

Sunday 5th June 2022
Evensong Pentecost/Jubilee

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Exodus 33.7-20
NT: 2 Corinthians 3.4-end

One of the tropes of mythology and literature is that of the 'chosen one'. Think of King Arthur, destined to pull the sword from the stone and unite a Kingdom; or think of Frodo Baggins, returning the ring to Mordor. Or Harry Potter. Or Moses, in our Old Testament reading today. It is not a very thrilling theme, but it has been venerated by history. The divine right of kings gave authority to Henry VIII, but lost Charles I his head. If you visit the Tudor exhibition which is on at the Walker Art Gallery at the moment then you will see portraiture playing with the images of power, authority and destiny, whether it is Henry VIII standing in the most iconic swagger portrait ever, so Edward VI painted with his forebears and successors surrounding him.

I'm not sure that any of us can really subscribe to the doctrine of the divine right of kings any more, but many of us have been moved by the sense of continuity which Queen Elizabeth II represents and which has been celebrated over this weekend. We have a quirky and unwritten constitution, and every time an argument against the monarchy gains pace, the behaviour of our elected politicians reminds us that there is no ideal arrangement. And in a profound reversal of the Tudor swagger portrait, the greatest stability appears to be provided by the appearance of a 96 year old monarch on a balcony. Although she has limited political power, the Queen has demonstrated and perhaps even embodied virtues which we hold to be exemplary: those of loyalty, discretion, duty, and religious faith. What the Roman would have called 'pietas' is still offered to us as an invitation for mimesis.

Even if we don't subscribe to the divine right of kings, there is a religious trope in the concept of monarchy which reflects the imagery which we saw in our reading from the book of the Exodus. We heard that "whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people would rise and stand, each of them, at the entrance of their tents and watch Moses until he had gone into the tent." This was not suggesting that Moses himself was divine, but it did repeat the theme of 'chosen one'. More importantly, they were not standing for Moses himself, but they were showing respect for his role, for what he represented, and for the connection to something greater than they, the people, felt that they could achieve alone as individuals. Moses was pointing towards something else, as he so often was. In the same way, the Jubilee we are celebrating this weekend is not entirely about the Queen, but about the place where she is pointing, which is towards our national life, towards the continuity across a culture and history which seems to be changing rapidly, and towards the virtues which she is seen to represent.

Figureheads – be they monarchs or prophets – are almost entirely those who point the way, and those who make present for us some reality or virtue which we desire. For the last couple of weeks, in the lead up to Pentecost, our readings have reflected almost a desperation for knowing how Jesus will be present when he has left the world. But the promise has always been there: Jesus said, "But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you." (John 14.26). In our New Testament reading from II Corinthians we heard St Paul explain this further: "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." The Holy Spirit makes God present. But crucially, unlike monarchs and prophets, the Holy Spirit makes God present because the Spirit is God, and our experience of the Spirit in our lives is the experience of God.

This, then, is the essential difference. If the Queen's Platinum Jubilee reminds us of the values to which she points, and the ideals within our national life which are evoked by the service which Queen Elizabeth has given us over seven decades, and if Moses points towards God with his own person as he walks towards the Tent of Meeting, whilst the Israelites stand in awe, not of Moses but of God, then the Holy Spirit is entirely different: not a signpost, but a reality. St Paul wrote in this evening's reading, "All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit." The feast of Pentecost is often described as the 'sending' of the Holy Spirit, but in fact it is an adjustment of our perception of God. God becomes not 'other', to be encountered in a Tent of Meeting, or in the person of Jesus Christ, but rather he becomes a presence which cannot be evaded or escaped. Moses went to a place to meet with God; people travelled great distances to meet with Jesus, but in the Holy Spirit we locate his presence not elsewhere but here.

I am delighted that in services and other events across this weekend we have been able to celebrate the Queen's 70 years on the throne, and we give thanks for the values which she has represented and to which she has pointed over the years. But on this feast of Pentecost we also rejoice that the Holy Spirit is not pointing anywhere except to the place where we stand, because God is not found at the end of an arrow pointing the way, but he is found here – in this place – when we open ourselves to his presence.

Fr Crispin Pailing