

## GOD'S OVERFLOWING GENEROSITY

Trinity III

St Michael's Cornhill

Sung Eucharist

Sunday June 12<sup>th</sup> 2016

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Probably there are few, if any of us here, who will remember our Queen's whereabouts when she received news of her father's death and thus her accession to the throne. She was, in fact, staying at the wildlife lodge-cum hotel, *Treetops* in Kenya. She had travelled there in place of her father on an official visit and at a tense time in Kenya's history, during the *Mau Mau* rebellion aimed at achieving independence. Her father was too ill to go and the young Elizabeth's safari journey would mark the beginning of a most remarkable reign; Queen Elizabeth was just twenty six years old when she acceded to the throne.

Now, I've begun there, in the Kenyan outback, since this weekend finds us in the midst of the 'official' celebrations of the Queen's ninetieth birthday; her reign effectively began in that wildlife lodge. I've begun here too, because as we remember the sixty four years of the reign of Queen Elizabeth II, we give thanks for a remarkable outpouring of human generosity. Assuming that a monarch does not decide to abdicate, they have little choice but to get on with the role they've automatically inherited. But there are, of course, different ways of responding to such an enforced vocation. Our present monarch has been extraordinary in her generosity. She has effectively forfeited a spontaneous private life to serve both nation and commonwealth.

Now fear not, I do not intend to offer you a royalist diatribe or eulogy, nor indeed is this an occasion to defend the notion of an inherited head of state. Instead I begin here since the Queen's contemporary example of amazing generosity of spirit, captures something of what our first reading and our gospel are both about. Indeed the first story is about a *monarch* but not just any monarch, rather the king who effectively helped fashion Israel into a nation.

David was clearly a charismatic and dynamic personality, but he was certainly not without human foibles. The story of the death of Uriah, for example, which we heard today – effectively murdering the King by pushing him into the most vulnerable battle front, is scandalous and shocking. It is a story of unbridled avarice and selfishness, and the Old Testament chronicler – the *Deuteronomic historian*, as scholars know the writer – he turns it into a moral tale through the mouth of Nathan the prophet. 'David did what was wrong in the eyes of the Lord!'

This story stands, of course, in complete contrast to the gospel passage from St. Luke. This story from Luke has parallels in all of the other gospels, but it is Luke who tells it with the greatest pathos, dramatic and emotional power. Listen again to this most moving vignette:

'A woman of the city, who was a sinner...brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind Jesus, at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment.'

The Pharisee protests – but she's a sinner. Jesus responds: 'Simon, I have something to say to you.' He answered, 'What is it, teacher?' Jesus tells the tale of the two debtors – one owing more than the other. The creditor forgives both and Jesus asks: 'Now which of them will love him more?' 'The one, I suppose, to whom he forgave more.'

'You have judged rightly' said Jesus, and he turned toward the woman: 'Simon, do you see this woman? I entered your house and you gave me no water for my feet, but she had wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet

with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little.

The parable is, of course, about the love of God. God's generosity is boundless and, of all the gospel writers, St. Luke presses this point home most of all. The Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, the penitent tax collector and so on – all tell the same story. Nothing will halt the flood of God's generosity. But even in Matthew's gospel, which is a very differently flavoured account, there are similar indications.

There is the parable of the labourers in the vineyard – all taken on at different hours of the day – all paid the same wage. Those taken on early in the day complain – why weren't we paid more? Answer: I agreed terms, says the vineyard owner. The point is that the gospel as lived by Jesus is not simply about *justice*. It's about more than justice. God's generosity calls out of us a similar magnanimity. That's a tough challenge to everyone of us. Our words as young children ring in our ears: 'It's not fair!' No, it's not – we are called to more than fairness. It's a challenge to all – to union members, to avaricious bankers – but also to you and me.

Just one model of this has been there in the life of our present monarch – but why has she acted as she has? Here is where our second reading stakes its claim. Paul says: 'We have been crucified with Christ – we have been made right with God in Jesus Christ. Our faith recognises just this. A couple of Christmases ago, in her Christmas speech the Queen, rather unfashionably, spoke of her faith. That, she said effectively, had been the source of the generosity which had empowered her in more than sixty years' service, in both every *annus mirabilis* and in that famous *annus horribilis*, to which she herself referred.

Here we find ourselves challenged by the gospel in its entirety. Ultimately, such was Jesus' *generosity*, that he would give himself to a cruel death, for that was what the selfishness of our humanity required of him. Jesus shows us the nature of God and God's goodness.

This challenge to generosity in faith was captured beautifully by Robert Kennedy, John Kennedy's brother who suffered the same fate as his brother, and was assassinated. Kennedy remarked:

'Yet the Gross National Product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages... It measures. . . neither our wisdom nor our compassion... It measures everything, in short, except that which makes our life worthwhile.'

Underpinning all this is the generosity of God's love and our response.

'I tell you', said Jesus, 'her sins which were many, are forgiven for she loved much.' So with us – but that is but the beginning and not the ending of the gospel challenge to every one of us this morning!

Amen

### Readings

II Samuel II. 26-12, 10, 13, 15

Galatians 2. 15-21

Luke 7. 36-50