

Read the Archbishop's sermon from the Sung Eucharist at Canterbury Cathedral.



Only a few weeks ago, Bishops from across the Anglican Communion gathered in this Cathedral Church for the Lambeth Conference. We came from all corners of the globe, from different languages, different experiences and different countries. Yet, listening to them, one of those things that united them - apart from faith in Christ - was their common respect and admiration for Her Majesty The Queen. She somehow seemed to transcend cultures, languages and nations. When we had our Conference day in London, on the theme of the environment, the 1,470 people sitting in a marquee at lunch in the garden of Lambeth Palace showed rapt attention as her message to them was read.Â

Why? What was it that drew us so much to her? Â

It has been said very often in the last few days, but it bears repeating that in her life and her example, God graciously gave us the most wonderful example of a Christian life and a Christian death. Her Late Majesty taught as much, if not more, about God and grace, both in words and the actions that reinforced them, than any other contemporary figure. We remember her not for what she had, but for what she gave. Â

What a precious blessing. How precious she was therefore to us, and how keenly we feel her loss. Â

And, it happens, through the lectionary, that our reading in Luke today is about loss. The shepherd feels the loss of the sheep keenly, thatâ why he looks for it. The value of the coins is diminished when just one goes missing. We are not complete when one of us is lost â in our families, in our communities, and this week as a nation, Commonwealth, and indeed across the world. Â

Many people will be navigating their way around the raw and ragged edges of grief today, all because of The Queen, but many families will have lost loved ones, or been reminded of the loss of loved ones, this week. Their grief may well feel all the more painful during this time of national and international mourning, for loss is overwhelming to the person bereaved.Â

Shepherds were notoriously unreliable in the days of Jesus. They were liable to drink, they trampled over crops, they were always armed and often violent, and as a result they were the butt of many jokes. People would tell shepherd jokes. So, when Jesus responds to the grumbling of the Pharisees at the beginning of this chapter of Luke, grumbling that he "mixes with the wrong sort of people, you know", it sounds like the opening lines of a shepherd joke when he answers, and then a joke about a careless woman. But in both the Lukan and the Matthean version of the story the punchline transforms the story, for the presumed butt of the jokes - the women, the shepherds - turns out to be the model of God who reaches the lost.

Because nothing is lost to God.

No death is truly the end because we are always called and found, despite our wandering, despite being in some dark corner of our own making, despite mortality, danger and death seeming to have the last word, the shepherd, the woman, reveal the nature of God, who in divine humility searches for us and comes to us.

This time is being spoken of by many as a moment of uncertainty for the nation, of fear as a result of the passing of someone who felt like a near eternal point of stability. That fear relies for its strength on leaving God out of our thinking.

Nothing is lost to God. The lost sheep may have felt fear, but the shepherd was calling and saving. The coin only seemed lost, for the one searching was sure to find.

Whoever you are, however lost you may be, whatever you think of yourself - positive or negative - or fear for someone you love, however final death may seem, there is hope. Not hope as in the sense of "hope I will win the lottery this week" (which would be moderately unlikely as I have never bought a ticket), but the hope that is certain expectation of the future, the hope of God who knows you, loves you, finds you and rejoices in you. And Her Late Majesty knew that, His Majesty trusts that, and from that trust and knowledge comes the capacity to serve, to commit life to others, however long or short it may be. The Queen said that at her 21st birthday and then at her Coronation day address, and His Majesty said it yesterday in the Accession Council, and also in his address to the nation.

But does it apply to everyone? This sense of hope and faith, this sense for our nation we need not fear because there has been a change from permanence to someone else? We see differences in importance of people in our world. Of course, we know that everyone is equal before God, but to take words from George Orwell it does sometimes seem that some are more equal than others, surely?

But in Matthew, the parable of the lost sheep comes in response to a question from Jesus's disciple: "who is the greatest among us?" Jesus response shows us what the Queen knew all too well and which drew us in love for her: "it's not about me", she used to say, as did the Duke of Edinburgh. It's not about me. It's about the Saviour who finds us. It's about the Good Shepherd's promise to gather us up and bring us home, so the day might come when we can rejoice together, reunited.

Jesus places people often thought unimportant at the centre of these parables – shepherds and women. Those who met Her Majesty were always struck by her ability to make them feel as though they were the most important, the only person in the room, the only person in the street, in the crowd. King Charles III has the same ability, to see the value of each person as God sees them. And that is his conscious understanding of people.

I remember some years ago seeing him work his way round the Lady Chapel at Liverpool Cathedral, where there were families of police officers gathered. All the officers whose families were there had died from one cause or another in the previous year, the most recent some two weeks before the service, and that officer's widow and two very small children, for she was young, were there. By the time His Majesty had done the rounds, every person there, and I quote that young widow, felt they mattered uniquely and found some healing.

That same year, it was the year of the European City of Culture for Liverpool, Her Late Majesty came to Liverpool and there was a formal lunch. I was at a table not far away from her. Also at the table with her was a Rwandan woman who had escaped the genocide but lost almost her entire family and seen most terrible horrors. At the end of lunch, the Queen invited her to come and sit next to her, and talked to her for at least 20 minutes, while some of her staff hovered, twitching. And when I spoke to her later, she said, "there was healing".

Both Her late Majesty and His Majesty treat others as special because for both their faith is built on the same rock. The rock of Christ. It is a rock on which we too can stand. There is room on that rock for every human being, however important or unimportant. Our sure hope comes from the fact the monarchy is not in a person, it is in God's loving grace that he poured upon the Queen and pours upon the King – Thy choicest gifts in store, on him be pleased to pour.

This is the faith that enabled Her Late Majesty to be such a blessing to us, and to people around the world, an example of wisdom and reconciliation. Some of us will remember seeing on television her visit to Ireland in 2011 when, at the formal state dinner, she opened her speech in the Irish language, and Mary MacAleese, the then President of Ireland, looked at her neighbour at the table and went "wow". Or when Her Majesty in 2012, chose quite literally to extend the hand of friendship to Martin McGuinness, despite their differences and painful history – including the very personal history for the Queen of the death of her beloved uncle Lord Mountbatten as a result of an IRA attack in 1979. She was able to offer her hand because she stood on the rock of Christ.

She knew that every person is part of the flock, she saw every one of her subjects and every person she met as part of God's treasured people. She knew that even in the shadow of the valley of death the Good Shepherd was with her. She knew that throughout this country's darkest days and greatest victories, the hand of the Lord seeks us out and guides us. His Majesty knows the same. We have continuity, we have stability through grace.

Her life made sense in the light of Jesus Christ, her Lord and Saviour. So does that of His Majesty.

This is a moment of deep grief, indeed. As Her Majesty said herself "grief is the price we pay for love". But that love has in it the reality of hope that can lift heavy hearts, heal wearied spirits, for it is love that originates in God.

All that is lost will be found again, as surely as Christ Jesus was raised from the dead and defeated death. Â

And He will gather us all together in heaven on the glorious day of resurrection where, in a different context, as Her Late Majesty once said to us in difficult times, â  we will meet again  .Â

AmenÂ

8 min read

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