

DAYS OF MOURNING AND WEeping

(Sermon Summary)

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Sunday Morning, 14th September 2022

Reading: Deuteronomy 34:1-12 (v8)

Our sovereign Queen was 96 when she died. Moses was 120 years old. The people mourned for Moses. Ten days of mourning have been called in this country

Most of us have not lived under the reign of any other monarch in the UK, just as the people of God had known no other leader but Moses. To most of us, she was a distant figure, but she was a constant in our experience of living in the UK. None of us can pretend to understand how the nation will respond to this period of national mourning or how they will choose to remember her, or maybe not all. We do well to remember that there is no one-size-fits-all way to grieve. We might need to guard against some excess of public grieving. Or avoiding falling captive to public opinion about how we are meant to grieve, what we are meant to do, and not to do.

The death of anyone, but especially someone as important as the Queen, is a moment for solemn reflection. For us as Christians, as well as citizens of the UK, seeking to understand who we are and how we can better reach people today with the gospel, it raises questions that we perhaps do not usually ask. This is, probably, because for most of us, the monarchy is remote to our day-to-day living. But some of those questions we might fruitfully ask are 'What is the monarchy? What role is it to perform? What are we to expect of the person who is monarch? How does it all fit in with the wider purposes of God?' Some of these matters will be attended in the second sermon on this subject.

In some ways, she has come to be the 'public face' of the UK. She has represented the UK on the world stage, giving some clue as to the identity of the nation to other nations as well as reflecting this back to those who live in the UK. The monarchy holds together something of the nation's identity in an implicit way, as if those strands holding together our institutions and way of life were invisible yet real. The Queen has acted like some form of adhesive or glue that has held together something, though what it was she was holding together was becoming more and more brittle, fragile, and liable to fracture.

The monarchy formed some link to the nation's past while, gradually and often in an understated yet definite way, was adapting to changes in the wider culture.

And in it all was the 'mystique' of royalty. There was an 'otherness' about the Royal Family which has both fascinated people, but also led to resentment. The palaces, the wealth, the titles, the obscure protocols, the big events, such as the Trooping of the Colour, Royal weddings and funerals, has lent them a mystique. People have tried to debunk the mystique and find out the secrets. Photographers use long-distance lenses to pry into the privacy of the Royal Family. Interviews, biographies, and revelations about the members of the Royal Family are devoured, not only in the UK, but across the world. Despite the moral failures of some of her children, the Queen has been able to sustain the 'otherness' of royalty and perpetuate something of it to pass on to her oldest son, now that he is King. The fact that people have such an appetite for details about the secret lives and characters of the Royal Family, shows the continuing appeal and fascination. The public feel we only get so near to the 'real people' with all the gossip and revelations that have emerged in the last two decades, yet for all that the Queen, whether deliberately or simply by dint of the role she felt she needed to play, sustained the 'mystique'.

It shows perhaps the deeper human need to connect to some higher figure and authority, to be part of a bigger story, suggesting the Royal Family, perhaps unwittingly, was functioning to fill a void only God could or should fill.

1. It is right to mourn.

The death of any important person in our lives, or in the life of our nation, faces us up with questions. 'Who was the deceased? What was the relationship I had with this person? What difference did that relationship make to me as the person I am? What 'unfinished business' is there?'

Society is loath to admit it but death is a very big thing. It touches on matters of eternity, and sin has robbed people of any sense of confidence in facing what lies beyond this life.

So we should remember the Royal Family as they mourn. Taking away the mystique, they are flesh and blood people who have lost a very significant person in their lives. They will have regrets, things they wished they had not done, had not said, or wished they had said. They will have memories and a deep sense of loss, all the more so since it was only last year that the Duke of Edinburgh died. We should pray for them and, of course, pray for the new King.

We should avoid unbiblical sentimentality. Suddenly the Royal Family are in everyone's prayers. We cannot be fooled by this. Are they really in people's prayers? Are we to

believe that scores of people who showed no interest in the things of God were privately praying all this time and that now the Royal Family are going to feature a bit more prominently in an already functioning private prayer life? We can hardly believe this. Neither can we be overly swept along by the re-appearance centre-stage of some watered-down Christianity which will be featured, it is to be feared, in the public ceremonies and the funeral, in the hands of bishops whom we suspect have little by way of orthodox belief themselves.

Following on from this, we mourn wisely. The Queen may well have been a believer. We might be hopeful on that count. Yet her headship of the Anglican Church, and her Coronation Oath to be the Defender of the Faith, has proved to be empty. Somewhere in it all, her role as monarch, being seemingly impartial in national debates and controversies, has prevented her exercising her duty to toward God. She has sadly presided over decades of doctrinal decline in the Church of England. She will have to answer for this at the throne of God, though it is not for us to judge her harshly, given her other responsibilities of being Queen.

2. We respect authority.

Though the role and actual power of the monarch is limited, we recognize that God has given our nation this form of rule, and we respect the authority He has put over us. This is clear from Roman 13:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:17. Though the Queen has been powerless to stop the decline of the Church of England or alter the downward trajectory of the moral and spiritual life of the nation as a whole, we are perhaps right to think of her being used by God as a restraint upon things being even worse. We do not know what counsels she shared in private to leaders in the nation or around the world. Neither can we calculate how her example might have inspired people to acts of self-denial or personal courage.

We would be right to think of her as a highly credible public figure, who was in public what she was in private. Her formative experiences, living as a young person through the last war, equipped her well to display some admirable and much referred to traits. These include her loyalty, her sense of duty, her self-denial, her devotion to public office, her hard work and her personal modesty.

Many of these attributes are biblically approved. We can read of them in Titus 1:7-8 and 1 Timothy 3:2-3 as expectations of those who are elders. She might well have had to often hold her tongue, express herself carefully and temperately, and not be given to public outbursts of anger or impatience. Her self-control and self-denial stand out as good examples, fully approved in Scripture.

Here is where we suspect some hypocrisy in our national mourning and grieving. She represented something that our nation is moving away from, not towards. We are more

like what we read in 2 Timothy 3:1-4. She may not have been 'Queen of hearts' and we might think better of her for that. But, under God, she might have been the 'Queen of consciences', representing something better, but which, for the most part in our nation, has commanded some respect but not obedience. And that feeds into how we mourn, not so much for her passing, but that the good example she set has not been heeded.