

Homily Memorial Service for Queen Elizabeth 11

Romans 12:6-13 John 15:9-17

Over the past two and a half weeks we have witnessed the most amazing outpouring of grief and acknowledgment of a unique life. Millions of people, not just in Britain, but across a variety of countries have expressed their sadness for a life that has ended but also their recognition for a life of unparalleled service. It is this service that has undoubtedly been the fountain which has given rise to a level of grief, the likes of which we will probably see only once in our lifetime.

As I watched world leaders from a vast array of countries assemble to pay their final tributes to someone who was a queen in every sense of the word, it occurred to me that this wasn't so much about a monarchy as it was about a person who, having inherited the status and eminence of a monarch, used that inheritance, which does come with a huge responsibility, to carve out a legacy that, in my opinion, is unsurpassed. It is a legacy of selfless service that is difficult to comprehend, and one which transcends the issue of whether you call yourself a monarchist or not.

So the question we find ourselves asking is, How did she on earth manage this? What gave her the drive and the strength to give this service over such a long period of time? To maintain such a commitment for 70 years is more than remarkable, it is almost beyond one's grasp.

There is no doubt that she had an amazing sense of duty and this never wavered, no matter what trials she might have been experiencing on a personal level, and we do know she had her fair share of those.

However, there was one thing which was so very important to her and which undoubtedly stood her in such good stead throughout her reign, and that was her faith, and that is what I want to focus on for a few minutes.

Right from the moment she became Queen at the age of 25 on the death of her father in 1952, Queen Elizabeth committed herself to both her people and her God. This commitment to God was a rock for her. I believe it was very much her faith which not only provided her with a bulwark as a defence against the storms of life, but also a guide, a signpost showing her the way as she reached out in service to her people.

Why do I say that? In our reading from John's Gospel, Jesus, in commanding us to love one another – I quote, *'I command you to love each other in the same way that I love you'* – goes on to say, *'The greatest love is shown when people lay down their lives for their friends.'* What he is saying is that to truly show love, to truly carry out his commandment of love, we need to be prepared to make significant sacrifices.

Well, there can be no doubt whatsoever that Queen Elizabeth made huge sacrifices in order to serve. Her number one priority was her service to people. Her personal life played second

fiddle to her commitment to serve. She never wavered from her focus on her calling, her duty to serve.

God has certain expectations of us – that is to have faith and to put that faith into action through caring for our neighbour. James puts it so well in James 2:14: *'Dear brothers and sisters, what's the use of saying you have faith if you don't prove it by your actions? That kind of faith can't save anyone.'*

There is the story of a monk who was kneeling in his bare cell praying fervently. As the noon hour approached, the cell was suddenly filled with a bright glow. Lifting his eyes, the monk had a vision. It seemed to him that he saw Christ walking through village streets and fields, healing the sick, blessing little children, and preaching the word of God to the crowds.

The monk gazed at the vision with awe, feeling so very blessed that the good Lord should show himself to his humble servant in this way. But suddenly his joy was interrupted by a familiar sound. The chapel bell began to clang loudly, calling him to leave his cell and do his daily work. For now it was the appointed hour when the sick and lame gathered outside the monastery gates. There they received a daily portion of bread, which the good brothers baked especially for the needy. And it was this monk's duty each afternoon to distribute the bread.

The monk was filled with sorrow and doubt. What should he do? How could he turn his back on this magnificent vision? How could he desert this vision for a crowd of beggars outside the gate? Surely they could wait. But the thought of the poor people waiting at the gates would not leave the monk's mind. A battle was taking place within his soul between the ecstasy of the vision before him and the distress of the people who waited outside.

As he struggled with what to do, he seemed to hear a voice whisper deep within himself, *'Do thy duty and leave the rest to God.'*

At once he knew what he must do. Rising from his knees and taking one last, longing look at the vision, the monk left his cell and hurried out to feed the poor. There were so many to feed and he thought he would never finish. He was desperate to return to his cell, so hoping that the radiant vision might still be there.

At last, after a long hour, his work was done. He hurried down the long hallway to his room, threw open the door and stopped on the threshold with an awestruck gasp. The radiant vision was still there. He sank to his knees with joy and as he did so, the vision spoke, *'If you had stayed, I would have left.'*

The monk knew he had made the right decision when he made the decision to be faithful to his commitment to attend to the needy. In the same way, Queen Elizabeth made it her priority to care for people right across the board. Reflecting the words from our Gospel reading, she gave her life to the service of others.

I refer to the words from our first reading from Romans, chapter 12. *'Never be lazy in your work, but serve the Lord enthusiastically. When God's children are in need, be the one to help them out.'* These are words Queen Elizabeth carried out to a tee.

For a final observation, I give you a reflective question from Martin Luther King, 'Life most persistent and urgent question is, *'What are you doing for others?'* It is a question that Her Majesty was able to answer emphatically, and for that we salute her.

Reverend Warner Wilder