

24<sup>th</sup> April 2016

Preacher: Jennifer Potter

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**HYMNS:**    **25**    **“God is here! As we his people”**  
              **661**    **“Give me the faith which can remove”**  
              **660**    **“Called by Christ to be disciples”**  
              **658**    **“A charge to keep I have”**

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**READINGS:** **Acts 11:1-18**  
                  **John 13:31-35**

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### ***“LOVE AND SERVICE”***

Whether you are a royalist or a republican you cannot have been unaware that this week Queen Elizabeth II has been celebrating her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. She has been reigning for 64 years and already, last year, she became the longest reigning monarch in British history.

The Bible Society in Britain has issued a special book in honour of the Queen’s birthday entitled “The servant Queen and the King she serves” which shows how the Queen’s Christian faith has undergirded her whole life.

Yes, in comparison to us she lives a gilded life in palaces with a retinue of servants but it will be helpful for us to remind ourselves that, although a 90 year old senior citizen, she still works over 40 hours per week – reading her Government papers, visiting people around Britain and beyond and receiving visitors, including a session with the Prime Minister each week.

The Queen never went to University, indeed never went to school outside the Palace but she has been the adviser and confidante to 12 British Prime Ministers. She attends Church weekly even when she is on holiday and has her own daily prayer time. Her circle of concern embraces people of all faiths and none.

The Queen has been a remarkably calm and consistent presence over the years and her coronation promise of service to the nation has always been at the heart of her daily life. In an interview in 2002 the Queen answered a question about the secret of her remarkable consistency of character in these words:

“I just know how much I rely on my faith to guide me through the good times and the bad. Each day is a new beginning. I know that the only way to live my life is to try to do what is right and to put my trust in God .. I draw strength from the message of hope in the Christian Gospel.”

In our reading from the Book of Acts we heard the story of how Peter, the disciple of Jesus and faithful Jew was led by the Holy Spirit to reach out to non-Jews – to baptise Cornelius and his household and not to demand that they follow Jewish food regulations and the practice of circumcision.

This action and this attitude allowed the message of Christ to burst out from the confines of Judaism and reach out, firstly across the Mediterranean world with the journeys of Paul and then across the whole world – even to us.

The Queen is Supreme Governor of the Church of England and yet during her reign there has been a remarkable shift – she has extended the hand of friendship to people of other faiths and has encouraged her son, Charles, to work closely with the leaders of other faith groups.

Yet she has done something more remarkable. She owes her title of Supreme Governor of the Church of England to King Henry VIII's break with the Church of Rome in the 16<sup>th</sup> century – yet she, of all monarchs, has done most to bring reconciliation in the context of centuries of mistrust and suspicion with the Roman Catholic Church. She has visited the Vatican five times and has welcomed two popes to this country.

There is nothing more traditional than the monarchy yet the Queen has sought to move out from beyond the traditional positions and attitudes to reach out in love and service to others – even those who for years were considered 'enemies'.

Next to the monarchy churches are perhaps the institutions that sit most tightly to their traditions and practices. Here at Wesley's Chapel, custodians, as we are, of the bones of John Wesley, we are at pains to remember and commemorate Wesley's conversion day re-enacting all that Wesley did on that day.

In matters of doctrine or ethics in the church if we want to change our stance – it is never done lightly. Studies are done, reports are brought to Conference, a debate is held and there is a vote. The discernment of the moving of the Holy Spirit is not always easy – but we have in Jesus the example of a man who broke through the taboos and traditions of his Jewish faith and culture – love and service, compassion and care were always uppermost in his mind.

- Jesus reached out to the Samaritan woman at the well, a person marginalised by her community.
- Jesus did not hesitate to break the Sabbath rules in order to help people in need.
- Jesus spoke to those whom other religious leaders shunned – tax collectors, women of ill reputation, the hated Samaritans and non-Jews – the Gentiles who did not follow the strict purity laws like the Jews.

