's image is us. The coin shows visibly to whom it belongs. We humans are to show visibly to whom we belong.

Today we honour Her Majesty who, over 60 years and more, has visibly shown us where her commitment and loyalty are. Visibly she belongs to God and her service is an expression of that. It is not that she has been a Christian in private, with faith in the God who made her kept in a compartment, and a monarch separately. Her life and reign have been a whole – not faith in one box, the job and the firm in another. That has added a depth and quality that may not be as easily measured as the length of her reign and the quantity of her engagements, but is surely what we singularly celebrate today.

Much has been written and spoken over these past days in praise of the Queen. We sense from her concern for honesty and brevity that she might not entirely welcome hyperbole and a paean of praise. So let me try to be restrained like her and mention simply the duty, dedication and dignity she has shown, and suggest we note the example. In a society which often measures people by their ambition she has accepted her duty. Where many of us find it challenging to stick at a task or in a relationship she has shown dedication. When restraint is not a quality much regarded she has shown dignity.

Today we celebrate Our Queen with thanksgiving that she has long reigned over us, but also with deep gratitude and affection for the example she has given of living true to the One whose image we all bear. She has given us service and leadership of stature, integrity, and quality. The second verse of the national anthem includes a prayer which God has richly answered for us over 60 years. 'Thy choicest gifts in store, on her be pleased to pour.' She has given us cause 'to sing with heart and voice, God save the Queen.'

+Christopher