

Opinion "May flights of angels sing thee to thy rest": Elizabeth II and the virtues of a Christian monarchy

Alison Milbank

Posted Tue 13 Sep 2022, 12:39pm

Updated Tue 13 Sep 2022, 12:39pm



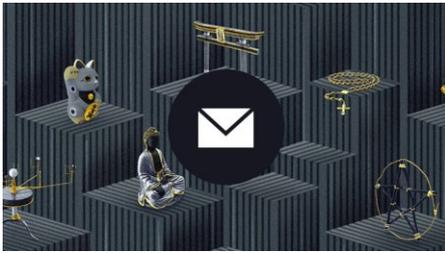
The virtues and the faith of the late Queen Elizabeth, far from being old-fashioned and superseded, are what we need for our future, which will only be sustainable if we can cooperate, act sacrificially, and show steadfastness and loyalty. (Max Mumby / Indigo / Getty Images).

Like so many Anglican clergy at the altar on the Sunday following the death of Queen Elizabeth II, I carefully negotiated my way through the 1662 liturgy to change each "she" to "he" and each "Elizabeth" to "Charles". The British constitution in its wisdom moves swiftly from the passing of one monarch to the accession of the next to ensure continuity, and so our vestments were white, even though our hearts were dark and heavy with mourning.

Most subjects of the late Queen have known no other monarch and her life shapes our own. Indeed, our personal sense of continuity is shaken by the passing of such a stable and reliable presence in the narrative of our lives.

As I left the cathedral, out of the mist emerged some early visitors to sign the condolence book, among whom were three teenagers with their father. Young people have been to the fore in the crowds glimpsed at Buckingham Palace, for they sense the gears of history shifting and the loss of something and someone precious. Without realising it, when people are drawn to the mystique of the monarchy, it is to something beyond the pageantry which mediates it: faith in a view of reality as rich and meaningful, for which we are fitted because we were made to do so by a Maker.

Elizabeth II's reticence itself suggested a depth of significance to her words and actions as coming from a well of strength beyond herself, which was the simple truth.



Want the best of Religion & Ethics delivered to your mailbox? Sign up for our weekly newsletter.

Newsletter Subscribe

-
-

Your information is being handled in accordance with the [ABC Privacy Collection Statement](#).

Our world is so crisis-riven and demoralised, our institutions so weak, that the late Queen's steadfastness was all the more important. In her rested that vision of service and the goal of the Common Good that is so lacking in our economic and political life in the United Kingdom and around the world. And in her also rested that Christian faith that so many have forgotten. It was part of her from childhood when her mother taught her collects and psalms from the *Book of Common Prayer*; it was her life's pattern as she sought to fulfil her coronation oath. Week by week she prayed, read her Bible and attended church in a society ruled by the commercial desecration of the Sabbath; she lived simply amid all the pomp and ceremony of her public role. Increasingly, she affirmed her faith in her Christmas messages, where in the 2021 broadcast, for example, she spoke of Christ's teachings as "the bedrock of my faith".

Elizabeth's faith reflected the religious basis of the British constitution, which has been affirmed by the proclamation of the accession of the new king, in which God's blessing is called down upon him, and confirmed by Charles's own prayer for the guidance of Almighty God. This Christian foundation matters because the power of the monarchy as guarantor of the British constitution (and of those of Australia, Canada, and elsewhere), in contrast to an elected figure, lies in the way in which it asserts that there is an authority beyond our own. This truth lies behind the reference in the Accession Proclamation to "God by whom kings and queens reign". The monarchic system demonstrates that it is God alone who can ground human power, and this means there is a divine pressure beyond the most powerful political leaders calling them to account.

Foundational to this religious reality is a truth and justice in which we will find our common good together, where what is good for me can only be completed in your well-being. There is more to society than a contestation of interest groups. Queen Elizabeth reinterpreted her title, "Defender of the Faith", in this manner at the time of her Diamond Jubilee in 2012, when she said that the Church of England, of which she is Supreme Governor, "has a duty to protect the free practice of all other faiths in this country" — again expressing the Christian idea of the Common Good, as a mode of mutual flourishing.

