

Leadership, continuity and resurrection

As the days have passed since our much-loved queen died, leadership, continuity and resurrection have come to the fore and grown out of all proportion. A death that initially provoked feelings of personal loss, sadness and sympathy has now brought us to a position of privileged onlookers to a far grander stage and witnesses of events that are of far more than historic interest, great though that is. Shock waves travelled through our little Scottish Episcopal Church as orders came down from the college of bishops that this was to be no normal Sunday: instead it was to be a homage to the late queen with special hymns and readings. To some extent we have done that and will continue to comply but it struck me that today's set readings were on message, speaking as they did of leadership, continuity and resurrection.

On leadership, our reading from Exodus (Ch32 v 7-14) found Moses leading worshippers of God on a journey that was to last 40 years. Our Queen had headed four Churches throughout the UK, worshipping the same God but for nearly twice as long, for 70 years. The similarity may seem to end there, because unlike us, the people Moses led were stateless and homeless. However, his charge was to lead his people through a wilderness to a brighter, settled future; Queen Elizabeth II's charge, after war had ended, was similar. Her style of leadership also appears to have differed. Moses is portrayed as speaking to God directly; not just speaking but trying to bend God's ear and change his mind.

Our queen would not have indulged in what might be called such 'Megaphone Spirituality' but neither might Moses, if truth be known. Furthermore, we can be pretty sure that the queen regularly interceded with God on behalf of us, her people. In our reading, Moses does his best to get his people toeing God's line by barking orders, as he often did, but we know very little about how he went about his business as leader, of the sort of example he set, day-to-day. We now know a great deal about the way QE II went about her daily business and it was exemplary. God is reported to have supported both leaders in tangible

but different ways: he sent manna rather than marmalade sandwiches to Moses!

Continuity of leadership is important because of our mortality: leaders come and go and there was never a leader quite like Moses. By the time Jesus comes on the scene, the Jewish people were in another bind and a different wilderness, because of successive failures of leadership. A different tack was required to the one inaugurated by Moses, one which was based on love and self-sacrifice rather than blinkered adoration of invisible divinity and one which needed universal not insular application. That is the message carried by Jesus' parable of the Lost Sheep (Luke 15 v1-7). Jesus' message was the more convincing for being lived as it was told. Jesus was in the process of laying down his life, not just for the Israelite flock but for all.

Queen Elizabeth's style of leadership contained some of those elements and virtues. In his statement about the queen on behalf of SEC, our Primus, Mark Strange said this:

"The Queen came to the throne at a moment of great hope. A time of rebirth following the difficulties of war. She dedicated herself to the service of this country and she has honoured that pledge, especially so when things were difficult. She never wavered from her service-----[and] was steadfast in her faith, in her prayers and worship. She spoke openly and often of her devotion to God, and to the Christian message of respect and the value of people, of all faiths and none.

Read that last half sentence again and note its closeness to the message of the parable of the lost sheep.

Continuity of leadership is resurrection in another guise. Paul's life was transformed by his encounter with and faith in the risen Lord. In Paul's subsequent life of self-sacrifice, Jesus' message took on fresh flesh. In today's epistle, the last half of 1 Tim 1, Paul passes on a baton of leadership to his protégé. 'Timothy, my son' he says 'I give you this instruction- fight the good fight, holding onto faith and a good conscience'. The accession of Charles, which we witnessed yesterday,

expressed continuity and resurrection. Acknowledging the restrictions of his new role as head of state and church, King Charles III handed on a baton of love and service, which he had received from his mother to his son, William, hoping that he would 'bring the marginalised to the centre-ground, where they can receive support'. This noble ambition is akin to going in search of that lost sheep and it is one we should all espouse. Continuity is the responsibility of citizens as much as of monarchs: resurrection is achieved every time we put flesh on the bones of our faith through acts of self-denial.

Our late queen bore her responsibility with grace and dignity. As Mark Strange put it at the end of his statement

"Today we will share memories and sadness. Her Majesty understood and believed in the promises of God. In her many statements over the years she spoke always of moving forward, serving the country that she loved, and giving thanks to God for the life she lived.

"May she rest in peace and rise in glory."

Neville