

Prayer and Promise
Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 113:1-6
Reading from the New Testament: 1 Timothy 2:1-7

Queen Elizabeth II held and now King Charles III holds the title of 'Defender of the Faith and Supreme Governor of the Church of England'. The title dates back to the reign of King Henry VIII when he and Pope Leo X were in the octagon duking it out in *Divorce Court*. According to the Royal website, "The Monarch's relationship with the Church of England is symbolised at the Coronation when the Sovereign is anointed by the Archbishop of Canterbury and takes an oath to 'maintain and preserve inviolably the settlement of the Church of England, and the doctrine worship, discipline, and government thereof, as by law established in England'."

It is interesting to note, however, that England's monarchs have also maintained a formal, but decidedly different, relationship with our siblings in the Church of Scotland since the 16th Century. In the early 18th Century, this commitment was articulated in the 1707 Act of Union between England and Scotland with a promise to "preserve the settlement of the true Protestant religion as established by the laws made in Scotland"

Queen Elizabeth II made this same promise in her first meeting with the privy counsel upon her father's death in February of 1952, more than a year before her own coronation service. The difference between the Queen's relationship with the Church of England and the Church of Scotland is revealed in this statement on the Royal website: "The Church of Scotland is a Presbyterian church and recognises only Jesus Christ as 'King and Head of the Church'. The [Queen] therefore does not hold the title 'Supreme Governor' of the Church of Scotland; when attending Church services in Scotland [Her] Majesty does so as an ordinary member," (royal.uk website) which led some to comment that since she died in Scotland, she died a Presbyterian.

That historic relationship was symbolized when the Queen's body was brought from Balmoral to Edinburgh for a memorial service held in the mother church of Presbyterianism, St. Giles Cathedral, situated on Edinburgh's Royal Mile, halfway up the hill between Holyrood Castle and Edinburgh Castle. It is a beautiful worship space with a rich history. Founded in the year 1124, St. Giles survived 14th Century raids by the armies of King Edward II, and later, King Richard II. It is where the 16th Century exiled Protestant convert, John Knox returned to preach and

establish the Church of Scotland much to the chagrin of Mary, Queen of Scots. In the 17th Century, when Charles I sought to institute Anglicanism in Scotland, imposing the use of an Anglican prayer book in worship at St. Giles, a local woman named Jenny Geddes stood up and threw her chair at the preacher. *(I guess I can be thankful our pews are screwed to the floor, though it's probably safe to say that Ms. Geddes action has been repeated at more than a few Presbyterian Session meetings through the centuries.)*

In the 18th Century, when the Jacobites invaded the Island, attempting to restore the Stuart monarchy, it was in St. Giles that the magistrates were gathered to hear of the arrival of Bonnie Prince Charlie and his demand for them to surrender the city. And it was in this same St. Giles that a service of thanksgiving was held for Elizabeth II this past Monday.

Granted, we don't have a line of trumpets heralding the arrival of the family and officiants for most memorial services here, but liturgically, the service for the Queen at St. Giles followed a standard order for a Presbyterian memorial service, including prayers, scripture, hymns, and homily. The congregation, which in addition to the Queen's children,

included new prime minister Liz Truss along with a former Prime Minister, Gordon Brown. Nicola Sturgeon, the First Minister of the Scottish Parliament, participated as a liturgist in the service, reading from Ecclesiastes. Yet, the service was notable in the way it did not stray from the elements of worship included in any Presbyterian memorial service. They sang the hymns we sing (*And Zach, they sang, they actually sang, King, Princes, and Prime Ministers all*) - “*All people that on earth do dwell, sing to the Lord with cheerful voice...*” They read from the Psalms, from Romans 8, from John 14 (“*Do not let your hearts be troubled ... In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.*”)

And notably, they prayed the prayers that we pray (*one being offered antiphonally by a Presbyterian theology professor, a female Presbyterian elder, an Anglican Priest, and a Nigerian PhD. student researching dialogue between Christians and Muslims.*) This prayer included the call and response familiar to many here: *Lord, in your mercy ... Hear our prayer.* They gave thanks for the Queen, prayed for the King, offered intercessions for the hungry, the suffering, those displaced by conflict, and those who yearn for peace.

