

“What Can an English Queen Teach an American Church?”

Hebrews 11:23-32, 12:1-2

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If you would have asked me a month ago if I, as an American Christian, could learn anything about my faith from a stuffy old English Queen, I would have thought, “Are you CRAZY? What’s some 96-year old lady who’s lived a privileged existence behind castle walls gonna teach me about God after living my entire life in the REAL world with forty years of ministry under my belt!” Despite being half-English (my English grandmother who came through Ellis Island back in the 1890’s helped raise both me and my brother), no one can ever accuse me of being a monarchist or even a royalty watcher for that matter. However, during the “long goodbye”—a week and a half of constant airplay surrounding Queen Elizabeth’s death and funeral—we all became privy to the profound grief felt by the royal family and her subjects and, in the process, learned more about this monarch—one of the world’s most private citizens—than we might have expected. It’s been estimated that over four billion persons saw some or most of it, making it the most watched television event in history. I have to say that after days of listening to experts on the royal family and reading articles about them, I’ve arrived at an appreciation for the Queen which I never had before.

Actually, I once did have an opportunity to see her and Prince Philip—when the two of them visited New York City in the summer of 1976 during her second visit to America. I was working for a savings bank in mid-town Manhattan in New York City at the same time that our nation was celebrating her Bicentennial. On Friday, July 9th, the bank manager came up to me and asked if I’d ever seen the Queen. “No” I said. “Why do you ask?” “Well if you want to take off an hour early, you might get a chance to see her when she arrives at Bloomingdale’s later on today”—Bloomingdale’s of course being the world-famous department store that was situated directly across the street from us. I jumped at the opportunity, not just to see royalty up close but to take advantage of getting out of work a little early.

At three o’clock, I finished my duties and hurried out of the building before the boss could change his mind. A small crowd had already gathered outside the bank in anticipation of the event. Television cameras were being set up by some of the local networks to capture what would serve as the lead story on the evening news. The police began cordoning off the area in front of the store, prohibiting persons from entering it. I stood around for about half an hour when in the distance I could hear the growing blare of sirens indicating that her arrival was imminent. Within moments, a retinue of police cars turned the corner with the Queen’s limousine right behind them. All traffic on Lexington Ave. had to be reversed due to the tradition that the Queen always exited from the right side of her car.

Once the procession came to a halt, Queen Elizabeth slowly emerged from her vehicle followed by Prince Phillip. Smiling, they faced the crowds and began waving to everyone—a scene she had performed thousands of times before. Almost spontaneously, there were shouts of “Queenie! Queenie!” with persons reaching out their arms as though somehow believing they could actually touch the royal couple. What happened next completely surprised me as my OWN arm began to slowly rise along with everyone ELSE’S. Then I TOO began excitedly shouting, “Queenie! Queenie! Over here! Over here!”, trying to draw the attention of both her

and her husband. Her head turned in our direction and for a moment, I thought she may have been looking directly AT ME, which of course she wasn't. Then they disappeared into the store to do some shopping.

When Elizabeth died, she was 96. It wasn't altogether surprising considering that her mother--the "Queen Mum"--was over a hundred when SHE passed away twenty years ago; longevity seemed to run in her family. She had the longest reign of any royal in British history--seventy years, having been coronated in June of 1953, a month before I was born. During those years, fifteen Prime Ministers served under her- from Winston Churchill right up to the latest, Liz Truss, who was presented to her at court only two days prior to her death. Upon the news of the Queen's passing, expressions of sorrow and sympathy were almost immediate; they came from leaders all over the world, including Vladimir Putin. She was SO beloved by her people that when her body lay in state in Westminster Hall, the line to view her coffin extended more than five miles and had to be closed off. It was reported that David Beckham, the famous soccer star, stood in line over thirteen hours in order to pay his respects.

