

Queen Elizabeth, Servant of God

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In one of the inevitable rounds of media interviews in the days following Queen Elizabeth's death last week, one journalist asked a key question. "The Queen was *anointed* at the coronation, wasn't she? Did this make a difference to how she saw her role?"

The image of the anointed monarch is one that pervades Scripture, giving us the title—"Christ"—by which we acknowledge our Savior. For the literary and historically-minded, it is an image that also haunts Shakespeare's dramas and the starkest debates and conflicts of British political history. It has been used to mystify and exalt monarchy in ways that most of us would now find uncomfortable at best.

But if we step back a little from the history and think a moment longer about the theology of anointing, we might understand better what the journalist's question was driving at. Anointing—in baptism or ordination—signifies that someone is being given a new place in the community of God's people. It is not a job description, nor is it a blank check for power and privilege. It creates a relationship, with God and with the community of faith, and promises grace to make that relationship live and thrive.

The coronation service has this much in common with ordination: It singles out someone to occupy a position whose point is to manifest something about the whole community's life—and to do so first by just being there, holding the ideals and aspirations of the community (and also carrying its projections). It is the rationale of the theological tradition that tells us that priesthood is not about an individual's successful or meritorious performance but about fidelity to a position, for the sake of the community's peace and well-being. It does not exempt priests from censure and judgement where needed, nor does it confer on them an unchallengeable right to win every argument. That is not the point. They are there so that we can gather around something other than our preferences and anxieties and prejudices; around a gift of "kinship" in which we can stand together before God.

And this is what the royal anointing means at its most important level—a gift of the Holy Spirit to hold a fragile human person in faithfulness to this place where community can gather for restoration and renewal. There is no doubt at all that this was

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exactly what Queen Elizabeth believed about her role. It was a vocation for which she had been blessed and graced, and the anointing was at the heart of it. Sometimes at Windsor Castle she would show visitors her small book of daily devotions from the weeks leading up to the coronation itself—prayers and meditations that had been written for her by the then archbishop of Canterbury. It was obvious that these meditations had sunk in deeply, and that she still shaped her life according to what was laid out there.

People wondered why she did not abdicate as she became a little more frail (though her physical health remained extraordinarily robust until the very last months). But she never saw her role as something she could lay down. In this, she echoed Pope John Paul II, disregarding the pressure of advancing age and vulnerability because the position was not one in which what mattered was success, performance, public glamor. But what she did do was plan very carefully for the transition to her successor, sharing out responsibilities, shifting expectations, gently preparing the nation as much as she could for her departure.

It was typical of her striking lack of egotism. When I held the role of archbishop of Canterbury, I had to meet a large number of political leaders across the world; I can truthfully say that not one impressed me in the same way the queen did. Not one had the same degree of attentiveness, un pompous clarity of mind and response, lack of prickly or defensive reactions. She could be abrupt, she could be caustic; she had a powerful sense of the absurd and a real impatience with clichés and flannel. Yet her profound kindness was always in evidence, and her dry and deflating humor was a great gift in keeping matters in perspective.

I watched with admiration as she—year by year—became just that bit more explicit in her public addresses (especially at Christmas) about her Christian faith; never obtrusively or aggressively, but in a way that made it absolutely clear that she knew whence she derived her vision and her strength. At the same time, her engagement with other faiths was surprisingly strong and positive, and I would hear imams, rabbis, and swamis alike sing praises for her empathy and shrewdness. Like her husband, she would listen attentively to sermons and be ready to discuss and challenge afterward. It was a very particular privilege to give her Holy Communion on the occasions when she visited the Church of England's General Synod.

A servant of God, without doubt; a generous, courageous, patient, and prayerful person. And not least, someone whose living-out of her role kept alive the question of how increasingly secular societies find any kind of durable unity in the absence of the great common symbols of grace, in the absence of that “canopy” that offers us an identity larger than our own tribe and interest group and holds us in a kinship we haven't had to invent for ourselves.

SAINTS:

John Coleridge Patteson, Bishop of Melanesia. 20 September. Born in London in 1827, John Coleridge Patteson came under the influence of George Augustus Selwyn while John was still a scholar at Eton. Patteson went on to be ordained and, in 1855 at the age of twenty-eight, left Britain to begin his life's work among the Islanders of the South Pacific, founding the Melanesian Mission and becoming the first bishop of those Islands. His system of evangelisation was to train indigenous clergy and so to equip local people to share the gospel in a way that was within their own culture. This novel educative approach quickly bore fruit and Christianity spread rapidly. Also working in Melanesia were 'blackbirders', essentially European slave-traders, who carried off Islanders to work in British and other colonies in Australasia. When Patteson and his fellow-workers landed on the island of Nukapu, they were mistaken for such men. They were attacked and brutally put to death by the inhabitants. John Coleridge Patteson gave his life for the gospel on this day in the year 1871.

Theodore of Tarsus, Archbishop of Canterbury, 19 September. Theodore was born at Tarsus in Cilicia in about the year 602. He was an Asiatic Greek and had been educated in Athens before being appointed Archbishop of Canterbury by the pope. He was raised straight from being a sub-deacon to the archiepiscopal see but proved his worth by immediately undertaking a visitation of the whole of England soon after his arrival. He set about reforming the Church in England with the division of dioceses and summoned the Synod of Hertford on 24 September 673, probably the most important Church council in the land, as it issued canons dealing with the rights and obligations of both clergy and Religious: it restricted bishops to working in their own diocese and not intruding on the ministry of their prelate neighbours; it established precedence within the episcopacy; it ensured that monks remained stable to their monastery and obedient to their abbot; and many other matters were dealt with to effect the good order of the Church. The canons were based on those of the Council of Chalcedon. Theodore proved to be the first Archbishop of Canterbury to have the willing allegiance of all Anglo-Saxon England. He died on this day in the year 690 and was buried close to St Augustine at Canterbury.