

Sermon

God Save the King!

1 Kings 3:5-10; 1 Peter 2:13-17; Matthew 22:16-22

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God save the King!

Last night our time was the coronation of our King Charles III. I hope you watched it or that you will make a point of watching it. Because at the heart of the coronation is the concept of covenant. A double covenant between God and the King, the King and the people. Where else do we experience a covenant in contemporary life? - in a wedding. If you have a wedding in the family you should be there. We have a covenant in the nation and it behoves us to take part as much as we are able.

I want us to consider together Biblical origins of the coronation and some Biblical understandings of our relationship to our sovereign.

Servant Leader

The form of the Coronation service is largely unchanged over centuries. It is very definitely not a celebration by a powerful ruler, lording it over his people. Some rulers in the world and many in history have been of that nature, but the British Coronation is deeply based on scripture and the teaching of Christ.

In Matthew 20:25-28, we read that Jesus said to his disciples,

"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave-- just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

This is the attitude which was promoted through last night's service. The first words the King said are "In his name and after his example I come not to be served but to serve." He directly quoted Jesus from this passage and echoed the sentiment of his mother in her 21st Birthday pledge to serve the people all her life, "my whole life, whether it be long or short, shall be devoted to your service".

Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali wrote, "[The coronation service] represents, as perhaps nothing else, the character, beliefs and values of the nation, and reveals the cumulative nature of our constitutional arrangements, as well as the place of the monarch in them. It is based on the British sense of valuing wisdom, since it is mediated over the centuries."¹

Presentation of the Bible

Early in the service, the King was given a Bible with the words:

Sir, to keep you ever mindful of the law and the Gospel of God as the Rule for the whole life and government of Christian Princes, receive this Book, the most valuable thing that this world affords. Here is Wisdom; this is the royal Law; these are the lively Oracles of God.

This echoes the instruction in Deuteronomy that a new king was to copy out the scroll of the Jewish Law and read it all his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees ...²

Michael Nazir-Ali again wrote, "... since at least the time of Alfred the Great, our laws have been derived from and made consistent with the teaching of the Bible, especially the Ten Commandments and our Lord's summary of them."

Proclamation, Oaths and Anointing

The form of coronation draws on ancient Hebrew practices. When King David was near the end of his life, he ruled that Solomon was to be his heir and that the High Priest, Zadok, and the prophet, Nathan, should anoint Solomon, blow a trumpet, proclaim him king, then seat him on the royal throne.

Early on the king was presented to the people to ask if we accept him as our king. It is not a *fait accompli*, it is a compact, a covenant between the people and the sovereign, especially in a constitutional monarchy.

The King then made oaths to govern according to the laws and customs of the peoples he rules. Since the time of King John and Magna Charta it has been clear that the king is not above the law. He swore to cause Law and justice in mercy to be executed in all his judgements. Rulers are called by God not just to make laws but to enforce them. Yet God also shows mercy. The Apostle James wrote, "Mercy triumphs over judgment!"³

Wisdom

Our Old Testament lesson was the account of a dream King Solomon had in which God told him to ask for whatever he wanted. Solomon's answer was to ask for wisdom to rule his people. God expressed his

¹ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/05/03/coronation-critics-forget-the-point-of-rituals/>

² Deuteronomy 17:18-19

³ James 2:13

pleasure with that request and therefore granted Solomon both a discerning heart and also riches and honour.

King Charles prayed for God's help in the service. This was a new addition to the service. We are told that the form of service was agreed between the Archbishop and the King. So these are words he chose to pray:

GOD of compassion and mercy whose Son was sent not to be served but to serve, give grace that I may find in thy service perfect freedom and in that freedom knowledge of thy truth. Grant that I may be a blessing to all thy children, of every faith and belief, that together we may discover the ways of gentleness and be led into the paths of peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Then followed the anointing. As we have heard this is based on the ancient Hebrew practice of commissioning kings, prophets and priests. There is humility in the action. To be anointed he laid aside the glorious Robe of State, wearing a simple linen tunic.

