

## Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> May – Coronation Weekend: ‘The King of kings’ (Isaiah 40:25-31, Mark 12:13-17)

So yesterday we celebrated the Coronation of King Charles. How many of you watched at least part of the service at the Abbey yesterday morning? I must say that I wasn't entirely sure what to expect – like most of the country I've never watched a live coronation before – but I found it a more uplifting and absorbing occasion than perhaps I was expecting. I was a bit bemused by the bracelets of sincerity and wisdom, and that funny thing they did with the sword and the money – but overall, I thought it was a joyful, Christ-centred and Spirit-filled service. The congregation even sang pretty well, which they usually don't at ceremonial services!

One of the striking things about **the liturgy of the service is how thoroughly Christ-centred it is**. It's freely available to access if you Google 'Coronation liturgy 2023' – some of you no doubt did that before or during the service; and one of our church groups spent a very enjoyable hour this week going through it together and reflecting on the promises that will be made, the prayers that will be prayed and above all, the consistent sense that, even as an earthly king, Charles is subject and accountable to a greater King, the King of kings – the Lord Almighty.

Take a look, for example, at how Charles was welcomed to the service by one of the choristers, who said: 'Your Majesty, as children of the Kingdom of God we welcome you in the name of the King of Kings.' To which Charles replied: 'In his name, and after his example, I come not to be served but to serve.' That's a quote directly from Jesus which you'll find in the gospel of Mark, chapter 10, and which we used at our special Platinum Jubilee service for the late Queen last year.

Immediately following this, the Archbishop opened the service with what's known as the Grace: 'The grace of our *Lord* Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you.' If you're a Christian you'll be very familiar with these words, so you probably don't even notice that Jesus is called 'Lord' – in other words, the boss, the ruler – even of earthly powers.

A few minutes later, at one of the key moments in the service – The Oaths – the new king was presented with a bible, with the words: 'Receive this book, the most valuable thing that this world affords. Here is Wisdom; this is the royal Law; these are the lively Oracles of God.' (and what a great phrase that last one is!) He was then invited to place his hand on this bible, in order to make the various oaths of service to the country and to God. Indeed for the latter oaths he knelt, and placed both hands on the bible.

In a break with Coronation tradition, after the Oaths Charles then offered his own prayer, and the words of that prayer are again very powerful, and quite significant: 'God of compassion and mercy, whose Son was sent not to be served but to serve, give grace that **I may find in thy service perfect freedom, and in that freedom knowledge of thy truth**. Grant that I may be a blessing to all thy children, of every faith and conviction, that together we may discover the ways of gentleness and be led into the paths of peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.'

It's lovely, I think, that Charles emphasises that he wishes to serve *all* people, and to embrace our plurality as a nation. But again, he quotes that same verse from Mark 10 and commits himself to find freedom and truth in the service of Jesus Christ.

In the Christian tradition – and this was a revolutionary idea 2,000 years ago when Jesus first declared it – true human leadership is defined as humble service. Not power or wealth or status – but service of others. If only more of our earthly leaders heard that still, small voice, think how much less suffering there would be in the world.

We've only looked at the first third of the Coronation service, but the pattern that emerges is clear. And it is reinforced by the bible passages that have been offered to churches to use at special services this weekend. We are using two of these today. They both give a valuable perspective on how King Charles – and indeed anyone – is to relate to God.

The first is from Isaiah 40, a lovely passage of hope in a chapter which is often read in the days leading up to Christmas. And what it calls Charles to is **to rely on God**. 'Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary.' The passage calls us to put our trust in the Lord, because Almighty God never runs out of steam: 'He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.' The work of a leader is never done – where will Charles go to find energy and rest? The passage invites him, and us, where to look: Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.' A great promise for Charles – and for all of us. Rely on the Lord, and you will find strength for the journey.

The second passage which we read from the gospel of Mark is, at first sight, perhaps more for us than for the king. Jesus is asked a tricky question about whether to pay taxes to the ruling power – bear in mind that the Romans were occupiers of Israel at the time and were seen as hated oppressors; many considered paying taxes to them as treachery, a betrayal of their national identity. Jesus cleverly sidesteps the question by saying that **we are all called to render to each power what should be rendered**. Render to Caesar what is Caesar's – *and to God what is God's*.

The sting in the tail is that God deserves everything. Yes, Caesar might receive some of our cash, but God deserves our whole lives. It's a challenge not just for us – but also for the king. Even Charles has to render to God what is God's – and the service yesterday makes it clear that his rule is defined ultimately as loving and humble service to a higher power, the Lord Almighty.

Rely, and render – that is the healthy way to relate to God. **Rely on his goodness and strength, render everything to him in worship and service**. This is the way to soar in the good times, or, if all we can do in the testing times is to just keep going, to be able to do that – to walk.

As we gather to celebrate the Coronation and to pray for Charles and all in authority, let's take these reflections to heart. They are certainly for Charles, and my hope and prayer is that he will be not just a wise, but also a humble, loving and gracious ruler. But they are for us, too. It's not just Charles who is called to serve the ruler of rulers, Almighty God. To echo Archbishop Justin's address yesterday, may God grant us all grace to commit ourselves not to be served but to serve, and to find in that service perfect freedom, and in that freedom knowledge of the truth. Amen.