

Divine Right

A Sermon preached in All Saints' Northampton on Saturday, 29th May 2010 (Oak Apple Day) for the 350th Anniversary of the Restoration of the Monarchy

Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet anointed Solomon king¹

"The cliffs of England stand
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay"

and if you listen

"You hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling
At their return, upon the high strand."²

And stepping onto Dover Beach to reclaim his kingdom and his royal, divine heritage from the puritan and regicide usurpation is King Charles Stuart. Tall, dark, the hooded eyes alert, wary, thick-lipped, sensuous, "seeming to belong rather to southern Europe than to puritan England," with more than a hint of the exotic, his very presence was a signal that England's dark night of the soul was over-past. "When they cry unto the Lord in their trouble: he delivereth them out of their distress. For he maketh the storm to cease: so that the waves thereof are still. Then are they glad, because they are at rest: and so he bringeth them unto the haven where they would be."³

On that day, three hundred and fifty years ago, here solemnly commemorated, when the monarchy, and the Royal House of Stuart, was restored to this land, there was a great crowd to meet him. They did not cheer wildly because they, too, were wary. Their welcome for the returned king was not unconditional. The Mayor of Dover stepped forward and placed a copy of the English Bible in his hands: the King James Bible, named for his grandfather. Charles declared that he loved it above all things. "For the transgression of a land, many are the princes thereof; but by a man of understanding and knowledge shall the state thereof be prolonged."⁴

His assertion did not prevent him from serial breaches of one or more of its commandments. But, King Charles showed himself as politically adept as he was morally wayward and successfully negotiated the Scylla of unfettered, absolute royal power, and the Charybdis of anti-catholic mob mentality. He re-established the monarchy and secured the succession of his brother to the throne who, sadly, proved himself less politically skillful.

The Restoration was not merely the substitution of one political elite for another. It was a restoration and a re-animation of what it is that lies in the heart and soul of a nation and people. The twenty years of Civil War, of anarchy, usurpation and military despotism were not an aberration in English history. The Wars of the Roses had been longer and possibly more bloody. Nor did the Restoration mark a complete end to that terrifying

¹ I Kings 1: 45

² Matthew Arnold, *Dover Beach*

³ Psalm 107: 28 – 30

⁴ Proverbs 28: 2 the text of the sermon preached at the coronation of King Charles II 1661.

mode of political discourse; the events of 1688 were yet to come; but it did signal a return to the unifying principle of an hereditary monarchy and one which within a short time became an hereditary constitutional monarchy and the unifying principle became stronger as the executive responsibilities became fewer. As the Bishop of Worcester, who had shared the King's exile, preached at the coronation the following year: "Even of hereditary monarchies one may be more desirable than another, as a political rather than a despotical, for a despotical monarch governs his subjects as a master doth his servants, arbitrarily according to his own will and pleasure, whether it be right or wrong; but a political monarch governs his subjects as a father doth his children, by equal and just laws made with their own consent to them. The former is the government of the Turk and Muscovite, the latter is, or ought to be the government of all Christian kings."⁵

The Sovereign represents a continuity of tradition, a stable constant in a world of political and social flux. The almost insane desire for change at any cost, irrespective of consequences, because change is seen as progress, as improvement, though it is rarely that: change is change, bad or indifferent more often than good: that desire requires the corrective of stability and tradition. The Sovereign represents, embodies and personifies that essential continuity of tradition, above party and factional strife, beyond the reach of financial and commercial interests, symbolic of social cohesion, of the impartial administration of justice in the monarch's name and not that of an overweening executive, of the maintenance of laws and customs, and of the identity of the nation.

Symbols, of course, are an important way of helping us to make sense of a dizzying and distracting world, and are fundamental to the human psyche. A symbol implies something more than its obvious and immediate meaning. As a sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inner and spiritual reality: "the means of grace and the ... hope of glory,"⁶ so the monarchy has that sacramental character, or, at least, a quasi-sacramental character. In his coronation sermon the Bishop of Worcester rejoiced in the "miraculous restitution [of Charles] to his crown ... the immediate hand of God was visible in [this]"⁷ and of Charles himself he said, "Behold the man that was designed by the Divine Providence, that hath been preserved by the Divine Power, that is qualified by the Divine Wisdom, and be brought home again to us by the Divine ... mercy to settle and prolong the state."⁸

