

Hymns: 134 “Christ whose glory fills the skies”
 549 “Come, let us use the grace divine”
 595 “Lord, we have come at your own invitation”
 231 “The silent stars shine down on us”

Readings: Ephesians 1:15-19
 Matthew 2:13-23

“LE ROI EST MORT: VIVE LE ROI!”

I wish everyone could have seen those of us who had gathered for our Christmas Day celebrations. The service was over and everyone had gone home – except for those of us who were to have the pleasure of each other’s company for the rest of the day. A fine lunch was duly served and greatly enjoyed. We moved from the Philadelphia room to the Radnor Hall for an afternoon of gentle entertainment. The climax of this, without any doubt at all, was the tryst with Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. We witnessed the whole of it via the wonders of modern technology – there’s now a large screen in the Radnor Hall which is a truly luxurious extra. And so we listened to the message. Amongst a number of illustrations on the theme of “reconciliation”, she said:

For me, the life of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace... is an inspiration and an anchor in my life. A role-model of reconciliation and forgiveness, he stretched out his hands in love, acceptance and healing. Christ’s example has taught me to seek to respect and value all people of whatever faith or none.

This was such a simple yet profound word. Indeed, if I’d had my way, I’d have laid all the Standing Orders of the Methodist Church on one side and fast-tracked Elizabeth Windsor to the status of fully accredited Local Preacher forthwith.

As she made her speech, I noticed that the Queen was sitting by a table which had two photographs on it. One showed her grandfather and the other her grandmother – King George V and Queen Mary. I mused upon this long and hard. Her grandfather ascended to the throne in 1911! His grandparents were Queen Victoria and her Consort Prince Albert. And Victoria’s grandparents were King George III and Queen Charlotte. And I could have gone backwards into time until I reached Doomsday!

The monarch is head of State by her genealogical descent. There is no doubt about the person who fulfils this role – it’s all laid out in the rules. Her son Charles will succeed her, his son William will succeed him, and his son George will succeed him and so on into eternity. But our present Queen, in her Christmas speech, spoke of a Prince – and she did so with a note of awe and wonder in her voice. The Prince she was referring to

was, of course, Jesus whose birth we were remembering on the day of her speech. There were no cameras in his day but, if there had been, then photographs of two otherwise unknown people, Joseph and Mary, would have stood by the cradle where he lay. This Prince was born in such humble circumstances, at the mercy of the social and political currents of his day. Within days of his birth, his family had taken flight into Egypt, frightened out of their wits by the threat of extermination. Eventually, they were brought back into Galilee where they established themselves in the little town of Nazareth.

What a contrast between a present day Queen and a latter day Prince. And how impressive that Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain and the Commonwealth should look up to someone who was born in such circumstances.

The second chapter of St Matthew's gospel is heavy with hints about the real importance of this child. Again and again, references from the Old Testament indicate that, far from a radical new initiative on God's part, the birth of Jesus represents the fulfilment of Old Testament hope and expectation. He is to be understood as a new Moses. He's come (as did the first Moses) to make his people free. His return to the Promised Land from captivity in Egypt is an exact parallel to that of Moses. So we are to understand the way the importance of Jesus is integrated to the experience of the Jewish people and the fulfilment of everything that they'd been longing for. He is a very special person. St Matthew's gospel opens on that note – he is described as “the Messiah”. That's a Hebrew word which speaks of “anointment” – and those of us who remember the coronation of our Queen will recall the moment when she too was anointed.

If Jesus is special, he's also vulnerable. Joseph and Mary had fled from Bethlehem during the time of King Herod – a tyrant and a heartlessly cruel man who, in order to remove what he considered to be the threat posed by the birth of Jesus, set about slaughtering all children who were born at the time when Jesus might have been born. Indiscriminate massacre – that's what it was. Herod eventually died. His kingdom was divided into three and the part of that kingdom (Judea) which included Bethlehem was handed to Archelaus. The son proved worse than the father. In order to impress those who came under his sway, according to the historian Josephus, Archelaus massacred 3000 people. He began as he intended to go on, to rule through fear. His father was dead but he continued (and intensified) the severity of his rule. The king was dead – but the king's deeds lived on after him.

If Archelaus proved his authority through acts of tyranny, we note how the authority of Jesus came in an entirely different way. In the first place, Jesus was not the Messiah by virtue of his descent. Even though St Matthew begins his gospel with an elaborate genealogy that attempts to show how Jesus is descended from Abraham through David, from the patriarch through the “ideal” king, his authority is not derived from that mere fact alone. I might suggest at this point that anyone with the surname Griffiths could establish a genealogy of a similar nature – one that goes back to Llewelyn ap Gruffydd,

the last king of Wales, who died at the hands of King Edward I in 1282. It's aspirational rather than scientific!

The authority, the kingship, of Jesus lay in the way he lived our life, died our death. It was shown in his readiness to move amongst ordinary people and to reach out to them in love. Whereas the kingship of others was imposed upon them "from above", his majesty was bestowed on him "from below".

How I wished that our political leaders, like the Queen, could learn from Jesus how a closeness to people gave him his authority. The open clashes of what is going to be a very long General Election campaign are currently being witnessed. It sounds like the noise of ignorant armies clashing by night. Unless and until our political leaders gain the trust of the people they seek to represent, the widening alienation between those who govern and those who are led will simply continue on its threatening way.

Real authority is won on the basis of trust, it is a gift that has to be earned, it is not simply the outcome of the necessary number of votes planted in ballot boxes scattered around the place.

Christians everywhere, ordinary people as well as those in public life, could learn so much from the example of our Queen. This New Year 2015, it's vital that believers begin to put their faith on the line. Jesus should be our anchor, our role-model. In his name and following his example, we should be stretching out our hands in love and acceptance and healing. We should be seeking to respect and value all people of whatever faith and none. Everyone who meets us should have a chance of seeing something, however slight, of Christ in us. There should be a qualitative difference between us and those who follow other paths. Not because we are better than anyone else. But because we set our sights on the one whose birth we celebrated a few days ago.

Christians have as good an opportunity to tread this path now as they've had for some considerable time. In Britain, Archbishop Justin Welby has shown a concern both for the holding of an evangelical faith and also for a commitment to transformative courses of action carried out on the basis of that faith. His campaigns against payday lenders and loan sharks has led to a significant difference of practice in this area. And his work on the Banking Commission has contributed to a re-imagination of the framework within which financial transactions need to take place. His simple faith expresses itself in a way that contributes to the making of a better world.

And then there's Pope Francis. Who could fail to be impressed by the way he lectured his leading cardinals in the nature of humble faith – in front of television cameras he told them off for being greedy and pompous, given to gossip and tittle-tattle. He called them to higher things. And he exemplifies those higher things. His humility and his generosity of spirit have captured the minds and hearts of all who have witnessed them.

These two men model the Christian faith and show true allegiance to the Jesus who was hauled off into captivity in Egypt at the very beginning of his life, who laid all pomp and ceremony on one side, whose humble life commanded the attention and the allegiance of his contemporaries and who remains, all these years later, a role-model and an anchor for us all.

On Covenant Sunday, what better message could we preach?

Amen.