

I hope you've all had a good chance to stop and stare at the restored royal coat of arms, hung above the church door, now thanks to the Friends of St. Lawrence seen in all its original splendour.

It has been in this church since 1678, proclaiming our loyalty to Charles II and the House of Stuart.

I wonder how you would feel if we had one to the House of Windsor?

Or how, if history had taken a different turn, Andrew, Duke of York, was now in line to become King?

It's not as if, comparatively speaking, Andrew has behaved all that badly. He is of course guilty of gross stupidity, and quite possibly much more. But consider, for instance, Charles II. He had at least twelve mistresses – and many more 'encounters with actresses' historians delicately put it. There was dodgy use of public money to set his women up in the style they wanted. And perhaps there was also tragedy: a young Miss Jane Roberts, a vicar's daughter no less, was one of Charles' flings. She died soon afterwards, we're told, in unclear circumstances 'but with a great sense of her former-ill life'. Not everything was merry around the Merry Monarch. As with Andrew, sex and money and glamour and power left a lot of human wreckage in the way.

You might wonder, will we ever learn? Why are we so attached to monarchy? Maybe, you just can't quite bear the thought of President Blair, or President Thatcher. You might think that the head of state should be utterly non-political, and hence not an elected figure. You might even think it's just wonderful for tourism – that the royals do a good job of pageantry and theatre and it keeps the Americans coming, so what harm does it do? And against all that, of course, you might think that even if the monarchy is virtually powerless, it's that word *virtually* that's the problem – there's still some little, residual power, and you think *all* power should be democratic. And it makes your blood boil that just by virtue of birth, someone is given great wealth, great status, and presumes to rule over us. Why should you bow or curtsy to anyone? What makes them better than us?

Well, those arguments will go on and on. Once upon a time, of course, good English Anglicans had to be on one side only – we were firm monarchists. We were the State Church, more to the point the Crown’s Church: that’s why royal coats of arms were hung in the churches, and why all clergy still, at the beginning of each new appointment, swear true allegiance to the Queen and her heirs and successors. For many centuries, teaching all of you about the God-given nature of monarchy and your proper place quite far down the social hierarchy would have been viewed as an important part of my job. Church and crown, intertwined, making sure the whole realm was godly and quietly governed.

Those days are long gone in practice if not quite in theory. Lots of good Anglicans, and probably some here, are republicans. The sky has not fallen in, and I don’t think God minds that much. All of which is a long way of saying that if you disagree violently with the rest of this sermon, well, we can still probably muddle along.

But what might you disagree strongly with? Well, here goes:

For all that Charles II was an absolute rake. For all of Andrew’s stupidity, and for all the myriad other ways in which kings and queens have let us down over the centuries – for all the broken lives they’ve left in their wakes – ***there is something godly about monarchy.*** There is something godly about monarchy. Just, I suppose, in the same way that even though so many clergy have been appalling, have been the most desperate and wicked people you could imagine, there remains something godly about the ordained ministry. Some good purpose it exists for, something which even the worst people in the role cannot quite destroy. Something it points to. Something which God uses it to help us see.

And in the case of monarchy, the 'something' is this : there is more to human life, and how we live together in a society, than simply doing what the majority here and now wants. Not everything in life is subject to a democratic vote. We are so used to thinking of ourselves as basically in charge of our own lives, basically free to decide what is valuable and what is not, free to choose – 'nobody tells me what to do' is the proudest claim of the modern person. I'm my own man, I bow the knee to no-one, I'm as good as you, I can do whatever I want and be whatever I want and no-one can stop me. As a culture, we've spent the last three hundred years or so casting off all restraint, maximising our power to choose – even to the extent, now, of choosing what gender we are. Well, monarchy – even in our wholly constitutional, politically weak, merely symbolic version of it – monarchy is one of the very few things left in our culture that says 'no'. You're not in charge. You're not the centre of things. You don't get to choose and control. You don't even get to negotiate – there's a reality, an authority before which all you get to do is kneel.

Her Majesty the Queen, of course, is not that authority. She is a very admirable mere mortal. But her role speaks of something far beyond her, of the most basic and original power of all – the power of the God who calls all things into being and who makes them flourish, but who does not even begin to try and justify himself. He will not *compete* or negotiate with us, anymore than her Majesty would run for election. His authority just *is*, of itself. Our monarchy is a kind of sacrament of that – an outward and visible sign, expressing a profound spiritual truth. Like any sacrament of course, it can be misunderstood and abused – but use it properly, approach monarchy in the right spirit, and it's a kind of enfleshing, a making real, of that encounter with the majesty of God which is at the heart of all Christian life.

Monarchy, then, as pointer to God. Maybe. But somebody out there *should* be fuming, should be thinking this is the most hopeless conservatism, and demanding to know quite what all the wealth and militaristic display of even our modern British monarchy has to do with God. Well, if you are that person, listen on. Because what our readings from Colossians and Luke today are both saying, in their rather different ways, is that that the supreme act of the divine authority, the moment when the divine majesty is most fully and definitively established and revealed is *on the Cross of Jesus*. It's on the Cross of Jesus. God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, says Paul – to reconcile, to make peace, to do justice, to do what Kings do – through the blood of his cross. Not by guns, not by swords, but through the blood of his cross. And then there's Luke's account of the crucifixion itself, with the sign over Jesus' head: Jesus of Nazareth, *King of the Jews*. Pilate put it up there to mock, but the early Christians saw it as just *the truth* – Pilate, despite himself, was bearing witness to the true King. To the one who had nothing to do with Empires, and governors, with wealth and weapons – who was killed by those things, and so passed judgement on them.

Now what this means is that the most basic power in creation, the thing with which you do not to negotiate or control or choose, is this: love, pouring out for other people in sacrifice. That is the non-negotiable authority at the heart of the universe, that with which you must fall into line or be a rebel, a traitor, to the one who made you. Love is not a nice idea or a suggestion, it is the royal law at the heart of creation. On the great day of Judgement, it is that which hold us to account. Jesus Christ is King, and your allegiance is required – not requested, *required*. Which is to say that every aspect of your life – what you do with your money, what you do with your body, what you do in your family, what you do with your vote, what you do *with you* – all of it, must come to chime with him. Must speak of your loyalty to Him. Must take on his character, of giving away self so that others might flourish. To be Christian is to pledge allegiance, and to let that allegiance run through everything about us. Everything.

On this Feast of Christ the King, I invite you to make that pledge anew.