



# Bristol Cathedral

## A Sermon Preached at Sixtieth Anniversary of the Coronation By the Dean

In my newspaper, this morning, it was the recollection of a choirboy smuggling in milk because it would be such a long service; one of many memories that we have been enjoying in the last few weeks. The story in my family (and many others) is the purchase of a first television set. Churchill famously, was not keen on television and the Archbishop, said that this was “one of the great dangers in the world today”. The Korean War was being fought, it was less than ten years after the first atom bomb, and in the midst of the cold war, but Archbishop Fisher, with Anglican, narrow-eyed suspicion of things modern, thought television was the real problem. It wasn't, it was a triumph, a great day and a nation and later Commonwealth and world joined in. There were jokes of course: ‘Dimbleby ill, Coronation postponed’. Still the memories are wonderful.

It is not always the case at a coronation. There have been some spectacularly awkward moments. When Elizabeth the First came to the throne the Catholic bishops were in such a sulk about the new protestant monarch that they refused to play. It was the Bishop of Carlisle, of all people, who did the job. At the coronation of William the Conqueror, when the English gave assent in their own language the Norman soldiers thought a riot was brewing and actually set light to the Abbey. At the coronation of George III all went swimmingly until the beginning of the sermon, as the Archbishop climbed into the pulpit suddenly the congregation produced meat pies and bottles of wine and passed up chicken drumsticks to the gallery. The stories you most often hear though are of the coronation of George IV in July 1821. Not long after Waterloo, The Prince Regent wanted to prove who was top dog; it is still the most expensive British coronation ever. The king's costume was so elaborate that he needed nineteen handkerchiefs to wipe the royal brow. Outside, meanwhile, the doors were guarded against his Queen, Caroline of Brunswick. She tried every one before she admitted defeat.

Our memories are different; the reign of Her Majesty The Queen really did start auspiciously and, thanks to television, no one was locked out... except, of course, for one moment in that extraordinary day. After the great coronation oath, the Prayer Book Communion began: Epistle, Gradual, and so on. Then the Choir sang *Come Holy Ghost ours souls inspire* and the Archbishop began a prayer you will not find in any communion service.

*O Lord and heavenly Father,  
the exalter of the humble and the strength of thy chosen,  
who by anointing with Oil didst of old  
make and consecrate kings, priests, and prophets,  
to teach and govern thy people Israel:  
Bless and sanctify thy chosen servant ELIZABETH,  
who by our office and ministry  
is now to be anointed with this Oil,*

This was a moment no one was going to see. The rubrics for the service directed that,

*the Queen rising from her devotions, having been disrobed of her crimson robe by the Lord Great Chamberlain, assisted by the Mistress of the Robes, and being uncovered, shall... sit down in King Edward's Chair... Four Knights of the Garter shall hold over her a rich pall of silk,*

And shielded by the Garter Knights, and that canopy, the Queen was anointed by the Archbishop. He used a spoon that is the only piece of coronation regalia to survive the Commonwealth. This was the very

heart of the service, the symbolism here went deeper than all the drama with the lifted crown. Watch the film, and you will see the camera cut away so that this holy moment was made private, personal, pious.

*On the palms of both the hands,  
On the breast,  
On the crown of the head,*

...as kings, priests, and prophets were anointed:  
And as Solomon was anointed king...  
so be thou anointed, blessed, and consecrated Queen

Now, I am told, only the United Kingdom and (rather splendidly) Tonga retain this ritual. It has a history though. It has been associated with European monarchy for a thousand years and more, Charlemagne was anointed, Napoleon was anointed. But, of course, the roots go deeper still. Saul and David were anointed king over Israel. Christ our King and Saviour is *Christ* because the word in Greek means 'anointed one', actually 'covered in oil'. The act of anointing is a prayer and a sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit, it is empowerment, it is equipping for the task. When our Queen was anointed she was set apart, and she was dedicated. She has been set apart and dedicated ever since.

This much is fact. This much I know. This is what we commemorate and celebrate today sixty years after that day of sunshine and showers, pomp and pageantry. We give thanks, as we should, for our anointed Queen. What I want to add is, I suppose, a bit of speculation, mere opinion. Deans take themselves seriously, I like to think the Queen (who appointed me) is my line-manager, but the truth is that I do not know the woman who was set apart that day. Few of us can say we know the Queen, because she has resolutely made the crown and not herself the focus of our attention. In days when being famous has seemed so very important she has not made herself into a personality, three are other virtues she has demonstrated. Because I am a Dean I was lucky enough to go to a garden party at Buckingham Palace this week and I saw Her Majesty walk past. That was a real privilege, but what was more striking was watching the men and women who were introduced to her – three scout leaders in uniform, women in unfamiliar heels – bashful and a bit anxious, but utterly thrilled. It is easy to get all patriotic and say something grand and large about our national life and the English way of doing things, and I want to avoid that if I can. There is something we need to celebrate today. But it is a little bit elusive.

Years ago, in another place, I heard Archbishop Robert Runcie preach. It was Remembrance Sunday, Runcie knew about war, he was a tank commander in Normandy, decorated with the MC. He talked about the war memorial in Washington for the Vietnam War, an extraordinary polished wall – you see your own reflection as you stand at it reading the names. Then he described another memorial, I cannot remember where, this memorial was rougher, unpolished and in all the holes and cracks messages, prayers and notes had been left. He used those two images to ask us if we thought we were best served with public pomp or with little acts of kindness. For ten minutes he talked to undergraduates (this was a college chapel) about all the little virtues, duty, kindness, patience and they were hooked.

I want to suggest tonight that our anointed Queen has put at the centre of our national life, a personal commitment made that day in Westminster Abbey. It was a commitment to virtue, to duty and service; it was a commitment to relationship that she sustains sixty years on with scout leaders and smartly dressed strangers in her garden. We are not easily taken in; loyalty is pretty complicated now. We are not over-impressed by the shifting allegiances of politics, we are quick to note that commitment usually has a price that can be measured in expenses and bonuses. On Thursday though in the garden at the Palace, and now here, we have a chance to pause and acknowledge that there is still someone who is set apart and dedicated. And that makes all the difference. Just briefly, we are offered back the best of ourselves, a reminder that commitment can be sustained, a signal that promises can be kept. That is worth celebrating and today we pray that the same spirit that was poured out in oil in the Abbey will rest upon our Queen this night and always.