

## Easter 5A SFX 2023

Speaking of the Coronation, the historian Simon Schama said yesterday that “to be British is to be part of a community of memories.” Moments of national celebration bring to the fore how these memories have been forged over many generations. It goes back to the Benedictine monk St Dunstan in the 10<sup>th</sup> Century.

Some memories are painful. Last week we celebrated the Feast of the English Martyrs, our own dear John Kemble amongst them. Priests and lay people, rich and poor among them shed their blood to defend their faith and Catholics suffered at the hands of many monarchs. And yet the Coronation, I would say, went a long way in the healing of those memories. This is a very different Britain than that of the Queen’s 70 years ago.

There was healing of memories in the Catholic elements of the coronation ceremony. Thinking of our English and Welsh Martyrs, the Gloria was a setting by William Byrd, written for recusant Catholics in the sixteenth century who refused to be part of the newly established Church of England.

There may be here a mixture of enthusiasm and disinterest in the coronation and the monarchy, some regarding it as an outdated institution, others appreciating the stability, history and tradition it embodies. It was a curious mix of the old and the new, tradition and innovation, golden spurs and a Gospel choir, Frederick Handel and Andrew Lloyd Webber, the ‘Gold Stick in Waiting’ and Ant and Dec. In it the King expressed a clear aspiration of the sort of country we could be.

In terms of religion, the King solemnly affirmed the Protestant Reformed Religion. And yet his declaration was made in the context of a sumptuous Catholic ceremony, such as the anointing with oil and the wearing of priestly vestments. The Reformation hardly touched this liturgy. And his declaration to uphold the Protestant religion was also put into context by his promise, in his profession of the Gospel, “to foster an environment in which people of all faiths and beliefs may live freely.”

And in that lovely prayer that the King prayed following his solemn oaths, he asked to be a blessing to those of all faiths and convictions: “God of compassion and mercy whose Son was sent not to be served but to serve, give grace that I may find in thy service perfect freedom and in that freedom knowledge of thy truth. Grant that I may be a blessing to all thy children, of every faith and conviction, that together we may discover the ways of gentleness and be led into the paths of peace” he prayed.

As a devout Anglican King Charles would subscribe to those words of Jesus today: “I am the way, the truth and the life.” And yet those other words of the Gospel also express where his heart is. “There are many rooms in my Father’s house.” Well, he would know about that – Buckingham Palace has 775 rooms. The Coronation offered a vision of a country where there is room for everyone. While he made a commitment to follow Jesus in his own protestant tradition, at the same time his profession of the Gospel naturally led him to promise to serve those of all creeds, traditions and cultures.

Our following of Christ, 'the way, the truth and the life' is not to make us narrow minded or bigoted. Because a true follower of Jesus has this enlarged heart that embraces others.

Apart from the Eucharist, the most sacred moment of the Coronation was the anointing with holy oil accompanied by a prayer for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit brings. But it was almost as if the Coronation was not about Charles but about the country could be. St Peter expresses it well today that we be a holy people, a consecrated nation, a people set apart to sing the praises of God. Can our anointing, as we have at Baptism and Confirmation, help us to become a people with a sense of belonging, or mutual respect and dedicated service.

The Coronation can express something for all of us not as a peculiar British event but because it was Christian liturgy with deep roots in the Catholic tradition. As monarchies have faded away in Europe I believe that Britain is the only country in the world apart from the Vatican City State that installs its head of state with a religious ceremony.

The Coronation makes a unique statement that faith is not to be something side-lined but it is the power in which all our actions are animated. The King's promise to serve might seem unremarkable, but ancient emperors and kings did not conceive of their rule in terms of service. Christian monarchs did. The King expressed it clearly at the start of the service: "I come not to be served but to serve." That centrality of service is behind the appointment of deacons in our first reading, so that no one be neglected.

The King entered Westminster Abbey behind a cross containing a relic of the True Cross of Christ given to King Charles by Pope Francis. The orb that the King later held in his hands was a symbol of the earth with the Cross standing over it. The world stands under the authority of God, and a Christian monarch is called to embody the values of Christ's Kingdom.

And so are we by our baptism and our anointing. As I said I think the Coronation is less about the King but about us as a people. If yesterday's celebration can help bring us together as a country it will have done some good. If it reminds us and helps us embody those Christian values espoused in its liturgy it will have done something greater. If in God's Kingdom there are many mansions and a place for all, perhaps the inspiration of that multi-layered celebration can help us reflect it here in our country and our communities, and then we will be closer to becoming that "consecrated nation, that holy people, set apart to sing the praises of God."