

Sermon preached at the service in Liverpool Cathedral to celebrate the 90th birthday of HM Queen Elizabeth II. June 12, 2016.

Seventy-five years ago, in the dark days of October 1940, Winston Churchill's private secretary John Colville wrote this in his diary:

"Today ... Princess Elizabeth spoke for the first time on the wireless ... if the monarchy survives, Queen Elizabeth II should be a most successful radio Queen."

What does it take to be a successful monarch? Well, these days it takes the radio – film – TV – the media. Through these things personality shines. The present Queen is the first whose entire reign has been marked by these things. All her life her people have seen her – the little princess – and heard her speak and have the pictures and the words to remember. And as a young woman she made commitments, and the commitments she made, and her faithfulness to them, were captured for all to hear and see.

What has she said, this remarkable woman whose birthday we commemorate? Sixty-nine years ago, on her 21st birthday, in 1947 in

South Africa, she suggested that we were all called to bring good to the world and then said that to do this:

we must give nothing less than the whole of ourselves. There is a motto which has been borne by many of my ancestors - a noble motto, "I serve". Those words were an inspiration to many bygone heirs to the Throne when they made their knightly dedication as they came to manhood. I cannot do quite as they did.

But through the inventions of science I can do what was not possible for any of them. I can make my solemn act of dedication with a whole Empire listening. I should like to make that dedication now. It is very simple. I declare before you all that my whole life whether it be long or short shall be devoted to your service...

I have never heard anyone, not even the most vehement republican, deny that this is exactly what the Queen has done, as a Princess after that speech for five years and then as our Queen for sixty-three more.

With the utmost restraint and discretion. With focused and single-minded dedication in this marathon reign. Through good and, yes, pretty bad times too for her family and for the nation. Devotion to service.

Today we meet, people of faith reflecting the communities of faith in this nation, to thank God for that. And to ask, what has the engine been for such devotion to service?

The clue – well, it's more than a clue, it's the simple fact – can be found once again in the archive of what she has said.

In 1952 in her first Christmas broadcast, made before I was born (I'm 62; a fully Elizabethan baby!), looking forward to the Coronation, she said this:

"I want to ask you all, whatever your religion may be, to pray for me on that day - to pray 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.

And at Christmas 2011 she said this:

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.

It is my prayer that on this Christmas day we might all find room in our lives for the message of the angels and for the love of God through

Christ our Lord.

And last Christmas, less than six months ago, she said this:

For Joseph and Mary, the circumstances of Jesus's birth - in a stable - were far from ideal, but worse was to come as the family was forced to flee the country.

It's no surprise that such a human story still captures our imagination and continues to inspire all of us who are Christians, the world over.

We rightly say about the monarch in a constitutional monarchy that she is above the fray. In politics, in opinion, in controversy, the Queen's discretion is absolute. But on one thing she is absolutely clear. She is a woman of faith. In a nation where faith is often contended and sometimes despised, she makes no excuse for her own faith, and she does not hide it. On the contrary it is the engine of her devotion to service.

So we who are people of faith thank God for that and pray for her still.

And I think too that this afternoon each of us who are people of faith may learn a lesson from it, in this plural England, in this United

Kingdom, in this Commonwealth of nations. To be strongly and distinctively who we are, and also to hold an inclusive spirit.

There is a saying that I first heard from my friend Bishop Graham Cray: “Roots down, walls down, bridges out”.

Roots down: we can be secure in what we are and what we believe.

Drink deeply from the welling spring. We won't pretend that we're all vaguely the same. We will be be strongly who we are.

Walls down: from our security as people of a clear faith we have no need to hide. We can include. We can be there for all people, undefended, since we are deeply rooted in the faith that we believe God has gifted to us..

Bridges out: actively and courageously we can reach out to our sisters and brothers and together we can continue to build a community of love, as we too devote ourselves to serve.

It seems to me that this is the spirit of this reign, and this monarch's fundamental gift. Roots down, walls down, bridges out. We recall one example today of what faith has wrought in a human life. We thank God for her. And we pray for her nation and our nation – I pray for each of us – that our lives in our smaller ways may become such an example too.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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