

St Mary Abbots, 18.9.22, Vigil for the Queen

Isaiah 61:1-3, John 6:35-40

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On Saturday morning I went with a member of our congregation to pay our respects at the lying-in-state of The Queen. I had perhaps built up the emotional response I was expecting to have for it ever to be fulfilled, along with worrying that I was over lingering and so would be moved on, rather than being able fully to savour the moment. And so we left, looking back at that small coffin, surrounded by comparatively giant guardsmen and surmounted by what appeared from a distance to be a rather delicate crown. However glittering the crown, it is after all limited to the circumference of an ordinary human head, and is set within the vastness of that great and ancient hall.

Once we were outside, I did, after all, feel a sudden rush of emotion. As I pushed the wheelchair down a dark Victoria Street, looking for somewhere which was open early for breakfast, the two of us began speaking. As that initial rush subsided it was replaced with a sense of great satisfaction and happiness at being there with her and with the stream of people walking slowly away down the streets emptied of traffic.

As we notice our emotional response to The Queen's death many of us have, I think, been wondering why we feel the way we do about a woman most of us have never met or, if we have, only fleetingly and formally; and whom we knew relatively little about. We know her dates, the countries to which she travelled, the trials of her family and the outfits and jewels which she wore.

We even now feel as though we know her sense of humour from the vignettes which are being shared by those who knew her better than us. But, if we are honest, most of those stories are rather slight – they are only told and re-told because they are all we have to go on. We fill in the gaps, in our dreams as many of us will own up to, perhaps imagining her as the ideal grandmother.

But as we try to work out what it is we so admired in her, we are left with two things: her sense of duty; and her steadfastness.

I don't think we imagine her to have been academically brilliant, or particularly creative. We all know that she could fix a Land Rover, at least from Helen Mirren's portrayal; and that her perspective gave her a wisdom invaluable to her 15 Prime Ministers (or at least the 14 with whom she had regular audiences).

But her achievement did not come down to any one particular thing she **did**, other than her continuing to **be** there, and be there so **faithfully**.

In other words, despite seeming so extraordinary in her position and her permanence, and in those things being unlike any other person in the world, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that there was beneath those things something deeply *ordinary* about her. And yet – and before I am lynched for such heresy - there was still an indefinable quality that shone through. That was particularly evident in that smile which over the last twenty years or so we have taken as her hallmark. In her later years she radiated simple joy at being herself, at meeting others and finding out who they were (and remembering!), and at doing that duty which she had always done so unquestioningly.

If we are perplexed by this seeming enigma, we as Christians should not be. For the ordinary being transfigured into the extraordinary is the stuff of our faith.

If her service transformed her, showed us a woman who could take all our projections and yet retain her still, unpretentious, yet somehow radiant presence. This is partly the mystique of monarchy as it has always worked - but in The Queen's case I do not think it an overstatement to say that on a deeper level it also speaks of something we call holiness.

And one reason I think The Queen can seem such an enigma is because her service – her living for her representative role and for all of us whom she represented, guided by the example of Jesus, as she increasingly explicitly stated – that service steadily shaped and changed her. The inner joy and quiet confidence of that service, is what I think we saw shine out in that smile of her last years.

Such holiness is not only for those whose lives seem unattainable to us, separate and exalted. Despite the glory of her robes and regalia, Her Late Majesty showed us most of all how service can, in living it out, make us the person God created us to be, with all of the deep satisfaction that that brings.

That is not a life without hardship, or a life that has to be dazzling in worldly terms, but it is the life of the saints, which life is one we are all called to.

The great paradox of Queen Elizabeth's quiet greatness, which we can only perhaps see as so momentous now that it stands in perspective, is that in living out the extraordinary charge which she was given, she showed all of us how the ordinary can be transfigured by the faith which she lived by and by the faithfulness which it inspired in her. Amen