And we also have the example of Peter – a man who had to discard his fixed ideas about who could be in and who was outside the kingdom of God. Not only did Peter

come to realise that baptising Cornelius and his family was at the leading of the Holy Spirit but Peter also realised that there was no need for those who wanted to follow Jesus to have to, in effect, become Jews and follow the old rituals. Then Peter had to defend his actions against those died-in-the-wool, traditionalist Jews who could not accept the reception of Gentiles into the community of Jesus people.

Our God, the God of the whole created universe, is always trying to urge us on to open up our minds, to deepen our understanding and to realise that the message of Christ is for all without distinction. Our love and dedication to service should always be leading us to cross barriers so as to love and serve all whom God calls his children.

There is another example of the way our otherwise-traditionalist Queen has brought about a change that could scarcely have been hoped for a generation ago. Ireland – for centuries the relationship of Britain and Ireland has been a long sore, giving rise to violence and terrorism, loss of life, Catholic/Protestant animosity intimidation and fear wracking society.

The Queen by her style and in her actions has eased these centuries-long tensions especially in the wake of the Good Friday Agreement. In her historic visit to Ireland in May 2011 she astonished many with the candour of her remarks. She acknowledged that with the benefit of hindsight there were things that would have been done differently – or indeed, not done at all. These words and the bowing of her head at the Garden of Remembrance in honour of those who died in rebellion to the Crown in Ireland – helped to set a different atmosphere and ease centuries of antagonism.

If we go back to the story of Peter and Cornelius for a moment – we need to remind ourselves that Peter's actions in embracing the gentile, Roman Cornelius and his family was not just radical in a religious sense, but like the Queen in Ireland, in a political sense, too.

In the 40s and 50s of first century Jerusalem the political atmosphere was febrile. Pressure was mounting that would lead to the bloodiest and most disastrous war in Jewish history – a war that ended with Jerusalem and the Temple being destroyed in AD 70.

So the question of Jewish food laws and the practice of circumcision were not abstract issues but vital identity markers for a nation under intense pressure.

For Peter, and also the apostle Paul, to be welcoming gentiles as equal brothers and sisters into the Jesus movement must have looked like fraternising with the enemy to many Jews. Yet, in different ways God called Peter and Paul out from the narrow confines of their own thinking, out from the time-hallowed traditions of their faith and culture – to be led by the Spirit to a new understanding of what love and service to Christ would mean in this new dispensation.

The Spirit reminded the apostles of Jesus' call as we heard it read from John's Gospel, "I give you a new commandment that you love one another" and the Spirit led the apostles to interpret this afresh, this love was not just to be confined within known groups or within safe boundaries - this was the boundless love of God.

So, in our own time the Spirit of God is abroad challenging us, pushing us out of our comfortable, well-worn grooves and asking us to cross boundaries which we may have considered uncrossable. Let me give a few indications of where the Spirit may be at work in our time

- The refugee crisis is challenging us, in very stark terms, about what our common humanity means in practice. Can we stand by as people drown at sea or suffer in camps or on the streets of Syria?
- We live in times of elections – the London Mayoral election on the 5<sup>th</sup> May, the EU Referendum and there is the small business of some elections in the USA – are we just going to put our vote where we always put it out of loyalty or from family tradition? Or are we really going to seek out those politicians who we believe have integrity and are seeking the good of all the people?
- We live in times when some people and some of the media would seek to set different faith communities against each other. Are we willing to take a stand and recognise something of God in all faiths? Or indeed recognise that the insights of other faiths may enrich our faith?
- We also live at a time when issues of sexuality and same sex relations are contentious especially within the church. Are we, in the words of the Quakers, prepared to see something of God in all people whatever their sexual orientation and to reach out in love to those who hold different views than our own?

In December 1939 Britain had been at war with Germany for three months Princess Elizabeth was 13 years old. Her father, struggling with his stammer, was to broadcast to the nation. As he was about to go into the studio, Elizabeth handed him a poem by Minnie Louise Haskins that she thought might be helpful to him.

“I said to the man who stood at the Gate of the Year, ‘give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.’ And he replied, ‘Go out into the darkness and put your hand in the hand of God that shall be better than light and safer than a known way.’”

May the Spirit guide us so that we might be led by the hand of God to love and serve him wherever we may find ourselves. Amen



