

The Call to Serve Our Earthly King

“His throne was a Cross. His crown was made of thorns. His regalia were the wounds that pierced his body.” The Archbishop preached yesterday.

I'm sure many of us were amongst the millions of people from all around the world watching the Coronation, fascinated with all the pomp and ceremony from golden carriages to magnificent robes and crowns with precious jewels.

It was a spectacular show, but at the centre of proceedings we had the humble Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury, who led worship, bringing a relaxed solemnity to the proceedings. He was definitely God's man for the job.

Justin has had many challenges in his own life, particularly his younger years, his parents were alcoholics and they split when he was only 3.

In 2016 he went public over the discovery that the man that he always thought was his biological father was not in fact. He told the complicated story but, in the end, he said, that although he had been shocked, and there were issues arising from this that he would have to deal with, he was reassured in the knowledge, that his real identity was found in Jesus Christ. It was this that defined the core of his being.

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Justin Welby came to a Christian faith when he was 19 as a student at Cambridge, and it was when he was praying that suddenly he felt "a clear sense of something changing, the presence of something that had not been there before in his life. He said to his friend, "Please don't tell anyone about this." Welby said that he was desperately embarrassed that this had happened to him. In a 2014 interview, Welby said that his conversion had

come when his friend had taken him to an "evangelistic address" which he found to be poor. Later that evening, his friend "simply explained the Gospels" to him. Welby said that from that point onwards he "knew the presence of God". He has since said that his time at Cambridge was a major moment of self-realisation in his life.

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Well Archbishop Justin has had a remarkable journey of faith and yesterday he crowned the King of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland.

He overcame many obstacles in life with the core belief that his identity was found in Jesus.

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And I believe that came over yesterday in the beautiful service at Westminster Abbey. It was a service of identity.

The Guild motto is "whose we are and who we serve" – and that's what I heard yesterday.

The service itself was grounded in tradition, very symbolic, deeply spiritual.

One of the moving parts was when the Moderator of the Church of Scotland, Iain Greenshields, himself a man who of great faith, not too dissimilar to Justin Welby, presented King Charles III with a King James Bible. This presentation has been part of every Coronation Service since 1689. The King swore oaths upon this to govern the people with justice and mercy and uphold the Churches.

Our Moderator said to the King, “Sir, to keep you ever mindful of the law and the Gospel of God as the rule for the whole of life and government of Christian Princes, receive the Book, the most valuable thing that this world affords. “Here is wisdom; This is the Royal Law; These are the Lively Oracles of God.”

The King placed his hand on the Bible and took the Coronation Oath.

Then at the very heart of the ceremony, was the anointing of the King, which goes back to the anointing of King Solomon by Zadok the Priest and Nathan the Prophet.

In this symbolic act, the King is literally stripped of all pomp and outward regalia, it reminds us that the monarchy is essentially a call to service, and in that we are reminded of Jesus the Servant King, who came not to be served but to serve.

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Let us sing MP 374 “From heaven you came...”

“His throne was a Cross. His crown was made of thorns. His regalia were the wounds that pierced his body.”

Jesus didn't say a lot about politics, although his people were ruled by the Romans. They were an oppressed people - but when he was challenged about whom they should serve, he had an immediate response which spoke deeply into their hearts.

Jesus, the Prince of Peace, refuses to collude with either the pro-Roman party - Herodians - in Jerusalem, or indeed with those who were against Rome - the Pharisees. This question about to whom they should pay their taxes has deep underlying political motives, and it's one that I'm sure resurfaces time and time again throughout history, who do we serve, where is our identity to be found? Do we identify with Caesar or with God?

Jesus very wisely gave them an answer that they would never forget and an answer that left them speechless, as he asked them for a Denarius, and asked them whose image is on the coin?

Now, any Jew worth their salt, would know that they should not worship a graven image, and the very thought of worshipping Caesar would send a shiver down their spine. This coin was a powerful symbol of their current political situation, in that it daily reminded the Jew that they were someone else's property. It spoke of their identity. Their identity was with Rome.

The coin reminded them that they paid taxes to this oppressive government. They thought for a brief moment that they had trapped Jesus. He was in a position that there was no wriggle room. Jesus' answer to them was remarkable, because it conserves both the civil and religious powers of his day.

Jesus encouraged his people to give to Caesar what was his and to God what belonged to God.

Yes, the coin had Caesar's image on it but humans – you and me - have God's image upon us. The Bible teaches that we are created in God's image and therefore we belong to God – first and foremost.

The inevitable conclusion is that, if the state remains within its proper boundaries and makes its proper demands, the individual must give it its loyalty, and their service to it. We are called to serve the King of the land. But in the last analysis, both state and man belong to God, and therefore to it, should their claims conflict, loyalty to God comes first. But it remains true, that, in all ordinary circumstances, a person's Christian faith should make them a better citizen – a citizen of the Kingdom of God.

Today, I'm not here to invite you to swear loyalty to our earthly King Charles III, you were invited to do that yesterday, but I'm commissioned to invite you to swear allegiance to our Heavenly King.

Justin Welby's opening words, in his sermon, “We are here to crown a King, and we crown a King to serve.”

There is King Charles' identity, it is Justin Welby's identity, it is Iain Greenshields and every other Christian since Jesus uttered the words, come and follow me.

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The archbishop went on to say that Jesus Christ announced a Kingdom in which the poor and oppressed are freed from chains of injustice. The blind see. The bruised and broken-hearted are healed.

That Kingdom sets the *aims* of all righteous government, all authority. And the Kingdom also sets the *means* of all government and authority. Jesus doesn't grasp power or hold onto status.

This is where Justin finds his identity and this is where he guides the King to also find his.

So, let me conclude, In our reading in 1 Peter 2, Peter reminds his readers about their identity.

⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

In those few words, we discover our identity in Christ, we are a royal priesthood. When we follow Jesus on the path of service, we are considered to be royalty in the eyes of God, and more than that, we are seen to be priests, doing the work of God by serving others.

Archbishop Justin Welby, a human like us all, no doubt like us all has many failings, and yet in Jesus Christ, he has found his true identity – *“His throne was a Cross. His crown was made of thorns. His regalia were the wounds that pierced his body.”* Where is your identity? May we also find our identity in our Servant King.

Amen.