Why I've found Elizabeth to be notable were several things: FIRST she reminded us of the IMPORTANCE OF TRADITION, and not as dead formalism or some empty ritual but a LIVING tradition- one which carries on the best the past can bestow upon both the present and the future; SECOND, she reminded us of the importance of duty and service toward others as her OWN commitment to this was UNPARALLELED; and THIRD, her life witnessed to a strong personal faith in Jesus Christ which inspired her to give of her very best to her people. Regarding her allegiance to tradition, we inhabit an age when people consider tradition to be a dead cow. Fewer and fewer people have any regard for the past and instead insist "let the dead bury the dead; it's time for us to live life now in the present." This is a major reason why history is being left off many liberal arts curriculums in our schools these days. Due to declining church memberships with much smaller budgets, pastors and their congregations have OTHER things on their minds than recounting the stories of glories past. However, we forsake history at great peril to our understanding of who we are as "the Church, the Body of Christ," and of our present roles as Christians in this world.

Of course, one of the ways we remember the past is to HONOR it through the many traditions we annually celebrate and the stories we've heard and continue to pass down to current and future generations. Heritage and tradition plays a primary role in the formation of our identity, our values, and our perceptions. It provides stability, something to steer our lives by; it keeps us from shifting with every wind of change, especially in this television age of ours where our attention spans are already short and shrinking all the time. For instance, it would be difficult to love our nation if we did not stop and recall the accounts of how this country came to be and the deep and terrible sacrifices made by those who went before us- from the arrival of the Pilgrims to the Revolutionary War, from the Civil War to the various military and social conflicts waged over the past century. It's virtually impossible to develop a sense of place, of being "at home" without some understanding of its history. As Christians, we practice a faith which has been shaped by tradition, one that has been formed between a memory and a hope. Hence, we are constantly forced to look back and remember who we are as the People of God and what it is that God has done for us for it is what anchors our faith, sustains our hope, and is the basis of our Christian mission and service. Our history provides us with a specific identity, and through it, we join hands with an ageless fellowship we can all feel proud of.

This is ESPECIALLY true of our connection to the Reformed Tradition. As Presbyterians, we have a long and distinguished history and tradition to remember. For the past 233 years, our denomination has left an indelible mark upon our civilization. Our U.S. Constitution was modeled after the Presbyterian form of government. Presbyterians have been at the forefront of education and improved healthcare through the establishment of numerous colleges and hospitals. We believe in a highly-educated clergy and share a profound commitment to God's Word. Through programs such as Church World Service and the Presbyterian Hunger Program supported by our mission dollars, disaster relief and human needs are attended to. People all over the world have been touched by the proclamation and work of Presbyterian missionaries. Presbyterians have often taken the lead in promoting social justice both home and abroad. We fought slavery and segregation, and helped lead in the struggle against Apartheid, against the spread of nuclear armaments, and in supporting the rights of women and minorities, and that includes gays and transgendered persons as well.

Yes, we have a story to tell! But, if we ever FORGET our story, if we no longer have any interest or concern in the past, we will soon forget who we are as the People of God; we will lose sight of our heritage as a diverse communion committed to education and democracy and missions and social justice. We can all-too easily surrender to apathy and uncaringness; forgetting our neighbors, loving only ourselves; allowing ignorance, injustice and disease to breed and the quality of life as we now know it to deteriorate. For this reason, we MUST remember, for by REMEMBERING we discover our identity, our values, our perceptions, and our intentions; by REMEMBERING, we find ourselves connected to the rest of God's people in the world; by REMEMBERING, we achieve some permanence, some stability in a rapidly changing world, a foundation to build our lives upon and something to pass on to our children.

In this morning's New Testament lesson, Moses is held up to the Early Church as a model of the faith. He is one of a number of outstanding heroes of Jewish history the writer has chosen whom he wants the people to remember. After speaking of Noah and Abraham and Moses, he mentions Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah; David and Samuel and the prophets. He speaks of their faith as the one common denominator which united them and made them one. Regardless of their differences, regardless of how they lived and how they died, they remained sons and daughters of the same God, heirs of the very same promise- all by virtue of their faith.

Of this company, we TOO are members; to this company we ALSO belong. To this, OUR entire life is oriented and from this tradition WE draw strength and inspiration. It tells us that we DON'T have to be a descendant of some prior English king or queen to be part of a royal lineage. This is because the scriptures themselves remind us that we are ALL part of a KINGLY race, a ROYAL priesthood, a CHOSEN people. God made us this and we shall remain so both now and forevermore. It is in this history, this tradition, we therefore stand.

