



**A sermon preached at a Service of Reflection for the life of Her Majesty
Queen Elizabeth II, as delivered by the Most Revd John McDowell,
Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland, in the Cathedral
Church of St Anne, Belfast, on Tuesday 13 September 2022.**

Readings: Joshua 4:1-3,13,19-24 & Philippians 4:4-9

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

In anim a Áthair, agus a Mhic agus a Spiorad Naomh. Amen.

For many of us in the United Kingdom there were two people whose deaths we could never imagine. Our own and the Queen's. And I think that is one of the reasons why the death of Queen Elizabeth was literally *felt* – felt so keenly by so many people when the news broke on Thursday afternoon. It was as though the nation's collective grief was gathered up in those remarkable words of Christopher Marlowe's: "*If I had wept a sea of tears for her, it would not ease the sorrow I sustain*".

And if that was how those of us felt who were in many ways part of her adopted family through her coronation oath, how much more profound must that feeling of loss be to those of the Queen's blood family; those who knew her best and loved her most; Your Majesty, our prayers will be with you and your family for a long time to come.

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St Paul could be a bit of a gloomy old moralist at times and some of his injunctions contained in his letters are very far from easy to fulfil. It's pretty difficult to *"have no anxiety about anything"*. But I would dare to suggest that for the family of the late Queen and for millions of others, there will be no difficulty whatsoever, when she comes to mind, in following St Paul's command to think on *"whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, whatever is worthy of praise"*.

There were many other words used about the late Queen during her long reign. Faithfulness, care, dutifulness, love, devotion. And all of these could be employed to describe her relationship with Northern Ireland and, I have to say, probably with patience binding them all together. But paying attention especially to what she said most recently, the word which I think will be most associated with Queen Elizabeth and Ireland, north and south, is *Reconciliation*.

It's a great New Testament word. It's a great civic word. And it's a hard word. So hard in the religious sense that it was beyond the power of humanity to achieve, and God Himself had to give it to us as a gift in His Son. And as a disciple of Jesus Christ, Queen Elizabeth followed where Jesus led as women often have in the elusive and unfinished work of reconciliation here in Northern Ireland. *For where the Master is, there will the servant be also.*

It has always been love's way that in order to rise, she stoops; so bowing of the head in respect was far more powerful than much grander gestures would have been.

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Love listens far more than she speaks, so a few words in an unfamiliar tongue and a judicious sentence or two of heartfelt regret and wisdom said far more than ceaseless volubility. Love never rushes anything for fear of overwhelming the beloved, but when the moment was right she walked the few steps between two Houses of Prayer in Enniskillen alongside the beloved, in encouragement and affection. And although love is easily injured, she keeps no record of wrongs and extends the open hand of sincerity and friendship, with courage, to create an environment and an atmosphere where reconciliation has a chance.

Love never fails. *Where the Master is there will the servant be also.*

Reconciliation is about the restoration of broken relationships. And the word should never be cheapened by pretending it's an easy thing to achieve. And by and large in the work of reconciliation most of our victories are achieved quietly and in private: and most of our humiliations will be in public.

Reconciliation requires the greatest of all religious virtues, *love*; and it requires the greatest of all civic virtues, *courage*. But as the great apostle of reconciliation says: "*What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, do; and the God of peace will be with you*".

And who can doubt that the Holy Spirit of the God of Peace was present in the mind and in the heart of the late Queen, when she spoke her judicious and generous words, and walked the hard road of reconciliation, in this Province, and on this island.

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The Queen's vocation as a Christian monarch to work for the good of all her people went far beyond the boundaries of these islands, but we have much to learn from it.

That it is Christian to be tolerant not because we believe so little about God, but because of the nature of the God we believe in and because we believe so much in the importance of a free response to God's call. So firmly rooted in her Christian Faith, the Queen was therefore firm in her belief that it is no part of a Christian's vocation to belittle another person's faith or lack of it.

It's only an impression, but it did seem to me that in the last years of her reign the tone and content of the Queen's broadcasts became slightly more overtly religious and perhaps a little more personal. On Christmas Day, only four or five years ago, she said this:

"Although we are capable of great acts of kindness, history teaches us that we sometimes need saving from ourselves – from our recklessness and greed. So God sent into the world a unique person – neither a philosopher or a general, important as they are; but a Saviour with the power to forgive. Forgiveness lies at the heart of the Christian Faith. It can heal broken families, it can restore friendships, and it can reconcile divided communities."

And she went on to say:

"And it is in forgiveness that we feel the power of God's love."

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At her baptism Elizabeth Alexandra Mary was signed on her forehead with the sign of sacrifice; the Cross. And for ninety-six years in a life which was a prodigy of steady endeavour she offered herself, her soul and body, as a living sacrifice to God who loves her with an everlasting love.

So, I want to finish by reminding us of those final words spoken by Mr Valiant for Truth in Bunyan's 'Pilgrim's Progress', some of which the Queen herself used in her very first television broadcast in 1957:

"Then he said, I am going to my Father's, and though with great difficulty I am got hither, yet now do I not repent me of all the trouble I have been to arrive where I am. My sword I give to him who will succeed me in my pilgrimage, and my courage and skill to him that can get it. My marks and scars I carry with me, that I have fought his battles who will now be my Rewarder. And when the Day when he must go hence was come, many accompanied him to the riverside, into which as he went he said, 'Death where is thy sting?' And he went down deeper; he said, 'Grave where is thy victory?' And so he passed over."

And the trumpets sounded for her on the other side.

Now to the King of Ages; immortal, invisible, the only true God, be ascribed all might, majesty, dominion and power, as is most justly due.

God Save the King

+John Armagh

13 September 2022