

# A very human Queen

By Gethin Russell-Jones

First things first: I'm not a royalist. I can't honestly say I know of a better alternative, and the thought of a President in the United Kingdom sends shivers down my spine. But I'm no great fan of the royal family either. This could be due to my nationality: the monarchy has left a mixed legacy in Wales with its castles built to quash the natives. Or it could be due to the Union Jack, a flag which recognises the union of England and Scotland, with Wales reduced to a principality of England. Even the office of Prince of Wales carries an echo of conquest over a defeated people.

But that's enough of my angst. I do actually like the Queen?

My opinion of her changed in 1992, a year in which she came clean about the skeletons in her cupboard.

During a speech to the Guildhall, marking her 40th anniversary as Head of State, she said:

1992 is not a year on which I shall look back with undiluted pleasure. In the words of one of my more sympathetic correspondents, it has turned out to be an *annus horribilis*.

Like all her other subjects in Great Britain and the Commonwealth, HM Queen Elizabeth admitted that life isn't all it's cracked up to be. It was a year marked by royal family discord. Prince Andrew, the Duke of York, separated from his wife Sarah; Anne, the Princess Royal, divorced Captain Mark Phillips; and Diana, Princess of Wales, spilt the beans about her unhappy marriage to Prince Charles, who was having an affair with Camilla Parker-Bowles. By the end of the year 'Camillagate' resulted in Prime Minister John Major telling the House of Commons

that the heir to the throne and his wife were formally separating. Quite a year.

And if all that wasn't enough, Windsor Castle caught fire, followed by a mass outcry against public money being used to repair the home of Britain's most famously dysfunctional family.

But in my estimation, and probably in many others, too, Queen Elizabeth II's share value went through the roof. Away went the tiara and clipped speech; she had transformed herself into a human being. Giving a nod to pain and disappointment, she won me over with her brief vulnerability.

In 2016 the Queen celebrated a great age. To be proper about all this, Her Majesty Elizabeth the Second, by the Grace of God of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and of Her Other Realms and Territories Queen, Head of the Commonwealth, Defender of the Faith, was 90 years old on 21 April. And, as is fitting for a reigning monarch, this birthday was celebrated several times over during the summer. After four days of celebrations in Windsor in May, there was a thanksgiving service at St Paul's Cathedral on 10 June. The following day saw the Trooping the Colour ceremony at Horse Guards Parade, and on 12 June there was an enormous street party on the Mall. In other words the usual flag-waving bonhomie.



Elizabeth was crowned Queen on 2 June 1953. Happily coinciding with the mass production of televisions, more than 20 million viewers watched the coronation with a further 11 million listening to the wireless broadcast. It is said that more TV sets were sold in the two-month build up to the coronation than at any time since.

## Defender of the Faith

And of course, as part of her regal title she is Defender of the Faith; the faith in question being of the Christian variety, and the Church of England flavour in particular. Unlike her oldest son Charles, destined surely to one day succeed her as King, the Queen has no desire to defend all faiths. She is committed to one and one alone, thank you very much.

Her very public and consistent declaration of faith is in marked contrast to the changing religious appetite of the British Isles. During the last nine decades church attendance

in the United Kingdom has been in freefall and, apart from the possible exception of Northern Ireland, we are going less and less often. Wales, for example, has the most woeful record with less than six per cent of the population claiming to be at church regularly. (And it's probably worse than that.)

So when it comes to evangelism, far from defending the faith, Her Majesty is on the offensive. The royal mind is a mystery to us all; the Queen's ideas and opinions are her private domain. Except that in the matter of her own Christianity she is unbelievably open. Take for example these extracts from her Christmas speech at the turn of the millennium:

Christmas is the traditional, if not the actual, birthday of a man who was destined to change the course of our history. And today we are celebrating the fact that Jesus Christ was born two thousand years ago; this is the true millennium anniversary.

In his early thirties he was arrested, tortured and crucified with two criminals. His death might have been the end of the story, but then came the resurrection and, with it, the foundation of the Christian faith...

Many will have been inspired by Jesus' simple but powerful teaching; love God and love thy neighbour as thyself—in other words, treat others as you would like them to treat you. His great emphasis was to give spirituality a practical purpose.

Her Christian sympathies can be traced back to 1939 when she was only 13 years old. Knowing that her father, King George VI, was preparing his Christmas Day broadcast she handed him a poem by Minnie Louise Haskins. Britain was now at war for the second time in twenty-five years, and this stammering sovereign had to say something to unite and console a fearful nation. These are the words given to him by his teenage daughter:

I said to the man who stood at the Gate of the Year: 'Give me a light that I may tread into the unknown'.

And he replied: 'Go out into the darkness, and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light, and safer than a known way'.

More than any other occasion, the Queen has used her Christmas speeches over and over again to draw attention to her Christian vocation. In 2011 she used her speech to speak of the power of forgiveness:

Although we are capable of great acts of kindness, history teaches us that we sometimes need saving from ourselves—from our recklessness or our greed. God sent into the world a unique person—neither a philosopher nor a general (important though 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. It is in forgiveness that we feel the power of God's love.

### A 'servant' Queen

These two quotations are taken from a delightful new publication, *The Servant Queen and the King She Serves*, published by Hope, Bible

Society and LICC (London Institute for Contemporary Christianity). Threaded through its pages is the sovereign's real and uncluttered faith. Surrounded as she is by fussy clerics and officials, she is resolute in her Christian simplicity. And it's a Christianity that enables her to reach out to others of other faiths. Speaking of her contribution to multi-cultural Britain, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks said:

Jews have deep respect for the Queen and the royal family... Something similar, in my experience, is true of the other minority faiths in Britain. They value the Queen because they know she values them. She makes them feel, not strangers in a strange land, but respected citizens at home.

The Queen continues to attract enormous public support, due in large measure to her work ethic and commitment to the public good. But with her passing it is unlikely that this sentiment will transfer automatically to her successors whose interests seem more self-serving than the present monarch. There may be trouble ahead for her heirs. But all that's in an unknown future; for now we join with millions of others and say 'Happy Birthday Ma'am!'

Gethin Russell-Jones writes from Wales. This article was first published in *The Plain Truth*, Spring 2016. Reprinted with permission.

### Facts about the 'servant' Queen

- She has advised 12 Prime Ministers.
- Since her coronation, she continues to work 40–50 hours a week.
- She is patron of more than 600 charities and organisations.
- The Queen has made 97 State visits.
- Although she employs 1200 people, she still feeds her own dogs. (And during her reign she has owned more than 30 corgis.)
- As Supreme Governor of the Church of England, she attends church every week (even on holiday). And she often drives herself, arriving unannounced to join the congregation of Sandringham Church.

Source: *The Servant Queen and the King She Serves*, by Mark Greene and Catherine Butcher, Bible Society, February 2016.