

Praise for Queen's 'unshakable conviction'

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Archbishop Nichols' Jubilee tribute



Today we come to thank God for the sixty years of the reign of our Sovereign, Queen Elizabeth II. The intention of our prayer in the offering of this Mass is that God will bless her, and her family, in all that she does as our Monarch and for all that she represents in her person. Today we remember with gratitude the presence of Her Majesty the Queen in this Cathedral on 30 November 1995 for Vespers. We recall, too, her gracious words of appreciation of the 'special contribution' made to society by the Catholic Church, spoken in the presence of Pope Benedict at the Palace of Holyroodhouse.

In recent days, newspapers and other publications have been full of commentary about the decades which make up these 60 remarkable years. Looking back now, to 1952, the year of her accession to the throne, it is hard to take in all that has occurred.

At the time of the Coronation, 2 June 1953, I was still in the local primary school. The Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II was the first thing I ever saw on television, in our neighbour's house. Yet the moment is still vivid in my mind. The young, beautiful queen, the grandeur of the event, the solemnity of the anointing at its central moment, the size and weight of the crown bearing down on her head, the joy and fun of the party in the street later that day.

Since then the decades have unfolded, with far-reaching change in every sphere of our lives, in domestic, social, educational, international, economic and political realities. There is no need to list those changes here. We all feel their impact and sense in them today that mixture of elation and disappointment which always characterises our lives. Elizabeth II has been our Queen throughout all those changes.

Nor is there any need for me to recall or comment on the changes that the Queen herself has lived through in her own more personal life - if there is such a thing for a reigning monarch today. They, too, have been well rehearsed in recent days and weeks.

But what I would like to say is this. It is my impression, but not mine alone I am sure, that throughout all these changes there has been something about Her Majesty that has not changed at all. She has retained an inner quality, yet one that is clearly visible, throughout all these vicissitudes: a quality of stillness, of calm, of serenity. This has brought to us great reassurance and, increasingly, a sense of much treasured continuity. In times of great change, to which the Monarchy too has responded and adapted, her presence has been one of enduring stability.

This is one reason among many why we come today to celebrate her Diamond Jubilee with such joy. Indeed it is a reason contained within the very phrase: diamond jubilee.

We know well the wonderful connotations of the word diamond: that shimmering lustre of the precious stones which are so prized and carefully crafted. Yet in the origins of the word lie another indication for our celebration, for the word 'diamond' comes from a Greek original - adamas - which means 'unbreakable'. This is indeed an indication of the quality which we celebrate today.

And the second word helps us too: the word Jubilee. One of its origins lies in the world of the Jewish faith with its resilient traditions and firm faith. The word 'jubilee' goes back to the word 'yobel', the ram's horn trumpet with its deep, resonant sound, summoning the people to a season of prayer and rejoicing.

This is indeed a moment of diamond jubilee for us all.

The Gospel reading, too, helps us to find our true bearings at this moment of diamond jubilee. Leaving aside for one moment the motivations of those who put the question to Jesus, his answer has echoed down the centuries as a guide which has not always been observed but which serves us well. 'Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar - and to God what belongs to God.'

It is a particular cause for our joy that we have a Queen who understands well the profound meaning of this command. Year by year, especially in her Christmas messages, she has made clear her own Christian commitment. Only last Christmas she expressed one of the core truths of our faith with a clarity and conviction that no-one could mistake. She said:

'God sent into the world a unique person - neither a philosopher nor a general, important though they are, but a Saviour, with the power to forgive. Forgiveness lies at the heart of the Christian faith. It can heal broken families and it can reconcile divided communities. It is in forgiveness that we feel the power of God's love.' (HM Queen's Christmas Message, 2011)

These words of Her Majesty have, of course, been matched by her actions, not least in the wonderful welcome she gave to Pope Benedict XVI in 2010 and in her momentous visit to Ireland in 2011.

She understands, too, that the fulfilment of all our hopes comes not in this world but in the next, in the glorious fulfilment that has been put before us in the first reading from the Book of the Apocalypse. There the light of both day and night is the radiant glory of God; there the water of life flows in abundance, rising from the throne of God; there the tree of life is our greatest family tree which offers us healing from our broken human efforts. There we will see the Majesty of God, face to face, and every Jubilee will be fulfilled beyond measure.

Much has been said, and quite rightly so, about our Queen's remarkable record of service to our nation, to the Commonwealth and to the entire community of nations. I am sure that it is her Christian faith that lies at the heart of this commitment to service. Service demands a greater good which lifts those who serve beyond self-interest. A life of total service requires a greater good which goes beyond all that this world can offer. Faith in God as a loving Father is what lies at the heart of life-long service. In this we are indeed blest in our Queen.

The joy and rejoicing of these days of Her Majesty's Diamond Jubilee will remain long in our memories. So too, I hope, will this moment of solemn prayer in which we thank God for Her Majesty's 60 years of service, in which we ask God's blessing upon her and in which we commit ourselves again to working for the enduring forgiveness and unbreakable faith which are the hallmarks here in our midst of that Kingdom which will have no end. Amen.

The Archbishop of Westminster, Vincent Nichols, gave the above address in Westminster Cathedral on 5 June 2012, the final day of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee celebrations.

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