

“Following The King Who Serves”

It is less than two weeks since Buckingham Palace announced the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, peacefully at her summer home of Balmoral in Scotland. In the days since then we have had much time to reflect upon her reign, the longest of any British monarch. And there has been one repeated observation, heard time and time again. It has been made from all across the Spectrum of Australian life, from the Australian Monarchist League to even the Australian Republican Movement. Poles apart, and yet their voices united in observing that the late Queen’s life was characterised by service. Speaking to the Commonwealth on her 21st Birthday, she declared that she would be “devoted to your service”. And there is not one person who would argue that she did not more than keep that promise over three quarters of a century that followed.

For this, of course, we are extremely thankful to God. We have many joining us here this morning who have also set their energies to public service in so many different forms. Perhaps that gives us a unique appreciation of just how profound the commitment of Her Majesty was. There will come a time when we will set aside our chains of office, our batons, our swords; we’ll take off our caps, lanyards or preaching scarves for the last time as our commission comes to an end.

But Elizabeth, we might say, wore her crown of service till the very end. To the very end, for it adorned her coffin. A symbol of royalty that speaks of greatness, and yet her greatness, her glory, was that she devoted her life to and for those that she had been sent to rule over.

Her Majesty's devoted service was no simple adherence to duty. We British have, from time to time, perhaps developed a reputation for the stiff upper lip. Must not cause a fuss. Know your place. Don't complain. Keep calm and carry on. But it was more than this that motivated our Queen. Yes, she knew her duty. But we all know how easy it is to merely carry out our duty. It was so much more for her. We know this with confidence for she repeatedly told us. Christmas 2014, "For me, the life of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, whose birth we celebrate today, is an inspiration and an anchor in my life." Only last December she referred to Jesus' pattern of life as "the bedrock of my faith". Ten years ago, quoting from Luke's gospel, she called us all to "remember that God sent his only son 'to serve, not to be served'".

Simply put, the Queen had a King that she followed and sought to model her life on. And so she dedicated herself to service. Just as Jesus had also done.

And what an act of service that was. The Apostle Paul, in our first reading from the letter to the Philippians, explains exactly what Jesus' kingly service looked like. This famous ancient song, the *carmen christi*, the "song of Christ", speaks to the extreme depths of Jesus' service.

Though in the form of God, writes the Apostle, Jesus did not seek to hold on to, to *grasp*, that status. But emptied himself. The world, sadly, is all too full of those in authority who leverage their power to their own benefit. We grasp and climb upwards, claiming what is ours. But Jesus did the exact opposite. God himself. If anyone ever had the right to say "don't you know who I am?!" it was Jesus. And yet he laid that aside in service. And humbled himself, the Apostle tells us. Humbled himself. The ruler of all that is, set aside his orb and sceptre and became obedient to the shame and disgrace of death on a cross.

And he did that for us. He did that for us because our problem is that we want to be great. The Scriptures tell us that there is really only one great one. God himself. Yet the human impulse is to seek to unseat God from his throne. To want to have nobody ruling over us except ourselves. We are in effect, the Bible tells us, rebels against his divine majesty and kings have a tendency to put down rebels, to deal with insurrection.

But not this King. Jesus came to serve those who refuse to serve him. As he dies upon the cross he dies the traitor's death. Punished on behalf of those who should be punished; a willing scapegoat in their place. Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. Like you and I. And he gave up the glory and status of his throne in heaven for this. For us.

And it is the sacrificial death, the willing service of Jesus, that actually defines his greatness. Therefore, continues the Apostle. Therefore, because Jesus gave everything up for our sake, Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed upon him the name that is above every name.

We look in the wrong place for greatness. We look in the opposite direction to where we should actually turn our eyes. We look to wealth and the display of power. We follow influencers to learn what to wear and what to buy. Over the next two weekends hundreds of thousands of us will sing the praises of sports teams in their own arenas of glory.

Yet here is true greatness. Here is the one who steps down from the heights of heaven's throne and walks towards his death. The greatest act of service the world will ever see; the king who dies for his people.

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed upon him the name that is above every name. So that

at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the Glory of God the Father.

A day is coming, the Scriptures regularly tell us, when King Jesus will return and every knee will bow. That last day will be a day of great clarity. And it lends a quiet yet growing tone of urgency to everything. For if every knee will bow then it will be the case that only some will do so willingly. All will bow, but perhaps we might say that some will be forced to their knees. There is a sense of that, a foretaste if you like, in our second reading. It seems, at first sight, a strange part of the Bible for us to turn to at a time like this but we will actually see a moment of profound insight and challenge. The scene is the famous Garden of Gethsemane on the night of Jesus' arrest. Judas, the most notorious of all traitors who deny King Jesus, arrives with soldiers from the Temple. A Jewish army in a coup d'état against their true sovereign. Any sensible man might run away, but Jesus steps forward. "Who do you seek?" He asks. "Jesus of Nazareth" comes the reply.

"I am he". Actually Jesus says even less. Just two words. "I am" But they are profound words. "I am" was the name that the people of Israel used for God. The name that God himself declared centuries before on the mountain to Moses. "I am". And when Jesus

says this, John reports, “they drew back and fell to the ground.”

It is cameo moment, a brief instant when everything stops and we glimpse the truth. Almost as if the curtain is pulled back so we can see what is *really* happening. Jesus, the God-man, chooses not to grasp on to glory but steps forward to offer himself to die. His divine kingship announced both in the simple statement “I am” and in his giving himself up. And so the soldiers fall to the ground in the motions of worship. A brief shadow of that final day when every one of us will do the same.

But we need not wait for that last day. Queen Elizabeth did not. By her own confession, our sovereign lived gladly under the rule of the eternal king. And so Queen Elizabeth, as she put it, anchored herself to the one who came not to be served, but to serve. Bending her knee to him, she modelled her life on his. And this, as we have reminded ourselves over the past few weeks, was her true Glory. A beauty beyond that of the most dazzling diadem, an exaltation greater than any honour we can bestow on each other. For she sought glory in the same place that Jesus found it - in the willing service of others. Which is, of course, why the Apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians, pointing them to Jesus, telling them and us “Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” And then as *the* example of this service of others he

showed us Jesus. The King of all and yet the one who served his people by dying for them.

As we give thanks to God for her, here is every reason to follow in the pattern of our Queen. For she followed in the pattern of her King. Our King. One day every knee will bow before him and there is no reason not to begin now. To bow the knee in great thanks for *his* service and then to also follow in his pattern, just as Elizabeth did.

Will you pray with me?

Phil. 2:1 So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, 2 complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. 5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus,

Father, as we gather to give thanks for the life of Queen Elizabeth, we ask that you give us this mind amongst ourselves, just as you gave it to her. Help us to see what she saw; Jesus Christ who gave everything in service of us. And as we see him, help us to serve as she served. Keep us constant in this,

as you kept her. And bring us, with her, with great gladness to that wonderful day when every knee shall bow and Jesus our saviour is seen to be the King he truly is.

In Jesus name we pray.

Amen.