

Commitment to others

Mark 8: 27-38

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

It would be almost impossible to come into this church this morning and not realise that a momentous historical event has happened this week. I refer; of course, to the fact that on Thursday evening at about 5.30pm, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth became the longest reigning British monarch, overtaking her great grandmother, Queen Victoria at 63 years and 217 days.

I was quite surprised to read in the paper this week that whilst this is a new record for a British monarch, it's nowhere near the global record. That stands at an astonishing 82 years and 254 days and belonged to King Sobhuza II of Swaziland from December 1899 to August 1982.

I was also distracted by the accompanying list of the shortest reigning monarchs. We probably think that we could lay claim to that one with poor old Lady Jane Grey only lasting 9 days before Queen Mary had her head chopped off but 9 days is positively epic compared to some.

Tsar Michael II of Russia deferred acceptance of his rule until the 15th March 1917 – which was a little unfortunate as the Russian revolutionaries ended that reign after just 16 hours. If you think that was unfortunate then spare a thought for poor Louis XIX of France. His father Charles X abdicated in 1830 leaving him king before he also abdicated making his reign all of 20 minutes.

But back to our own dear Queen. All around us, we have tributes and memories of Her Majesty and nothing could be more appropriate than to pay her the respect that she is due for a lifetime of service, dedication and a commitment to her duty. She is credited with restoring the place of the monarchy in British life after the turmoil of her uncle's abdication and the subsequent seismic shift in society caused by the war.

She is dearly loved and respected and I think the reason for that is that she has always understood that the prime purpose of monarchy is to serve and not to be served. It's a truly Christian outlook, taking its lead from the servility of Jesus and she has lived that to the full. At an age when most of us would be enjoying our 2nd or 3rd decade of retirement, the Queen continues to dedicate herself to the nation.

It's telling that the official photograph that the Queen was happy to release to mark the event of her longevity was not a formal or regal one, but rather a picture of her sitting in her office working her way through her daily box of official papers. It is duty that the Queen wants to be remembered for and it is duty that has secured her a place in the hearts of the people of Britain.

It's duty that I want to spend a bit more time thinking about this morning; that commitment to others beyond ourselves that marks the truly dutiful from the naturally selfish. I want to start with our gospel reading today from Mark as it contains a few verses that are crucially important for us and really speak to the duty and lack of selfishness that should underpin our faith.

These few verses are so important that, uniquely they are repeated several times throughout the gospels. In total, there are 6 references to these same phrases in Matthew, Mark and Luke.

The words are spoken by Jesus early in his ministry. They are spoken before Good Friday and they are spoken before the passion. Let me remind you of the words – and I'll use the King James version for the pure poetry of the telling.

Whoever will come after me
Let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me
For whosoever will save his life shall lose it
But whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospels, the same shall save it
For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?

These words remind me of a very famous novel that some of you may have read – a classic of French literature called 'The Fall' by Albert Camus. It's a very short novel and it tells the story of one mans descent from a successful self confident and self centred life to a life of self loathing due to a reflection on his former life and his inability to 'do the right thing' when it really mattered.

The Fall of the title clearly reflects this descent but it also refers to a physical fall that acted as the trigger for this life change to occur. The man in question is called Jean Baptiste Clement, a successful middle class lawyer living in Paris. Clement has everything going for him. He's young, handsome, successful and relatively wealthy. He is a ladies man who avoids commitment primarily because, as he admits in his reflections, he only ever had one true love in his life and that was himself.

He was incapable of giving himself in love to any other human being. Something in his inner core got in the way and prevented him from loving another. He says of himself; "I was always bursting with vanity. I, I, I was the refrain of the theme of my whole life. The pronoun I was part of everything I said. I could not talk without boasting. When I was concerned about another person, it was out of condescension.

The night when everything changed was the night of The Fall. It happened on a quiet bridge across The Seine. He was making his way home from an assignation with one of his many ladies, his trenchcoat collar pulled up against the foggy evening cold and smoking a cigarette.

As he walked across the bridge he noticed a young woman peering over the parapet into the water below.

He sensed that something wasn't right but ignored it and carried on across the bridge. As he walked down the quay on the far side he heard the splash that he had half expected followed by the woman's screams. He heard them but he walked on, not even looking back to confirm what he knew was happening and soon the screams disappeared. He walked away, his coat still tightly around him and his cigarette still glowing. He told no one. He didn't call for help. He didn't do his duty.

