

# **Celebration of the Queen's Official Birthday**

## **Southwell Minster, Sunday 8 June 2019**

Our readings today are those that were read at the Queen's Coronation in 1953.

It is a strange thing to say, but the central theme of that service was not a throne or a monarch, the overriding theme of the service is the responsibility of all who are called by God to lead and serve – their duties to the ruling authorities and their duties before God.

Jesus summed it up in a dispute instigated by the Pharisees, the religious purists of his day. As they made another attempt to trap Jesus in the hope of having some ground to see him arrested.

In this incident recorded in Matthew's Gospel, their plan is to pitch ardent faith against obligations to Rome. The subject is payment of taxes to Caesar, on which the Jews were conflicted between their commitment to the faith of Israel and the requirement to contribute to the glory of Rome.

Jesus will not be tricked into creating a false dichotomy. And so having drawn attention to the inscription on the actual coin used to pay taxes, he simply declares:

*'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's.'*

Matthew adds, *'When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.'*

One of the remarkable and gracious characteristics of the Queen's reign is that she has not sought adulation or seemed to care that much about her personal reputation, perhaps sometimes to the frustration of senior courtiers and communicators.

For the Queen, service and duty is everything, but that sense of duty is not through gritted teeth, it is sustained through the inspiration she draws from her faith in God. Throughout her 67 years on the throne, faith has remained as central to her life as it was in her coronation.

In one Christmas broadcast she said: *'I know just how much I rely on my faith to guide me through the good times and the bad. Each day is a new beginning.'*

*I know that the only way to live my life is to try to do what is right, to take the long view, to give of my best in all that the day brings, and to put my trust in God!' (2002)*

Her example to us is not simply that of steadfast and humble service, but the essential integration of duty to nation with responsibility before God.

The love of nation and nationhood without some far wider spiritual vision for the flourishing of the whole earth, leads only to a narrow view of society that is easily defensive and inward looking. It also becomes devoid of creativity and courage, as the borders designed to mark the safe crossing point into a place where people can find freedom – for citizen and foreigner alike – are replaced by high walls of fear that stifle innovation and true hospitality.

Over the centuries these are the hallmarks of our national identity at its best. Which is why many of us sincerely believe that when faith flourishes, a whole society is blessed.

The rich history of our county and city bears this out.

I recently came across the intriguing account of a daily prayer meeting hosted in the 1750s by a Mr Matthew Bagshaw, who lived in the notorious slum district of Nottingham, known as Narrow Marsh. This was near the start of the 18<sup>th</sup> century revival, and Bagshaw had come to faith through the preaching of John Wesley on an earlier visit to the city.

His house was at the bottom of Long Stairs below High Pavement, roughly opposite the present BBC Nottingham building. A diarist at the time put it like this: *“The place was not very commodious, but Matthew was an ardent Methodist, and therefore possessed of an inventive genius, he resolved to counteract the defect as much as possible.*

*He could not enlarge his premises but he managed by an ingenious contrivance, to double the amount of available hearing space. He broke through the chamber floor, and made a large opening into the room below (so several hundred people could crowd in to join the prayer meeting). It was from this place that Matthew had the honour of being committed to the House of Correction by the Mayor of Nottingham.*

*The charge against him was that he encouraged a gospel prayer meeting without the consent of the authorities” – that included especially the Church of England, which was spiritually and morally asleep during most of that period. The diarist continued:*

*“Many of the persons who were in the habit of attending the meetings went voluntarily to prison with him. As a consequence Nottingham Goal itself was soon turned into a gospel meeting and singing and praying went on merrily. This the Keeper of the Gaol could not bear, and he complained to the Mayor about it.*

*Orders were given for their discharge, and returning triumphantly to Narrow Marsh they went on holding their meetings for prayer in Matthew’s house.”*

Within a year a rudimentary chapel was built nearby in Hockley, to host 500. In the two decades that followed, a great number of people professed a new faith commitment, many new churches were established and the whole city was blessed – crime was reduced and commerce flourished. By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century it would need to happen again.

And once more Methodism in its many forms became an essential catalyst to many of the great social reforming movements of the later 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

As we move forwards in a time of uncertainty in our national life, I pray we can rediscover what the Queen herself has exemplified, of the importance of personal faith and public-civic service: For Christians, the pinnacle of our faith is the reconciling work of Christ, which is surely needed now more than ever.

So I close with some more words of the Queen:  
*'For me, the life of Jesus Christ...is an inspiration and an anchor in my life. A role-model of reconciliation and forgiveness, he stretched out his hands in love, acceptance and healing. Christ's example has taught me to respect and value all people of whatever faith or none.'* (2014) *'Without the forgiveness that he brings divisions between families, communities and nations remain unbridgeable.'*

What we do here today expresses our commitment to a more hopeful vision for the future, where duty to nation and responsibility before God are the foundations for a new era of mutual flourishing.