Tradition teaches us that our Christian faith does not live in a vacuum- it came from somewhere; it has a history, and the better we understand it, the better we learn what it means to be a child of God and what our mission is. The Old Testament continuously recalls Israel's history, especially the Exodus- their deliverance from slavery in Egypt when Moses led them across the Sea of Reeds. Israel's history is the story of God's continuous miracles for his People, of God's never-ending love and mercy despite her constant faithlessness and disobedience. Through such stories, Israel remembered God's great deeds and they became the source of their knowledge of God, of themselves, of the creation, of the world, and above all, God's long-

suffering relation to his people. They had confidence in God and never ceased to hope, despite periods of great tribulation, because God had proven himself time and time again to be faithful and trustworthy in delivering them. Yes, Israel had a story to tell and as they shared it, they remembered the goodness and faithfulness of their God which enabled them to live in the present and to face the future with hope.

Similarly, in the New Testament, we are continually recalling what God accomplished for US in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Once again we are reminded that God is a "Deliverer" of his People for THROUGH, God's Son, WE found salvation. As we REMEMBER, death becomes life and despair turns to hope. As those Israelites and the Early Church were to discover, WE are assured that the same God who acts in human history will continue to act for US throughout OUR present and future days. This is why in the Lord's Supper, Jesus instructed his disciples to always to observe it "in remembrance of him" as WE will be doing next week when we join with Christians all over the world in celebrating World Communion Sunday.

My SECOND point involves Elizabeth's own sense of duty and commitment to service. To most people, the Queen was a symbol of unparalleled grace, stability, and continuity in an ever-changing world. It's been said that her obligation to duty and service was unequalled, that if there was a new hospital dedicated or a bridge or tunnel to be opened, she could always be depended upon to be present for it. Whether at Buckingham Palace or Windsor Castle, she would graciously greet the endless stream of persons who hoped for an audience with her. Add to that the more than 250 foreign trips she made representing the English people. As one close friend said of her, "She was the one member of the royal family who did not find the relentless schedule of royal duties a mind-numbing chore."

As Children of God, as "heirs and joint-heirs with Jesus" as the scriptures describe us, each of us has been summoned to SIMILAR service- to represent God to the best of our abilities and as faithfully as we can. But this does not entail being "great" but by simply being "GOOD." Few of us ever achieve GREATNESS in this world but of GOODNESS, that's an entirely DIFFERENT matter. To be good in what we do and how we perform it is something ANY of us can achieve. It's not HOW MUCH we accomplish in life that counts but the MANNER in which we do it that is of utmost importance to God. If Elizabeth was a GREAT Queen, it was not because she achieved outstanding things during her reign but because whatsoever she DID do, she accomplished it with purposefulness, with humility, and with devotion towards her God and her people. As one writer put it, "Whether Elizabeth was a great monarch or not is not the issue. What seems demonstrably true from her life is that she was unambiguously GOOD, and her GOODNESS might be what made her great. Her goodness was essentially one driven by gratitude and affection for her people...In Elizabeth II, the Anglophone world has lost a ruler who sought not to be great, but to be GOOD. Would that there were more like her."

Though she took her role seriously, she never took HERSELF too seriously. Said Alistair Bruce, a Royal expert, "Her HUMILITY was her REAL strength- she never did anything for herself. Most people go into public life to become famous and see how they can gain advantage for themselves. The Queen never did that...When people were cheering her, they were cheering the office she had the privilege to carry..."