We might not put it quite in those terms in this more prosaic, sceptical and relentlessly secular age. A post-Enlightenment intellectual frame of mind and sentiment is uncomfortable with the kind of assertions confidently made at the Restoration, fixed, as we seem to be with the "melancholy long, withdrawing roar" of "the Sea of Faith."⁹ The King "is to consider himself as he is, a prince, and as he stands in relation to his people and to God too ... as he is God's representative unto his people, and to govern the people in God's stead ... we know that monarchy is from God, and therefore we may know that whatever is destructive to monarchy or inconsistent with monarchy is not from God."¹⁰ In that light, Charles II, as all English monarchs, was, at his Coronation, anointed king: our

⁵ A Sermon preached at the magnificent coronation of the Most High and Mighty King Charles II King of Great Britain, France and Ireland, Defender of the Faith &c. At the Collegiate Church of S. Peter, Westminster The 23rd April (being S. George's Day) 1661 - by George [Morley] Lord Bishop of Worcester. London, R. Norton for T. Garthwait at the Little North Door of S. Paul's 1661. p. 36

⁶ Book of Common Prayer: A General Thanksgiving

⁷ *Op cit* Coronation Sermon p. 57

⁸ *Ibid* p. 58

⁹ Matthew Arnold, *Dover Beach*

¹⁰ *Ibid* p. 41, p. 59

present monarch was anointed at her Coronation and Archbishop Geoffrey Fisher pointed out in a notable broadcast that it was the anointing of the monarch that was central to the Coronation Rite, at its very core and heart. It was not the giving of the orb or sceptre, not the robing, not even the crowning but it was the anointing with holy oil that mattered, that signified: “as Solomon was anointed king by Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet, so be thou anointed, blessed and consecrated Queen over the Peoples, whom the Lord thy God hath given thee to rule and govern.”¹¹

Here is the sacralising of the monarch within the sacral and sacramental landscape and economy of the realm: the setting apart for a vocation of service and life-long commitment: “a divinity doth hedge a king.”¹² For those of us who order and mark our lives within a sacramental system as the natural consequence and effect of the Incarnation of Our Lord and the sanctification of the world, these are not outmoded concepts nor redundant symbols. Consecration to a life of service and the embodiment of a national ideal has been the mark of our modern monarchy. Although we no longer talk of the Divine Right of Kings, it may have been consigned to the dusty pages of history, the contemporary sacramental and sacral nature of our monarchy is an enrichment and a sophisticated adornment to our social, cultural and political environment.

But we speak, as we must, not merely of this world but of the time beyond time. The prayer at the Anointing of the monarch points us beyond this world of time and space, beyond this temporal sphere: “Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who by his Father was anointed with the oil of gladness above his fellows by his holy anointing pour down upon your head and heart the blessing of the Holy Ghost, and prosper the work of your hands: that by the assistance of his heavenly grace you may govern and preserve the peoples committed to your charge in wealth, peace and godliness; and after a long and glorious course of ruling a temporal kingdom wisely, justly, and religiously, you may at last be made a partaker of an eternal kingdom.”¹³

In that prayer “we have now passed the Gate, and are within the House of Judgement,”¹⁴ for all of us, so for any Sovereign: “Though princes are called gods,” said the Bishop of Worcester in his 1661 Coronation sermon, “yet they shall die like men ... though they be accountable to no tribunal here, yet they are to be judged hereafter, and judged by one who is no respecter of persons and from whom no secrets can be hid.”¹⁵ This is our King, this is Christ our King, Christ the Shepherd King, the King to whom all kings must bow the knee, the King whose country lies beyond the stars, the King whose realm is universal, the King whose love is infinite, whose mercy is boundless, the King who commands, not armies of men, but legions of angels and winged squadrons of saints and martyrs, the King glorious in his birth of his poor and lowly Mother, the King born, not in a palace, but in a stable and that King who now “commands the beauteous files,”¹⁶ the King who reigns not from a throne but from the gibbet on Calvary’s hill, the King of grace and peace, the King adored and worshipped by the heavenly host and by his people here on earth, the King who feeds us with his words of life, and who feeds and sustains us with his flesh and blood in the Bread and Wine of the Eucharist. He is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords to whom be everlasting honour, glory and worship.

¹¹ Coronation Rite 1953

¹² William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 4: 5, 126

¹³ Coronation Rite 1953

¹⁴ John Henry Newman

¹⁵ *Op cit* Coronation Sermon 1661 p. 46

¹⁶ Henry Vaughan