In this simplicity he was anointed on head, heart and hands, that the work of his hands would be blessed, that he would have grace to govern and preserve his people in peace and godliness and at the last be himself a partaker of Christ's eternal kingdom.



Investiture

Then followed the investiture which is all symbolic of the majesty, dignity, authority of the sovereign.

Spurs

The sovereign is the fount of chivalry in the nation. The medieval code of chivalry emphasised responsibility and protection of the weak. So he was given spurs representing military honour and chivalry and reminded to be an advocate for those in need.

The Sword of Offering was given to the King to represent justice. There is as much here of restraint as of power. The words of the Archbishop on presenting the Sword of Offering include: "a sign and symbol not of judgement, but of justice; not of might, but of mercy." It reminds me of the words of Habbakkuk to God, "in wrath remember mercy."⁴

He was then given the **Armills** (offered as bracelets of sincerity and wisdom, tokens of the Lord's



⁴ Habbakuk 3:3

protection embracing him on every side) and the **Robe & Stole Royal** – symbols of righteousness and salvation.



The Orb was presented to him to hold before it was replaced on the altar. It represents the world surmounted by the cross of Christ. It is a symbol that Christ is the King of Kings and this sovereign is subject to Christ.

The Ring. We use rings in weddings as symbols of the covenant between the couple. So too, the ring is a sign of the covenant sworn between God and the King and the King and people.

The Glove is a token of holding authority with gentleness and grace.

Sceptres are a form of rod – itself an ancient symbol of authority. Two sceptres were given to the King.

The Royal Sceptre represents kingly power and justice. This is surmounted by the Cross – since God is the source of justice. The second is **the Rod of equity and mercy** - a symbol of covenant and peace. It has a dove representing the Holy Spirit. The prayer was that the Holy Spirit would anoint the King with wisdom and direct him with grace so that justice and mercy would be seen in all the earth.

The **crown** is the sign of royal majesty – again it is surmounted by the cross. The cross is over the king. A title of God in the Bible is God Almighty. The Greek word is *Pantocrator* – ruler of all. Yet again the monarch, and we with him, are reminded that God is the ruler of all including the King.

Finally, he was seated on the throne – the seat of authority, judgement and rule.



Our response

I have said that the coronation is a time of making covenant between the King and the people. How does the Bible teach us to regard this relationship?

We have been following the first epistle of Peter which has a section devoted to this question of relating to authority. Peter told them and us to submit ourselves to every authority instituted among men starting with the king and then those under the sovereign.⁵ The passage ended with, “Honour the king.”

Don't think this was easier for Peter than for us. Quite the reverse! The supreme authority of Peter's day was the Emperor Nero who was corrupt and a terrible persecutor of the Church. We are to show proper respect for everyone. Love other believers, fear God and honour the King.

⁵ 1 Peter 2:13

Think for a moment of David when he was persecuted by King Saul who was insanely envious of him. Saul unjustly wanted to kill David. Twice David was in the position where he might easily kill King Saul – yet he refused to harm him. He honoured him for his role and entrusted his own cause to God.

There is of course the question of how far our obedience goes. That is a huge philosophical question in its own right. Our gospel reading provides some insight.

The leaders were trying to get rid of Jesus. They hatched a plan in cahoots with their archenemies who supported King Herod to trap him. The Romans exacted a heavy tax which the Herodians supported, but the people and the Pharisees hated paying it. So they asked whether it was right to the Roman taxes. If he answered no, he would be in trouble with the Romans. If he answered yes, the people would be displeased.

Jesus' answer had the brilliance of divine wisdom:

Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him a denarius, ²⁰ and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?" ²¹ "Caesar's," they replied. Then he said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." ⁶

The coin carried the image of Caesar and belonged to him. The unspoken inference is that people carry the image of God and belong to him. Therefore, in things lawful obey the civil authorities. But give to God what belongs to God. Our worship must be addressed to God alone and our conscience needs to obey God.

Let us give thanks that our new King has pledged himself to be a servant leader as was his mother and has chosen to pray for God's help to be a blessing to all his people and that we may together find the ways of gentleness and peace.

Amen to his prayer.

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⁶ Matthew 22:19-21