

SERMON

If I was preparing a sermon for, shall we say, an every day funeral, then I would want to include some thoughts about the person who had died, and I would want to include some reflections on the journey that person has now moved on to, and perhaps conclude with encouragement surrounding the destination for that journey. And, of course, I would ensure that no-one in the room where I was preaching believed that this was an every day funeral as there is no such thing. Each funeral service we take is a very special occasion and we take great delight in making that service and our sermons, very special for all those there.

And whilst I am not preaching a sermon at the funeral of Her Majesty the Queen tomorrow, what I want to do today, is to tell you what I would have included in that sermon if I had been. Last week I gave what I hope was an appropriate tribute to a woman who I believe has not only been the greatest monarch this country has ever known, but one of the greatest disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. Today, I want to talk about Elizabeth Windsor. I want to talk about the person she was, and how so many people throughout the world loved her. I want to talk about what Jesus taught his disciples about the journey she has now gone on. And I want to talk about how, in the Revelation to John, we have a picture of the place she will now be in for eternity.

You will have heard many people pay tributes to this amazing lady over the last week or so.

You will have heard about her service to her country from a young age, and how, as her father King George VI had to do following the abdication of his brother, she has worked tirelessly to on occasion restore and maintain, public faith in the monarchy.

But then there are the very human stories. How in 1939, the 13 year old Princess Elizabeth accompanied the King and Queen to the Royal Naval College at Dartmouth and, together with her sister Margaret, she was escorted by one of the cadets, her third cousin, Prince Philip of Greece. Apparently that was not the first time they had met, but it was the first time she took an interest in him!

How, at the end of war on VE day, she joined her family at the Palace as thousands gathered in the Mall, and then, with her parents' permission, again with her sister Margaret, she slipped down into the crowd to join in the celebrations. She was in some ways a young person, the same as any other young person.

She and Philip were married, and Charles and Anne arrived. And it was during an overseas trip to Kenya that she heard that her father had died and she was now Queen. At such a young age. In her own words, "I didn't have an apprenticeship – my father died much too young, so it was a very sudden kind of taking on and making the best job you can." None of us can even begin to imagine what those first few days as Queen must have been like. Not only was she, by all accounts, not expecting the death of her Father, but she was in another country, and she had to get back to London, with the time that journey would take, before she could even start to work out what being Queen really meant.

In the ensuing years she faced the challenges put before her, and dealt with them all in her own particular way. When she decided that her coronation should be televised the prime minister Winston Churchill opposed this, you can imagine a full and forthright exchange of views took place. When Prime Minister Anthony Eden resigned following the Suez crisis and she, in effect had to pick the next Prime Minister, you can only imagine how worrying a time for her that would have been. But there was also an increase in people's willingness to criticise the thing she held most dear – the monarchy itself – and her life at home must surely have suffered. And I could go on with the things that have happened to her, but she has resolved.

But in later years we started to get a different view of Elizabeth Windsor. This lady who some claimed was a rather starchy, out of touch, monarch clearly had a sense of humour, which no-one really even considered, and we were allowed to see it. I don't think any of us could quite believe it when she, as the producers would have you believe, parachuted out of a helicopter to arrive at the opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympics, accompanied, of course, by James Bond. Or there was the delightful recording of a speech by Pierre Trudeau where he introduced a toast to her majesty, Queen of Canada, by talking about her long and dedicated service, and she responded, "Thank you Prime Minister of Canada for making me feel so old". And who will ever forget the film made as part of the Platinum Jubilee celebrations where her majesty and Paddington bear exchanged notes on where they kept their marmalade sandwiches.

I read or heard somewhere someone talking about when the Royal Family get together and, not surprisingly, in their residences, they often can all get together in one, quite large, room, but the Queen would often just sit in the corner rather than in any way dominate what was going on. I don't know whether she did but I like to imagine her sitting there knitting, watching the younger adults in her family chatting, and the grandchildren or now great grandchildren, playing as small children do, probably crawling under tables – an essential part of their games, quietly exchanging a knowing glance to Prince Philip. And that, whether it is in my imagination or not, is the lasting image I want to have of Elizabeth Windsor – a lady who ruled over a country for 70 years, but clearly really loved chatting to, and watching, her family around her.

