

Address by the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, Right Reverend Dr David Bruce, at the Belfast Lieutenancy Service of Thanksgiving to mark the Platinum Jubilee of Her Majesty the Queen, Sunday, 5 June 2022, St Anne's Cathedral Belfast.

Luke 22:24-30

²⁴ A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. ²⁵ Jesus said to them, 'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. ²⁶ But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. ²⁷ For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. ²⁸ You are those who have stood by me in my trials. ²⁹ And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, ³⁰ so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

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When a person gives evidence in court, it is sometimes referred to as their testimony. "I testify that this is what I saw. It is the evidence of my own eyes". A credible testimony is deeply persuasive – it can convince a jury and win a case.

Leaders in public life are rightly assessed – as if by a jury of their peers – as to the quality of the job they have done.

The testimony before us today is evidence before the entire world that the life and service of Her Majesty, the Queen has not only been blessed with great longevity, but has been a beacon to the world of how to win the hearts and minds of a nation. It is what we have seen. It is the evidence of our own eyes. Further, the celebrations of her platinum jubilee across the country, and marked throughout the Commonwealth this weekend, is testimony to the high regard, affection and esteem in which she is held.

When the Queen celebrated her 95th birthday in April of last year, I wrote to her on behalf of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. I offered her the condolences of the Church following the loss of her husband Prince Philip, less than two weeks before, and went on to say this:

“This is also an opportunity to acknowledge Your Majesty’s devoted public service and unstinting sense of duty to the people of the United Kingdom and Commonwealth. The Apostle Paul’s words in Colossians come to mind when he wrote, ‘Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters...’

These words I believe, have been exemplified in the Queen’s life of service as our Monarch through these 70 years.

Throughout her long reign, she has spoken freely of her love for God, and her desire to follow the teachings and example of Jesus Christ in all she does. On her 90th birthday a book was published in her honour by the Bible Society, entitled *“The servant Queen and the King she serves.”* This also is a kind of testimony. Not evidence before a court of law but rather the self-evident authentic story of a life of faith lived consistently and well. At its heart, a commitment to live this way means a subordination of the will to a higher loyalty which loves and serves God first, making Him the true Lord of our lives.

The Queen has repeatedly demonstrated that this has been the practice of the years, and what an example she has been, navigating the great joys and the deep tragedies of both family and national life with dignity and grace. In her own words, as part of her 2014 Christmas broadcast, she expressed it like this:

“For me, the life of Jesus Christ...is an inspiration and an anchor in my life. A role-model of reconciliation and forgiveness, he stretched out his hands in love, acceptance and healing. Christ’s example has taught me to seek to respect and value all people of whatever faith or none.”

The changes which have occurred in the life of the United Kingdom since 1952 have been remarkable by their pace as much as their substance. Her coronation in 1953 was the reason why many families bought or rented their first television – with its one channel from the BBC. Post-war food rationing ended in 1954. I’m unsure if the invention of fish fingers in 1955 is connected with this, (I rather think it might be) but the advent of the supermarket was a new thing which changed forever the way we shop, and even live.

Migration gathered pace in the early years of Queen Elizabeth's reign, laying the foundations of the multi-cultural society we know today. The Queen presided while Elvis Presley and The Beatles provided the soundtrack to the first two decades of her reign. The internet was unknown; computers while invented, filled an entire room and were of only academic interest. The pace of change did not slacken through the 1970s and 1980s while we here in Northern Ireland were reeling in the worst years of the Troubles, which of course included the deeply personal loss of Lord Mountbatten in an IRA bomb attack in the west of Ireland in August 1979.

With the prospects of peace growing through the 1990s, including the signing of the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement in 1998, the way was opened for the Queen to engage more fully, and she led the way by her own example of reconciliation, including an important and memorable State visit to Ireland in 2011. If reaching out, and receiving a hand of greeting was needed – and it clearly was - she has been ready to do it, and with genuine grace, both a remarkable testimony and example indeed.

So today we are here to give thanks to God for the influence of the Queen during this long and sustained period of change. She has been and remains a world leader. She is an influencer, a meme, a trend, a phenomenon. And all of this begs the question, especially for someone who was never expected to wear the crown - how has she done it?

In the Gospel reading today, we are given a glimpse in this tetchy exchange between Jesus and his closest followers, of the great chasm which existed between the vision of a kingdom as taught by Him, and the vision of a kingdom as wished for by them. Theirs was a vision of power, and how to achieve it, and hold on to it. "Who will be the greatest?", they asked. His was a vision of servanthood, and how to multiply it and give it away. "I have come to serve", he said.

Our Servant Queen's testimony emerges from the servant King's example. This vision of a new kind of kingdom – a kingdom not sustained by rules to compel us, but more by deep influence to shape us - may not sit easily with lesser models of leadership, examples of which, sadly we have had too many in our lifetimes, and which stand in stark contrast to her extraordinary testimony.

In politics, commerce, the academy and all-too-easily sometimes in the church, this deficient style of leadership is bombastic, abrasive, aggressive, confrontational, and plays to the insecurities in the heart of the leader, just as much to the innate prejudices within us all. It's a toxic mix, and usually does us long term harm. How different therefore, the style of leadership exemplified by Jesus, and commended to his followers. The greatest among you should be like the least. The one who rules should be like the one who serves. I'll wash your feet. I'll give my life for you.

It surely behoves us in these days of deep international emergency, to carefully avoid perpetuating models of control which play to the loudest gallery, seeking to feather our own nests, while ignoring the plight of the poor, the marginalised, the displaced and those who simply want to do what is right. Leadership is not an arm-wrestling competition, with winners and losers. Jesus' self-description as gentle and lowly in heart, is neither spineless nor soft, but a robust challenge to those of us called to lead, that we do so:

- to bless the people, not to control them;
- to restore the sinful, not to alienate them;
- to bind up the broken, not to worsen their hurt.

In other words to act as ambassadors of Christ in such a way that he will say to us at the end, "Well done, good and faithful leader". Well, actually no. He will say, "Well done, good and faithful servant".

For it must be evident to all, that it is this which has marked out and defined the reign of Her Majesty the Queen. As a leader, she has above all else been a servant to her King who is Christ, and so calls us all to the same pathway, to craft a similarly powerful testimony before the world.

On this Pentecost Sunday and by this means we gladly join in thanksgiving for the years of her reign. To God be the Glory.

Amen.