

[24th Sunday (C)] — death of QE II

11th September 2022

‘The Queen is dead! — may she rest in peace — God save the King!’

Job 19: I know that my Redeemer lives!

Rom 8: nothing can come between us and the love of Christ

Jn 11:17–27: I am the Resurrection and the Life

Personally speaking, 2022 is sombrely turning out to be a quite a year of deaths! Some of you know that my own mother died in the first days of the year; and since then, 6 of my friends have lost a parent; another friend has just lost his sister, just short of her 50th birthday; and in both my former parish in Hoddesdon, and in my home parish (my father’s parish), a whole series of long-standing parishioners have gone to the Lord, or so it has seemed. Whilst making this remembrance, of course, it is right to think also of those many dead in this year’s conflict in the Ukraine: soldiers and civilians of the Ukraine, plus maybe 50,000 members of the Russian armed forces. And now, in these last days, the death of our Sovereign, a queen whose 70 years on the throne have exceeded any previous monarch’s reign in this country. We may feel somewhat overwhelmed by this wave of deaths, both the expected and the unexpected — deaths of the very elderly such as

our 96-yr-old queen and of the young, including soldiers in the battle-zones of the Ukraine — but we are called on in faith to approach this mourning as Christians and to pray: may Queen Elizabeth II, our deceased head of state — and all those we have lost in 2022 — rest in peace.

It is right that, as Catholics, we take the opportunity of these days of national mourning to offer prayers and the Requiem Mass for our late Queen, and to help make this time of death and grief a moment that is also a spiritual one. We can shine a light on these events, turning what would otherwise be mere tragedy and loss, solely an emotional vacuum, into that which is a chance for evangelization, an opportunity to proclaim the Gospel. We are somewhat helped in this by the nature of our land, its having the established Church of England interwoven in our national life. Thus, references to God — “God save the King!” — and recourse to Christian prayer, are part and parcel of the ceremonies of the death of one monarch and the instantaneous accession of another. That our monarch is a baptized Christian — despite historic tensions and

long-standing differences with the Catholic faith, the faith of the kings and queens of England prior to the 16th c. — is of huge significance, and we should not underestimate the ways in which this should colour our keeping of these days. The late Queen, and indeed the new King, have both made plentiful references to their Christian faith in public broadcasts — most recently in the King’s speech to the nation on Friday evening, including his prayer that the “flights of angels” accompany the soul of his mother on her last journey, an oblique reference to the *in paradisum* of the Requiem Mass. As Christians it is important for all of us to express with clarity, through our commitment to prayer and in our conversations, our faith in Jesus who has overcome the stranglehold of sin and death, and won the everlasting victory.

When I hear the words of Our Lord to St Martha in the Gospel passage I chose for this ‘Mass of the Dead,’ it makes me think of this: speaking the truth of Jesus, divine truth, into the sadness of grief. Martha and her sister are only recently bereaved — a matter of days — and yet our

Lord is speaking quite boldly to her, putting her on the spot: “*I Am the Resurrection and the Life ... Do you believe this?*” There is a directness with His friend, St Martha, which allows Him to speak boldly of His power over human life and death — there is no need for Him to ‘beat around the bush.’ Our Lord Jesus has the whole response to the mystery of death; His is the entire answer to those worrying questions surrounding our mortal end, our death and judgment, our eternal destiny. “*I Am the Resurrection and the Life. Whoever believes in Me, even though he die, will live, and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die.*” Our Lord will bring St Martha’s brother Lazarus back to life — in his case, a new spell of *earthly* existence, but an indicator that Jesus is truly the Lord of life, whose resurrection will announce a new sort of life for humanity, the prospect of eternal happiness in heaven with Him.

Just as Our Lord was bold in His words to Martha, so we also can be bold in anchoring the death of our Queen firmly in words of faith. The fact that religious services in both Scottish Presbyterian and Anglican traditions are

central to the recent days and the coming days too as the Queen is laid to rest will help in this matter, and reinforce the undeniable fact that human death cannot be separated from God. In death, we encounter the living and merciful God, but we so need the loving faithful prayers of those who surround us here on earth, to accompany us in our last journey and to intercede for our salvation. What a thought, that Queen Elizabeth has *so many people of faith* praying for her. Admittedly, many of her subjects may be of little faith or none, yet there remains that vast number across this nation and across the Commonwealth, who *do* pray, and are praying for her soul, and are witnessing to the fact that as she did, they believe in the Gospel of Our risen Lord Jesus. May the outpouring of love and affection for the late monarch, combined with this rising-up of a tide of prayer, bring many blessings — to her, yes, most importantly, for the forgiveness of her sins, and for her eternal repose; but also to our country. The reinforcement of Christian belief, prayer, and faithful living, is an important chance to revive, however obliquely, the

spiritual life of our nation and the Christian consciousness of all those who follow these events, perhaps millions worldwide.

We Catholics, though not in strict communion of faith with our Sovereign — a wound that sadly for now remains unhealed — can yet join wholeheartedly in the Christian dimension of these mourning rites and funeral ceremonies, most of all by commending her to our Saviour. Above and beyond, then, whatever ways in which we might participate — following the events on television or internet, or queuing with the crowds in London to catch a glimpse of the coffin — yet our foremost duty, as for any deceased person, is prayer and the offering of Mass. Any and every person who has died, even someone whom we may admire for having offered a huge long lifetime of civic service as Sovereign, is in need of prayer for the grace of Our Blessed Lord's mercy and forgiveness, healing in the pains of purgatory.

10 days ago or so I went to the Proms (concerts at the Royal Albert Hall) and heard a stunning performance

of Elgar's setting of Cardinal Newman, our patron's, great poem, *The Dream of Gerontius*, which recounts the passage of the soul of a dying man to God. Since I was 'promming' at that concert, i.e. standing, I was able to hear every word of the soloists' singing, and was very struck by one passage sung by Gerontius, who was about to face judgment. These are Newman's words, about that sombre and yet awesome moment of death, as the deceased man finds peace despite the purgatory that awaits him ...

Soul of Gerontius

I went to sleep; and now I am refreshed.
A strange refreshment for I feel in me
An inexpressive lightness, and a sense
Of freedom, as I were at length myself,
And ne'er had been before. How still it is!
I hear no more the busy beat of time,
No, nor my fluttering breath, nor struggling pulse;
Nor does one moment differ from the next.
This silence pours a solitariness
Into the very essence of my soul:
And the deep rest so soothing and so sweet
Hath something too of sternness and of pain.

This beautiful insight of Cardinal Newman in his epic poem — may this one day be the truth for us, each, as we

necessarily face God at the end of our life. May it please God in His great mercy to look upon Elizabeth II, our long-lived Queen, and grant her peace and rest. And may our many fervent prayers assist her, and all those whom we know of who have died in 2022, to come in God's good time to that beatific vision that we heard Job proclaiming with such reassurance in the first reading today:

*This I know: that my Redeemer lives, ...
After my awaking, He will set me close to Him, and
from my flesh, I shall see God.
He whom I shall see will take my part: these eyes
will gaze on Him and find Him not aloof.*