And I sometimes like to think of Jesus in a similar way with his disciples. Jesus called these 12 men to follow him and they all did precisely that. They must have been quite a tight knit family, and I like to picture him teaching them with them sitting around him at his feet – as they would when being taught by any rabbi – with conversation going on – either the disciples questioning Jesus or them saying to each other – do you understand what he is talking about? The opening verse of our reading from John's gospel is the sort of verse that gives me that image. "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me." It's almost as if he is saying, "Look, I know you are finding it hard to understand what is going on and what I am teaching you, but don't worry – just believe in God and therefore in me as well, and you'll be fine."

And then Jesus explains to his disciples that when he dies – something he again just tried to explain to them must happen soon – he is going to prepare a place for them, so that when they die, there will be somewhere to go. And, bless him, it's Thomas' turn to ask the question this time. "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" and Jesus' reply, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Wherever it is you are going – and don't worry about the fact that you might not know where the destination is – Jesus will take you there.

I'm sure there are times in each of our lives when we really don't know where we are going next, or how we are going to get there – and when that happens how comforting is it when someone comes up beside you, puts an arm around you, and says, don't worry, we will do this together. That is what Jesus is saying to his disciples – and therefore also to us – don't try and do these things by yourself, I will be with you. Can you imagine, again, that young Elizabeth on the plane heading from Kenya back to London, with the knowledge that I am sure she had, that whatever it was she was heading for, it would be easier with Jesus by her side. And Jesus is also by her side as she now journeys on.

Readings: John 14: 1-6

Revelation 21: 1-7

Title: If I was preaching at the Queen's funeral

St George's Thriplow

All Saints' Shepreth

And our reading from Revelation tells us about the destination. As with much of the Revelation to John, unpacking exactly what the revelation means is not easy. But let me draw you to three things in our the reading which help explain what this destination will be like. The first verse says, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more." And the sea was no more.

That may sound very strange to us but in the days when this was written the sea was one of the scariest places on earth. The people had no compasses, they had no concept of a round earth and when they had to travel by sea from A to B they did it by keeping as close to the shore as they possibly could. To create a new place with no sea would be one of the most reassuring images for people at that time.

And then the second verse. "And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." Jerusalem was a city with a history of being built and destroyed and being rebuilt, and the biggest and best dream of all Jewish people was that Jerusalem would be rebuilt to its former glory. And in this revelation we are told that this will happen in the new heaven.

And then third, we are told that this is a place with God. "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." This is God promising the eternal life in heaven that his followers had been told would come, from the prophet Isaiah's day and forward, and that place will be utterly joyful.

And then, for the first time in the book of Revelation, God speaks. "To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. I will be their God and they will be my children." This place to which we aspire really is the home of God.

So, we have completed the picture. Elizabeth Windsor was born in the same way as any other little girl but was destined to be, and indeed grew up to become a Queen, a Queen for 70 years, a disciple of Jesus Christ for all her life, a mother, grandmother, and a great grandmother. She went on a journey through life with Jesus as her way, her truth and her life, and she is now in that eternal kingdom revealed to John.

I have been captivated by the live streaming of people filing past the coffin in Westminster Hall over these last few days. People of all sorts, all ethnicities, all ages, paying their respects in their own way for those few seconds they have beside the coffin after queueing for many hours. Some visibly moved by the experience. I saw people in uniform, people in civies but with medals on their chests, people needing aids for their walking, some in their Sunday best, some in tees shirts and jeans, I saw children, I saw at least two bishops, but I saw thousands and thousands of faces that were new to me. And I saw her children. And I saw her grandchildren. I saw the people of this country paying respects to a leader who they loved. And the more I think about this wonderful lady, the more I realise why. Amen.