

Her Majesty – Being Joyful, Keeping the Faith, Doing the Little Things

Address at the Service of Commemoration and Thanksgiving following the Death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II Sunday 18 September 2022, 11.15am

The Very Revd Dr Sarah Rowland Jones LVO OBE, Dean of St Davids

Psalm 121

Revelation 7:9-17

Yn enw'r Tad, a'r Mab, a'r Ysbryd Glan

This is a service of Commemoration and Thanksgiving, coffa a diolchgarwch, remembrance and gratitude, even celebration, of a long life, lived to the full, a life of dedication, service, and faithfulness to the most demanding of callings. Much has been shared about the life of Her late Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II in the nine days since her death. What more can be said? Let me begin with St Davids Cathedral's unique relationship with royalty. At the Reformation, one of the Canon's stalls – the carved seats of the senior clergy in the Quire – came into the possession of the Crown. We now call it the Sovereign's Stall. In the centuries since, Her late Majesty was the only monarch who ever visited, who ever sat in the Sovereign's Stall – and she came four times.

That said, links to royalty are older and wider. Her Majesty's 14th great grandfather, Edmund Tudor, of the Tudors of Penmynydd, Sîr Fôn, father of Henry VII, lies in a tomb beyond the Quire. Other forebears came, Edward I, Henry II, William 'the Conqueror', with ulterior motives of politics and power. Among Welsh royalty predating the Tudors yr Arglwydd Rhys, 13th century Prince of Deheubarth, sometimes termed Prince of Wales, has his tomb in the North Choir Aisle. In the 11th century Rhys ap Tewdwr, King of Deheubarth, took refuge here, and Gruffydd ap Cynan, King of Gwynedd, came to make alliance, and throw out Caradog ap Gruffudd of Gwent and Morgannwg. Those were turbulent and bloody times.

But through all this, right back to Dewi in the 6th century, people came here as pilgrims. Just as Dewi found this a place to come close to God, so did they. Many of you will know personally that if you come once, that's it – you'll find yourself endlessly drawn back! And so the Queen came four times. I don't know what drew her, but I so know of her faith. Dewi's God, our God, was most certainly her God too. And I see Dewi's most famous words writ large in her life: be joyful, keep the faith, and do the little things you've seen and heard in me; byddwch lawen, chadwch eich ffydd a'ch credo, a gwnewch y pethau bychain a welsoch ac a glywsoch gennyf i.

Be joyful, byddwch lawen, llawenhewch – I'm remembering and celebrating Paddington and marmalade sandwiches, and James Bond at the London Olympics. The late Queen certainly had a sense of humour, which became more evident as straight-jackets of social convention loosened through the decades. She wasn't taking life lightly, but relishing life to the full.

Before ordination, I was a member of Her Majesty's Diplomat Service – holding the Queen's Commission, like a military officer. Posted to the Embassy in Budapest, in 1993 I helped organise her state visit to Hungary. On the first afternoon, and not appearing in the official programme, was a reception for the media. Palace and Embassy press officers gave a briefing; then the Queen and Duke of Edinburgh joined us, drinks were served and everyone mingled. It's no surprise that wherever Prince Philip was, there were gales of laughter – but it was true also with Her Majesty, who evidently had quite a rapport with many regular royal correspondents, and was not above leg-pulling and some merciless teasing.

Much has been said of the promise made by the Princess Elizabeth on her 21st birthday broadcast to the Commonwealth, to devote her whole life, whether long or short, to service. Devote it to service, she did. Watching her at close hand through the four days of that State Visit made me realise how unremittingly hard she worked, when she was on show – as she said, she had to be seen to be believed. Yet this did not appear a burden. She increasingly seems to have found a way to inhabit the responsibilities of monarchy with a lightness not so far from ‘joy’. The 2nd century bishop Irenaeus said the glory of God is best seen in human beings fully alive. The Queen was fully alive – her face so often lit up in conversation with others. Those famous words ‘And what do you do?’ became an invitation designed to bring out the best in them.

I was particularly moved to read a tribute from Patrick Djargun Dodson, of an Australian Aboriginal delegation who met the Queen in 1999. Emotion filled him as he recalled ‘We were totally disarmed ... she was so welcoming ... I think for the first time in our lives, we were treated properly. She treated us as human beings.’