That vision of the Anglican Church as an inclusive institution, open to everyone and the priest's cure of souls extending to everyone in his or her parish, no matter what their faith or lack of it, is increasingly under threat in Britain. This is partly through pastoral reorganisation and partly the rise of a gathered model of church in evangelicalism, reluctant to take funerals for all who come. The Queen's shaping by the rhythm of scripture and Anglican liturgy is undervalued by many in the Church today, yet it is sustaining. A faith needs deep rooted sustenance by scripture and tradition to have the staying power of Elizabeth II.

Our economy is in meltdown; our young people have never been so lonely and isolated; our sense of values so attenuated, our need for a simpler, more sustainable way of living more pressing. Only a rootedness in the moral realism of the Common Good will enable the radical actions needed to address these various crises. It seems ridiculous to suggest that one elderly lady should bear the weight of this

ethical and ecclesial tradition, but her role has been fulfilled with such consistency that she reveals a possibility, a potential: "the hopes and fears of all the years" she once quoted in her Christmas message about her Saviour are also met in her.

At the end of his message to the nation at his mother's passing, Charles quoted some words of Horatio from *Hamlet*, set to music by the composer John Tavener: "may flights of angels sing thee to thy rest", and sung at Diana's funeral. Horatio's words have an older reference. They derive from the *In Paradisum* antiphon from the Latin mass for the dead:

May the angels lead you into paradise; may the martyrs receive you at your arrival
and lead you to the holy city Jerusalem. May choirs of angels receive you and with
Lazarus, once [a] poor [man], may you have eternal rest.

In the gospel parable, it is the poor man, Lazarus, who is taken to the peace and joy of Abraham's bosom. Eternal life is equally for Queen and pauper, for all are one in the body of Christ.

There is a danger that we consign Elizabeth and what she represents of embodied faithfulness to the angels and to history and go forward on our atomised way as a society and a Church into an ever more individualist future, where the only mutual belonging is in our separate identity groups. Instead, let us use that sense of common loss to forge ever-stronger bonds between neighbours, classes, cultures, and nations, and resist the forces that seek to pull us apart. As King Charles said in his first speech, we must instead "help ... to bring the marginal to the centre ground"; the needs of Lazarus must be at the heart of our attention. We need strong neighbourhoods and parishes to resist the pressures of globalisation, of racism and hate. The virtues and the faith of the late Queen, far from being old-fashioned and superseded, are what we need for our future, which will only be sustainable if we can co-operate, act sacrificially, and show steadfastness and loyalty.

So we clergy can wear our white vestments of hope with integrity, for in laying Elizabeth to rest and acknowledging the religious resources upon which she drew, we can affirm the value of a Christian monarchy as offering a world of many faiths and cultures a moral umbrella, in which we can imagine together a better world of real justice, peace, and co-operation.

May she rest in peace and rise in glory. And may her faithfulness inspire and steady us in the years to come.

Alison Milbank is Canon Theologian at Southwell Minster, and Professor of Theology and Literature and the Director of Postgraduate Studies in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Nottingham. Her most recent book is God and the Gothic: Religion, Romance, and Reality in the English Literary Tradition.

Topics

- Royalty
- Community and Society
- Religion and Beliefs
- Christianity
- Anglicans
- Theology
- Ethics

Religion & Ethics

- [link Read](#)
- [link Watch](#)
- [link Listen](#)
- [collection News](#)
- [collection Opinion](#)
- [link About](#)
- [link Contact](#)

Connect with Religion & Ethics

- [Facebook](#)
- [Twitter](#)

Newsletter Subscribe

-
-

Your information is being handled in accordance with the [ABC Privacy Collection Statement](#).

Podcast

Subscribe to [Compass podcast](#)

Subscribe to [Religion & Ethics RSS feed](#)

Subscribe to [Compass RSS feed](#)