There's an old Jewish proverb told by Rabbi Zusya that in the world to come, when he will stand before God as Judge, God will not ask of him, "Why were you not Abraham? Or why

were you not Moses? Or why were you not King David or a great prophet like Elijah?” NO! God will INSTEAD ask him, “Why were you not ZUSYA?” In other words, why were you not who you were created to be- to touch the lives of those in those particular places—both large and small--God placed you in? The fact is that God never calls us to be GREAT, he asks no more of us than to be GOOD, to go about our very common lives in our very common tasks and duties, representing him as faithfully and as dutifully as we are able to- that’s all. He doesn’t ask me to be Billy Graham or Martin Luther King or the great Catholic social worker Dorothy Day- I CAN’T be them. I can only be DAVID WOOD and exercise whatever God-given gifts I have in the service of my Lord to the best of my ability and in whatever place I find myself in. And if I do THAT, then I make God as proud as God is of any work ever accomplished by Billy Graham or Martin Luther King or Dorothy Day in their OWN, much larger spheres of influence. As Paul instructed the Colossian church, “Whatsoever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” Church, if that’s ALL we ever do, going about our very common lives and fulfilling the duties and service WE’VE been entrusted with joy and good humor, then we will make God proud INDEED.

And LASTLY, since we’re speaking about models of faith, it was by virtue of her steadfast commitment to Christ and the church that Queen Elizabeth drew the strength and inspiration to carry out her duties with such dedication. At her coronation, she took an oath to “maintain and preserve inviolably the settlement of the Church of England, and the doctrine worship, discipline, and government thereof, as by law established in England.” Her duties included appointing archbishops, bishops and deans of the Church of England as advised by the Prime Minister. However, what is often forgotten is that though the Queen is head of the Anglican Church while in England, when she is in SCOTLAND, she THEN becomes a PRESBYTERIAN, a member of the Church of Scotland with no more power than you or I who currently sit in these pews have.

But it wasn’t her denominational loyalties that stood out, it was her own PERSONAL FAITH IN CHRIST ALONE. You see, her role as Queen was merely a symbolic one- she had no real POLITICAL power which was the sole preserve of the Prime Minister, his cabinet, and the House of Commons. She was really nothing more than a figurehead whose duties were to represent the permanence, the stability, the honesty, and the goodness of her office. However, as a member of CHRIST’S kingdom, she knew all-too well that she possessed a SPIRITUAL power that no government or organization on this earth could ever confer upon her or take away.

Throughout her reign, she was never reluctant or embarrassed to speak about the importance of her faith and to recommend it to her subjects. In her first Christmas broadcast in 1952, the new queen asked, “Pray for me...that God may give me wisdom and strength to carry out the solemn promises I shall be making and that I may faithfully serve Him and you, all the days of my life.” In 2000, she said, “For me the teachings of Christ and my own personal accountability before God provide a framework in which I try to lead my life. I, like so many of you, have drawn great comfort in difficult times from Christ’s words and example.” In her Christmas address at the end of 2002, after enduring an especially painful year of personal losses including the deaths of her sister Princess Margaret and the Queen Mother, she spoke of how her faith had sustained her: “I know just how much I rely on my own faith to guide me through the good times and bad. Each day is a new beginning. I know that the only way to live my life is to try to do what is right, to take the long view, to give of my best in all that the day brings, and to put my trust in God.” And in 2012, while celebrating her Diamond Jubilee, the Queen attended a

multifaith reception at Lambeth Palace, hosted by the Archbishop of Canterbury, featuring the leaders of eight faiths in the United Kingdom including Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism. At this event, the Queen said, “Faith plays a key role in the identity of millions of people, providing not only a system of belief but also a sense of belonging. It can act as a spur for social action. Indeed, religious groups have a proud track record of helping those in the greatest need, including the sick, the elderly, the lonely and the disadvantaged. They remind us of the responsibilities we have beyond ourselves.”

Of course, her Bible and the imperishable truths she found in it were always close at hand. In her 2016 address, she explained, “Billions of people now follow Christ’s teaching and find in him the guiding light for their lives. I am one of them because Christ’s example helps me see the value in doing small things with great love, whoever does them and whatever they themselves believe.” Thus by her faith, her humility, and her years of faithful service, she set through her OWN example a high standard for us all. As part princess and part pope, as guardian and great-grandmother, and as both diplomat and disciple, she demonstrated how the monarchy ultimately points beyond itself to the majesty of God, how it encourages the God-given human faculties of reverence, loyalty and worship, and how it derives its true sanction and authority from above rather than from below. And so may WE draw inspiration from her life this morning even as SHE did from the many examples of faith that had once inspired HER. Amen and amen.