There’s a Bible verse that says ‘The joy of the Lord is my strength’ (Neh 8:10). I suspect the reverse is also true: that the Lord’s joy in humanity is a source of our strength. The Queen knew God’s joy and God’s strength – in good times and in tough times, when perhaps things might have been said or done differently. God’s joy and strength carried her through, and she shared them generously: her Covid broadcasts spring to mind.

So I remember and celebrate Her late Majesty, remembering Dewi’s words, keep the faith - chadwch eich ffydd a’ch credo. The Queen kept her faith, and it kept her. Recent Christmas broadcasts spoke of Jesus Christ, his teaching and example, as her bedrock, her anchor.

I’ve spoken previously about how seeing her take time during the State Visit to Hungary, to sit alone in a Cathedral, in the deep stillness of silent prayer, left a lasting impression on me. It seemed her faith grounded her – I dare to believe that she found her ultimate sense of identity as a beloved child of God, held in the palm of his hand. This defined her, not ‘being Queen’, and gave her a liberty to wear the crown a little more lightly – always seriously, but in a way that she, and others, could freely flourish as she lived out her calling.

Such faith is not just a philosophy for life. It’s the capacity to draw on God’s strength: as the verses from the Psalm sung so beautifully by the choir said, our help comes from the Lord. He assists us to grow into our best selves, through, as Her Majesty said in her 2017 Christmas broadcast, trying to follow Jesus Christ’s teaching and finding him the guiding light of our lives. She went on, ‘Christ’s example helps me see the value of doing small things with great love.’ Ah yes, Dewi’s pethau bychain.

We did indeed see small things done with great love, in Her Majesty – little things that make a big difference: her diligence, faithfulness, hard work; truthfulness, honesty and integrity; being on time; doing her boxes. Until recently she read all the letters sent to her, and replies came swiftly from her staff, from whom she expected the same high standards of courtesy towards us all. Even on the day before her death, she signed off on ministerial appointments.

She did her homework. When, on her arrival in Budapest, I was introduced to her in the welcoming line-up, she said ‘I’ve seen your name on a lot of letters’. I’d been the main correspondent with her Private Secretary, and she’d taken a keen interest in all the details. Then once the visit got under way, I noticed other little things she and Prince Philip did, from the moment they arrived in any venue, to the moment they left, going out of their way to give others a good experience. Arriving and leaving, they made sure she could be clearly seen by crowds. He

would stand back, ensuring others did also, to show her to best advantage, just as she, such a petite figure, chose such bright clothes, to be extra-visible. In conversation with those she met, though I suspect she was a very shy person, she aimed to put others at their ease.

She had a grace-filled sense of the intrinsic value, of every human person, which she conveyed to those she met – and indeed, to those she didn't. It has been amazing to watch the crowds filing past, on the BBC's live feed of her lying in state, certainly a countless multitude from every nation, all tribes and peoples and languages. It is a very visible illustration of the deep, deep affection she has drawn out of so many, whether she ever met them or not.

But now she is gone, to be with that other, countless, heavenly multitude from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, before the throne of God, of which our Bible reading spoke; there through the blood of the Lamb, Christ's conquest of sin and death through cross and resurrection. These are God's faithful ones, and he is their shelter, their shepherd, wiping every tear from every eye, where they are renewed to youthful vigour through the springs of the water of life, through his infinite love.

So now it is for us to say, with Paddington, 'Goodbye – and thank you, for everything.'

The best 'thank you' that we can give, to her, and to the God who made her, called her, sustained her, and who has now called her home, is to follow the best of her example, the best of Dewi's teaching, of joy and faithfulness and little things, in God's strength and love. Let us pray these for her son, our new King, who also loves this place deeply and returns often. May he find his own ways to live with holy joy and faithfulness and integrity, in these new and weighty responsibilities of State now laid upon him.

And let us pray them for ourselves and for each other. Let us always speak and act to draw out the best in one another. Dewi's words were not for individuals, but for his whole community together. The Queen understood this wider dimension of life. At 21, when she made her commitment to a life of service, she followed it with these words:

I shall not have strength to carry out this resolution alone unless you join in it with me
... 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...

May God in Jesus Christ help us to help our King and to help each other, as he helped Dewi, as he helped our Queen – to be joyful, keep the faith, and do his little things. Felly, byddwch lawen, chadwch eich ffydd a'ch credo, a gwnewch ei pethau bychain. As we remember and give thanks today, may he bless us, so we may be a blessing to others – as he blessed Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, and made her a blessing to so many. Amen