Over the coming days and weeks and months his conscience started to laugh at him. He started to realise how ridiculous he was in his own eyes and he started to loath what he had become. The memory of that moment haunted him.

Let's move now from the cold waters of the Seine in 1930's Paris to the even colder waters of the Potomac river in Washington in January 1982. Air Florida Flight 90 had just taken off from Washington National Airport into an icy blizzard and its wings had iced up so it failed to gain the required height as it lifted away and it clipped the top of the bridge over the Potomac and the plane crashed into the icy river. 78 people died instantly but those few who survived crawled out onto the wing of the floating plane as rescuers tried desperately to reach them.

A rescue helicopter arrived over the wing and dangled a harness to the freezing, stranded passengers. It was caught by an older man who immediately put it around one of the female passengers who was then lifted to safety. The helicopter returned 4 more times and each time, the man grabbed the harness and strapped one of his fellow passengers into it.

When it came back for that last passenger he was gone, swallowed by the freezing waters. The pilot later said that he had never before seen anyone with that kind of commitment in a crisis. Later, when the man's body had been recovered and identified, his friends all said they were not surprised. That was the kind of man he was; always giving himself to others as that was the nature of his life.

This man understood what Jean Baptiste Clement could not see. He understood that God is love and whoever lives in love lives in God and whoever walks in love walks in God. This man understood that no greater love has a person than they are willing to give their life for a friend or a stranger. He understood the message of today's gospel. He understood what it means to deny yourself, pick up your cross and follow Jesus and he understood what it means to lose your life in order to find it.

Our faith is a tough faith and its not for the faint hearted. It is the great invitation by Jesus Christ to deny yourself and to take up the cross. It is the invitation to love the Lord Your God and to love your neighbour as yourself. Christianity is the great invitation of Jesus Christ to walk in love.

And I have thought of that so much over the past few weeks every time I've switched on the television or opened the papers.

I thought of it most sharply when I saw those awful pictures of little Aylan Kurdi washed up on a Turkish beach like so much flotsam – a beautiful 3 year old killed with his 5 year old brother, Galip and his mother Rehan and I wondered how this could happen in our so called civilised society.

Europe is facing its worst refugee crisis for many decades as terrified Syrians try to protect their families from a viscous war. A terror that is so extreme that they are willing to risk life and limb to escape it. I've seen so much in the press lately about economic migrants versus refugees. Well for me, someone who's looking for a better lifestyle and a higher income doesn't put their lives and those of their families on the line. To risk life and limb you are running from an even greater threat and the astonishing statistic that now more than half of the population of Syria are either dead or displaced brings that into perspective.

So how should we react to our 'needy neighbours'? Germany is welcoming the refugees with open arms. The cynical would say that it's because the German population isn't growing and that they need workers but that doesn't explain crowds of normal Germans out on the streets cheering and applauding the refugees as they arrive.

Britain's response appears miserly by contrast with the government being dragged reluctantly to take refugees thanks to a growing public outcry. I have to say that I have been embarrassed and ashamed by our approach when looked at through the eyes of our Christian duty but fully appreciate the political difficulties facing any government in such a situation. I think the Archbishop of Canterbury's comments were very appropriate when he said, "The people of these islands have a long and wonderful history of offering shelter and refuge, going back centuries – whether it be Huguenot Christians, Jewish refugees, Ugandan Asians, Vietnamese boat people and many more. It has always been controversial at the time it happened, always been seen as too difficult. Yet each time we have risen to the challenge and our country has been blessed by the result. We cannot turn our backs on this crisis. We must respond with compassion."

Our reading today is clear – we must deny ourselves and take up the cross. We need to take our example from the man on the wing of that plane in Washington and not from the fictional Jean Baptiste Clements. We need to take our example from our monarch who has shown us the commitment to a lifetime of serving. And we need to take our example from our Lord and saviour, Jesus Christ who gave his life that we all might live. Once again, our faith is being tested. The gospel of love must show us the way.

Let us pray

Lord we give thanks for the life of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth. Your spirit in her is plain to see as she lives the gospel of love.

Give wisdom to those in authority as they seek to find solutions to the tragedy in Syria. Give comfort to the millions who are suffering each and every day and give strength to us so that we might indeed deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow you in body mind and spirit. We ask this in Jesus name,

Amen

Tom Crotty