

CORONATIONS, CHARLES, and CALVARY

In his engrossing book *Coronation*, Roy Strong writes of going to see the Crown Jewels at the Tower of London. Part of the display was a projection of a film of Queen Elizabeth II's coronation in 1953. "Looking at it," he writes, "I could not believe that such a thing had been staged in the second half of the twentieth century, and, equally, I could not help wondering whether one would ever be staged again."

Well, one was indeed staged again yesterday—albeit in a slimmed-down, modernized version—proving that the mystique of coronations and royalty continues to be a powerful force in contemporary society. And yet, despite what seems to be a never-ending thirst for stories about royal glamour and goings-on, there's also a distinct undercurrent of distaste for—and distrust of—monarchy. In the days leading up to the Coronation a number of commentators implied that it's an elitist organization tainted with the shame of colonialism. Questions were asked what such a spectacle has to do with a twenty-first century democracy in a world torn by war and division, with the threat of economic and environmental catastrophe an ever-present spectre. Is it true that such ceremonies are out of touch with our contemporary, egalitarian age?

I don't think so. But I *do* think we need to look beneath the splendid, public, historic surface of the coronation to discover its true meaning—and to learn about the true nature of kingship. The power and pomp the kings of this world have traditionally claimed for themselves is fleeting—it's sometimes even been coercive. Which is why the first words spoken at yesterday's coronation were said by a small child: "Your majesty, as children of the kingdom of God we welcome you in the name of the King of Kings," and why King Charles replied "In his name and after his example I come not to be served but to serve." The entire service was set under the deep truth that only when we have learned to serve others as selflessly as Jesus did will his kingdom come. It won't come through the maintenance of the status quo, nor will it come to those who are content to live on the glittering surface of things. But it will come through small acts of goodness and charity and by the recognition of the King of kings in every person.

So, while we revel in all the apparatus of royal power and prestige—jewelled crowns, ermine robes, gilded thrones, and glorious processions—we also recall that the only processions our Lord took part in found him astride a donkey or stumbling beneath

the weight of the cross and that the only kingly robes he wore were a crown of thorns and a scarlet cloak draped on him in an act of savage humiliation.

You'll remember that at the beginning of Luke's gospel, Satan offered Jesus all the glory and authority of the world's kingdoms. But Jesus refused them; he knew how fleeting and contingent the structures of earthly kingly authority are. So it must follow that true kingship is shown by love that gives without counting the cost, sacrifice willingly undertaken, and forgiveness offered even before it is asked for.

All of which brings me to this morning's gospel reading. "A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. But he said to them 'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so among you.'" There's a sense of urgency, and even foreboding, in this reading—and for good reason, too, since it's part of Luke's telling of the Last Supper. In other words, Jesus is saying these things just hours before his strange and gory enthronement on Calvary. He is trying to teach the disciples the true meaning of kingship and how the crowd which welcomed him into Jerusalem wanted to show him the service of royalty when all the while he came to show them the royalty of service.

The King of kings of which that child spoke summons us. He summons us to realize that, brilliant though it was, yesterday's extravagant spectacle is nothing compared to the extravagant spectacle to which it points: selfless, loving service. He summons us to have the courage to pattern our lives after his, through acts of selflessness and genuine concern for the welfare of others. He summons us to live lives that are rooted in the transformative power of forgiveness. For even when they crucified him, he said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing," and what makes these words so poignant is that, as the great William Sloane Coffin once said, we don't know what we do, because we don't know who we are.

Dare I say it?—we don't know who we are because we don't know whose we are. If, on the one hand we reject the notion of monarchy as a hopelessly elitist hangover from a different age and on the other hand we embrace it as something dazzling which can distract us from all the cares of this life, we do so because we don't want to look plainly at the image of crucified majesty, because to do so is to come to a heart-breaking understanding that we've convinced ourselves that we don't need to be subject to any kind of authority—earthly or heavenly—save that of our own vanity. The heart-breaking understanding that we've been so frightened of becoming the people we were made to be that we've continually crucified the best of who we are by giving into our worst selves. The heart-breaking understanding that we've not wanted to find out who we truly are for fear of learning what we are called to do.

None of us can know what happened in that unseen, private moment in which the King's life was set apart—consecrated—in the service for others. We can't know how he perceived the spirit stirring within him and began to learn what he was being called to do. But I suspect that he felt the weight of service bearing down upon him

heavier than any crown could. An anointing is a sacred act in which, spiritually speaking, one puts on Christ—something even more glorious than all those splendid robes. Even as we bask in the memory of yesterday, we must not lose sight that we're not called to dwell on the brilliant but brittle surface of things. Rather, we're called to follow our new king's example of service and strive to live with purpose for the sake of the King whose service is perfect freedom. The King who has no subjects, only friends—loved, redeemed, and set free to help make his kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. The King who is enthroned on your heart—and mine—for evermore.