I am under no illusions about the regular church engagement of those present who were not in clerical robes, but I was struck by their active and intentional engagement with the liturgy, hymns, and prayers in the service. It was a witness to the significance and strength of the communal voice, an acknowledgement that despite human brokenness, political posturing, religious zealotry, bitter jealousy, and the destructive consequences of pride there is at least some modicum of will for the common good and some public and shared language of acknowledgement that any possibility for the achievement of the common good is dependent on a power greater than the human mind and beyond all human might.

In the letter of Paul to Timothy, the author charges his colleague in ministry to urge the church community “that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.”

This is not in the spirit of those suspect prayers for the home team’s victory, those partisan pleas to feed personal pride and enrichment. Rather, the form of these prayers, still an integral part of worship today, is focused

on the common good and the shared communal commitment to seek that end through the strength and light of our Lord, who alone can empower us to rise above our self-interest to pursue the shared interests of mercy, compassion, justice, well-being, and peace. The prayers are not for the glory of the persons in power, but that they may be granted wisdom for the decisions they make which impact the lives of many. The prayers are not that we would be fed first, but that all may be fed, not that we would be enriched at others' expense, but that all would discover well-being.

Two things that stand out in Paul's instructions to Timothy are the universality of the prayers to be offered and the observation that God desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. Our prayers are not just for the people we like and our hopes are not for ourselves alone but extend from our neighbors next door to our neighbors across the globe. Religion has too often been guilty of trying to squeeze the God of all into the interests of the few. Christians are certainly culpable in that regard. Yet, listen to what Walter Brueggemann suggests we lose when in our attempts to shrink God into our likeness. He says, "It is not simply [scholarly study] that determines how we read the Bible; rather, it is our vested interests, our hopes, and our fears that largely determine our

reading. And because the reach of the gracious God of the Bible is toward the other, we ought rightly to be skeptical and suspicious of any reading of the Bible that excludes the other, because it is likely to be informed by vested interest, fears, and hopes that serve self-protection and end in self-destruction.” (Chosen?: Reading the Bible Amid the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict)

Whenever I run or walk through a neighborhood, I pass by these wonderful houses with all these architecturally handsome windows, and I am always struck by the high percentage of those windows that never function as such because all of the blinds, shutters, and curtains are forever closed so tightly. In fear, we create these artificial fortresses dependent on artificial light to hide us from and blind us to the light of the larger world. Think about it, if some of your neighbors didn't have a dog to walk, you might not know the neighbor existed.

Subsequently, since fear is a primary response to that which we do not know, we isolate ourselves from our communities and allow our uninformed minds to draw inaccurate conclusions about people we have never met. That was never God's intention for us. Paul counsels us, “I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for

everyone.” For everyone. Why? Paul says, “This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth...” For Christ Jesus, gave himself as a ransom, not for some, but “for all.”

Theologian Karl Barth said, “This much is certain, that we have no theological right to set any sort of limits to the loving-kindness of God which has appeared in Jesus Christ. Our theological duty is to see and understand it as being still greater than we had seen before.” (*Karl Barth, The Humanity of God*)

We gather as a community to worship and serve a God whose love extends infinitely farther than our imaginations, and whose sovereignty infinitely exceeds any human construct. The service at St. Giles may have been perceived as performance by many, but when observing a nation’s leaders singing the church’s hymns, many singing them from memory, and watching that Presbyterian elder pray the prayers of the people, and hearing members of St. Giles choir sing from the Psalter so faithfully, I perceived at least a tacit recognition of a grace beyond all human striving and transcending infinitely all human made boundaries.

At the funeral for her husband Prince Phillip, much was made of the late Queen Elizabeth sitting all alone, but she was never alone. She was being held in the embrace of a loving God and surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, testifying to the grace of a sovereign God who will accomplish what God set out to do. And I would say the same about anyone here today along with everyone entertaining angels unawares across all God's creation. Barth was onto something important. There are no "limits to the loving-kindness of God which has appeared in Jesus Christ. Our theological duty is [always] to see and understand it as being still greater than we had seen before." Amen.