

SERMON ST PHILIP'S – SUNDAY 12 JUNE 2016

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As medicine has improved and longevity grows, many countries including Britain are looking again at the retirement age in order to balance the books. Not so long ago, women could be confident that they could retire at 60 with full pension rights. That age has already risen to 63 and will be 66 by 2020.

However, it will not have escaped your notice as you look at the shops, your TV screens and yesterday the skies, that for one particular lady, the retirement age is 90 already, and rising. Since 1979, Tim O'Donovan, a retired insurance broker who himself is well in to his 80s, has kept a chronicle of the work done each year by the senior members of the Royal Family and published it, normally in a letter to the Times printed on New Year's Day. In 2015, Mr O'Donovan's letter reveals that the Queen carried out no less than 341 engagements – a truly remarkable schedule for an 89 year old. We all expect that, this year, at the age of 90, she will do a similar amount of work.

Today's lessons address the question of the power of God and its relation with earthly powers. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul says that Christ is far above all rule and authority and dominion. He does not say that Jesus supersedes such powers and indeed the phrase "far above" suggests a degree of detachment rather than hands-on management. God works miracles through the hands and feet and hearts and minds of those who follow him on earth, working normally with the framework of the secular authorities.

Our Gospel reading from Mark, echoed in Matthew and Luke, makes clear that we can owe duties to God and to the secular authorities, and that we should try to obey both.

This view is echoed in the first amendment to the United States constitution which starts "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof" before going on to deal with matters such as free speech and a free press. Give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor and give to God what belongs to God.

But are we over-interpreting the Gospel in assuming that duties to God and to the emperor can always be separated? Sometimes, especially in societies which are not democratic or where minorities are not protected, there may be a conflict. In Nazi Germany, some Christians found it hard to reconcile their duty to God with their duty to a civil power that was doing unspeakable evil. Some paid the price. While payment of taxes, even to a disliked Roman occupier, is consistent with the duty to God, participation in the Holocaust was not.

In Britain, we have an established church that is part of the state. It has a duty to ensure that matters of conscience are properly considered in politics. One of the Queen's titles is "Defender of the Faith" and

she is Supreme Governor of the Church of England – she’s not the head because, as mentioned in our Ephesians reading, that position is held by Jesus. A poll in 2012 suggested that this arrangement has almost 80% supports among the public. Indeed it’s clear that the Queen takes this role seriously – to promote both the Christian faith and the freedom of people to follow other faiths.

We hear repeatedly in Christmas broadcasts our Queen encouraging us to put our trust in God, to exercise forgiveness, and find room in our lives for the love of God through Jesus Christ. It is a privilege to have a head of State who loves God in such a way.

We hear throughout the Gospels the concept of Jesus as the Servant King. Jesus who washed the disciples’ feet. The last shall be first. In the same way, the Queen – Head of State of the fifth largest economy in the world – has always seen her role as one of service. She has understood this from a young age; in 1947 at the age of 21, the then Princess Elizabeth gave a broadcast speech in which she said:

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 and the service of our great imperial family to which we all belong.

But I shall not have strength to carry out this resolution alone unless you join in it with me, as I now invite you to do: I know that your support will be unfailingly given. God help me to make good my vow, and God bless all of you who are willing to share in it.

I’m not sure she realised quite what she was signing up to. I doubt she expected to take up the burdens of her role just five years later when her father George VI died at the early age of 56. And I don’t suppose she expected to be still serving us sixty four years after her accession. But it’s obvious that she does not grudge the length of time for which she has had to carry the burden.

Over that time, she has witnessed hardships and triumphs and many changes that make Britain what it is today. A big decision on our future will be taken in ten days’ time. But the Queen has been there to serve us no matter what. She has done so with consideration and warmth. She supports many charities by

acting as Patron. She makes it her business to be on time for events so people are not kept waiting. She was willing to participate in the James Bond sequence that stole the show at the London Olympics opening ceremony. She is known for her ability to put people at ease and her sense of humour. At last month's Royal Windsor Horse Show, her horse won a minor event for which the prize was a Tesco Voucher. I'm not sure Her Majesty has much use for these. But she accepted it with a huge smile and looked delighted.

So as our Queen works her way through the next 341 engagements, representing us all with kindness and consideration, we give thanks to God for her many years of service, her wisdom and her Christian faith. And we ask God to continue to look with favour on her in the years ahead.

God save the Queen.

Amen