

It now seems slightly ironic that it was when Kate and I were heading home from a family funeral on Thursday afternoon that we listened to the news on the radio and heard that the Queen's doctors were very worried about her state of health, and that the royal family were gathering at Balmoral. Half an hour after we arrived home I saw the announcement come up on the BBC News site that Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II had died. And I felt slightly numb. It was all very unreal. She had always been there. Even when Prince Philip died, I never really thought that the same would happen to her. But it has, and we now reflect on a life well lived – and that is such an understatement.

You will have heard, I am sure, over the last couple of days, many tributes to this amazing lady; how for the majority of us she has been our monarch for our entire lives, and for people all over the world, the most dominant statesperson they have encountered. Many of those people who paid their tributes will have interspersed their thoughts with, "when I met the Queen at so and so", but I'm not one of those fortunate people who can say that. So the thoughts I am sharing with you this morning are from afar – and I hope when I finish, you will see that Queen Elizabeth II managed to have a profound effect on my life, even when I had no personal contact with her at all.

So what was it that made Queen Elizabeth II such an outstanding monarch? Was it her sense of duty? Was it her love of her family? Was it her determination to do the right thing whatever the cost? All these attributes she clearly had, but the one that made the difference was her faith.

On Christmas Day 1952 the new 26 year old monarch of the United Kingdom and 14 other Commonwealth nations, spoke for the first time to the world in what was to become her annual Christmas broadcast:

"'Pray for me,' she asked, 'that God may give me wisdom and strength to carry out the solemn promises I shall be making, and that I may faithfully serve Him and you, all the days of my life.'"

It was a prayer God answered. Elizabeth would make a series of solemn promises six months later at her coronation, which she kept faithfully for the next seventy years. The newly crowned Queen promised three things: to govern appropriately, to maintain justice, and to profess the gospel of Christ. All this she surely did until her final breath.

In her Christmas broadcast of 2000, the Queen reflected on the millennium year with complete candour about the importance of her own personal faith:

'For me the teachings of Christ and my own personal accountability before God provide a framework in which I try to lead my life'

All of which is fine to say in theory, but where does that framework come from. The answer is in the words of the Coronation service itself when she was presented with a bible – and at that point of the service those present would have heard these words.

"We present you with 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."

That was quite a statement. She was wearing a priceless golden crown adorned with nearly 3,000 precious stones; she was sitting on a throne in a thousand year old vaulted abbey, and yet God's word was recognized as 'the most valuable thing this world affords.'

But then I ask how does God's word help? The answer is in every aspect of life, and the Psalm we heard earlier explains how:

I lift up my eyes to the mountains—  
    where does my help come from?  
My help comes from the Lord,  
    the Maker of heaven and earth.

He will not let your foot slip—  
    he who watches over you will not slumber;  
indeed, he who watches over Israel  
    will neither slumber nor sleep.

The Lord watches over you—  
    the Lord is your shade at your right hand;  
the sun will not harm you by day,  
    nor the moon by night.

The Lord will keep you from all harm—  
    he will watch over your life;  
the Lord will watch over your coming and going  
both now and forevermore.

So, her majesty, when she got stuck, she could turn to God for help – and clearly did. She would not always have known the right thing to do, she would not always have made the right choices, but when she made mistakes God was there to protect her. And how does she receive that advice, that help, by reading that book that she was given – the bible.

And where this becomes really hard, is when I look around, at the other world leaders and I wonder, “where does their help come from?” How often do you hear politicians these days make the sort of statements that the Queen made in her Christmas talks? I don't think it would be considered a good speech by a politician if they said “but Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”” in answer to a question about how do you help people who are really living in poverty. But leading people to Jesus, whilst not necessarily helping them to pay their energy bills, is the way to a better life, and her majesty clearly believed that. All we can do today is to pray that politicians, and King Charles himself, follow her wonderful example.

But after saying all that I come back to how I felt when I heard that the Queen had died – a feeling of numbness. Actually, I think it was probably just extreme sadness. She was someone I constantly looked up to and admired. You look around at the number of leaders around the world who succumb to temptations and greed and end up being prosecuted for corruption. But not the Queen. Even though she had family issues to resolve over the years she resolved them, and the monarchy itself is stronger for that. But it was when she talked about her faith so naturally that my admiration for her was so high.

When I was ordained I had to make an oath of allegiance to the Queen – that really was the easiest thing I have ever been asked to do.

Elizabeth Alexandra Mary Windsor, born on 21 April 1926 in Bruton Street, London, married to Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh for 73 years, mother of 4 children, grandmother of 8 children, great grandmother of 11 children, for 70 years by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and of Her other Realms and Territories Queen, Head of the Commonwealth, Defender of the Faith, that really was a life well lived. And I thank God for the privilege of knowing her without knowing her, if you know what I mean. Amen