

18th September 2022
Marking the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II

We have all seen the pictures of mountains of flowers piled up outside Balmoral, Windsor and in Green Park, London. Imagine the scent of them. A Methodist friend believes that being in the presence of God is like being surrounded by fragrance – and that makes me think particularly of lilies, a symbol of purity, humility and the presence of God.

We have learnt only recently that Lilies of the Valley were the late Queen's favourite flower. She carried them in her wedding and coronation bouquets. But all flowers, with their fragile beauty and fragrance, springing from the damp, black earth, seem to me a symbol of resurrection.

It is resurrection that Jesus is speaking of in today's Gospel when he says, 'And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.'

It has been a strange ten days for all of us – strange and disorientating. Some of us will have found an unexpected depth of emotion in our response to the Queen's death. She has been at the centre of our sense of nationhood all our lives.

For some of us, the inability to feel anything very much will have made reading the newspapers and interacting with the media for the past week of so bewildering, irritating – even intolerable.

For all of us, though, her death reminds us of our own mortality. We all knew if we thought about it, that the Queen's life was nearing its end and we have all come face to face with death during these past years of pandemic. But the shift in perspective that her death has brought, the realisation of the inexorable passage of time is something we experience as a community. Her life and death represent the lives and deaths of our own parents, grandparents, and great grandparents.

And as we experience the funeral tomorrow I hope that we can weep for **all** those we have lost – our individual losses, and our recent loss as a church community of so many: Cliff and Margaret Burrows, Penny Edwards, Wendy Attar, Jane Fletcher, Margaret Silver, Sharon Rawlings, Yvonne Morris, many more whom each of you can mention and names stretching back into our history.

The Queen shouldered her role as a representative, carrying the weight of our collective hopes and sorrows. And I think if she could have, she would have welcomed the chance to meet every single one of her subjects, greet them by name and exchange a few words with them. And I do mean **every** one of her subjects. She seemed to be able to interact warmly with **everyone**. 'And this is the will of him who sent me,' Jesus says, 'that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day,' And what is it that the Son has been given? Not less than everything. John 16.15 confirms that when Jesus says, 'Everything that belongs to the Father is mine.'

And so Jesus is speaking not just of the millions who belong to the Commonwealth or the billions alive in the world today but the estimated 117 billion who have lived and the unknown multitudes who will do so. 'I will raise them up,' he says, 'on the last day.' Like the death of the Queen, that last day, our own death, is inevitable but unthinkable.

Looking back at the Queen's life and trying to sum it up I turned to the Poet Laureate's acrostic poem for Elizabeth. He wrote it within a few days of her death and you will find in it on your notices sheet. I particularly like the line in the first verse:

'A promise made and kept for life – that was your gift'

he wrote and then, remembering her love of Lily of the Valley and her hands holding it he went on:

*'The country loaded its whole self into your slender hands,
Hands that can rest, now, relieved of a century's weight....'*

Promises made and kept. Rest after great effort sustained for nearly a century. Quiet, unobtrusive goodness.

In the Song of Solomon, God declares, 'I am a Rose of Sharon, a Lily of the Valley.'¹ The phrase is understood to be a prophecy of the sweetness, fragrance and humility of Christ like a flower blooming in shade and sharing its sweetness. The stalks bend slightly under the weight of the flowers prefiguring the humility of Christ and the droop of his head on the cross in his final work of salvation. That was the king our Queen served.

Christ's work of humility and service ended, as all our works will, in death. But 'This is the will of him who sent me,' he promises, 'that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.'

Our Elizabeth has laid down her load and for her is the glorious reality of resurrection. But for us the fever of life is not yet over. We look towards difficult times politically and nationally, but Christ's promise holds. Nothing that is of God will be lost. As Paul knew, 'This slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure.'

'Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.'

Thousands of years from now, when all earthly memory of Elizabeth is long gone, still, on May mornings there will be the scent of Lily of the Valley damp from the rain and for us, like Elizabeth our late Queen, the reality of resurrection.

¹ Song of Solomon 2.1

Floral Tribute

Evening will come, however determined the late afternoon,
Limes and oaks in their last green flush, pearled in September mist.
I have conjured a lily to light these hours, a token of thanks,
Zones and auras of soft glare framing the brilliant globes.
A promise made and kept for life – that was your gift –
Because of which, here is a gift in return, glovewort to some,
Each shining bonnet guarded by stern lance-like leaves.
The country loaded its whole self into your slender hands,
Hands that can rest, now, relieved of a century's weight.

Evening has come. Rain on the black lochs and dark Munros.
Lily of the Valley, a namesake almost, a favourite flower
Interlaced with your famous bouquets, the restrained
Zeal and forceful grace of its lanterns, each inflorescence
A silent bell disguising a singular voice. A blurred new day
Breaks uncrowned on remote peaks and public parks, and
Everything turns on these luminous petals and deep roots,
This lily that thrives between spire and tree, whose brightness
Holds and glows beyond the life and border of its bloom.

Simon Armitage, Poet Laureate