

Call to Worship (Psalm 117)

Praise the Lord, all you nations!
Extol him, all you peoples!
For great is his steadfast love towards us,
and the faithfulness of the Lord
endures for ever.
Praise the Lord!

Hymn: StF 28 Jesus calls us here to meet him (3:25)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yulQuvsFD00>

Introduction

This week our focus is on an individual whose faith has, in her own words, supported and guided her throughout her life - a life lived with a sense of duty and devotion to God. That life has, today, so far been 95 years long and, we hope, more lie ahead. Today is the 95th Birthday of Her Majesty the Queen.

In 2002 she said this:

I know just 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 and do what is right, to take the long view, to give of my best in all that the day brings, and to put my trust in God ... I draw strength from the message of hope in the Christian gospel.

Let us pray:

Opening Prayer

Merciful Lord,
you have taught us through your Son
that love is the fulfilling of the law.
Grant that we may love you with our whole heart
and our neighbours as ourselves;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy Kingdom come;
thy will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread
and forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those
who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil
For thine is the kingdom,
the power, and the glory
for ever and ever.
Amen

In December 1939 Britain and its Allies had been at war with Nazi Germany for three months. The future looked dark. King George VI was planning what to say in his Christmas Day Broadcast to, what was then, The Empire.

I'm not sure how well known it is but it was George VI's 13 year old daughter - Elizabeth - who handed him a poem she had been reading by Minnie Louise Haskins. In it were the following words which the King used in his broadcast

*"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 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.'"*

Minnie Louise Haskins

Those now famous words helped others at the time and, ever since, it seems the Queen has tried to ensure that her own words help others too.

But what are the words that keep her going, that shape her faith and give her strength. In her messages throughout the years, for example at Christmas and on Commonwealth Day, there are two biblical themes that she keeps returning to time and time again - the first of those is forgiveness.

At Christmas 2011 she had this to say on 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.

Hymn StF 421 Empty, broken, here I stand (5:13)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GyeU19OQgf8>

The second great biblical theme that the Queen keeps referring to is Christ's command to love your neighbour. A command we hear in today's reading - The Parable of the Good Samaritan:

Reading: Luke 10 .25 - 37

At Christmas 2011 the Queen said this:

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.

A strong faith in Christ does not mean that we should exclude people of other faiths and the Queen shows the same respect and dignity to those of other faiths as she does to those who share her own. The following are the words of the late Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks:

Punctuality, said Louis XVIII of France, is the politeness of kings. Royalty arrives on time and leaves on time. So it is with Her Majesty the Queen, with one memorable exception.

The day was 27 January 2005, the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, and the place, St James' Palace. The Queen was meeting a group of Holocaust survivors.

When the time came for her to leave, she stayed. And stayed. One of her attendants said he had never known her to linger for so long after her scheduled departure time. She gave each survivor - it was a large group -

her focussed, unhurried attention. She stood with each until they had finished telling their personal story.

It was an act of kindness that almost had me in tears ... It brought a kind of blessed closure into deeply lacerated lives.

Sacks continues;

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

No one does interfaith better than the Royal family, and it starts with the Queen herself.

The following version of "When I needed a neighbour" is sung by Sydney Carter himself and includes verses not usually in hymn books. Thinking of those survivors of Auschwitz, whom the Queen listened attentively too, maybe it should have another verse added:

When you needed a listener, were you there, were you there.

Hymn: StF 256 When I needed a neighbour (3:52)
Sung by Sydney Carter himself!
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=quBKGeg8_hw

Prayers

Loving God,

As we mark the birthday of The Queen
we pray with thanksgiving for the faith we share,
for the guidance and inspiration we receive from it.
We also bring before you the doubts we hold
and the situations that are difficult in our lives.

As we worship together this evening
we pray for those unable to join us.
We pray for the church communities
from which we come.
Help us to rebuild them,
that together we may proclaim your Kingdom.

As our day draws to its close we pray for
people around the world;
places where day is dawning,
or where the noon sun is already at its strongest.
and for those in the depths of night.
Strengthen them in the situations they face day by day
and remind us all that we are one people
made in the image of God.

We pray for those who are ill,
or facing particular difficulties.
We pray for the bereaved
and for those who are approaching death.
Walk with them this night and evermore.

Lord, these prayers and others we offer
in the name of Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord.
Amen.

Our final hymn is the closing hymn from the Commonwealth Day Service in Westminster Abbey last year. I have to say looking back at that event there are aspects that terrify me! This was 9th March 2020. Two weeks later we were in full lockdown. Scientists said we should have been already.

Hymn StF 503 Love Divine all loves excelling (3:32)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0gvCODgV1fc>

The Blessing

Lord, grant that, inspired by your Holy Spirit,
we may love others as we love ourselves,
and forgive others as you forgive us;
and the blessing of God Almighty,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit
be with us all this day and always.
Amen

The Grace