

**‘THE DIAMOND QUEEN’ : THANK THE LORD, FOR ELIZABETH WINDSOR!**

St. Mary’s, Elton, Evensong, Sunday 10 June 2012  
Address by Sir Leslie Fielding KCMG, Reader Emeritus

On my way up to church, this evening, I was thinking of the Commission which the Palace sent me in 1956, signed “Elizabeth R” and appointing me a member of her Diplomatic Service. An impressive parchment, it begins as follows :

“Elizabeth The Second, by the Grace of God of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and of her other Realms and Territories, Queen ; Head of the Commonwealth ; Defender of the Faith &c, &c, &c.”

Absolutely *lapidary* – as if carved on marble. Redolent of permanence, even?

But, you know, we are lucky to have had her at all, as our Queen. During World War II, Adolf Hitler had his eye on the Duke of Windsor. (A rather pathetic individual, incidentally, whom I had to wait upon at one point in my career – under Palace Protocol, whenever the Duke and his poisonous Duchess, living in exile in France, departed or returned, the Private Secretary of the British Ambassador in Paris, and I as First Secretary, used to have to take it in turns to be present in the VIP lounge, and make polite conversation). Hitler wanted King George VI out of the way and the former King Edward VIII (believed to have fascist sympathies) back on the throne of England. This, in the hope that he would persuade Sir Winston Churchill to sue for peace.

So Buckingham Palace was bombed a total of nine times. Once they had got the message, the Royals were mostly down at Windsor Castle at night, retiring when the siren sounded to their air-raid shelter in the cellar. But, at the outset of the Blitz, on 13 September 1940, at Buckingham Palace, it was a close thing for the then Princess Elizabeth.

We have so much for which to be thankful to the Good Lord in our Head of State : her faith, her conduct, her maternal example and her sheer courage, to name but a few!

The Queen’s Christian faith has been steadfast. She affirmed it at her Coronation. If anything, notes one of her Archbishops of Canterbury, Royal broadcasts to the nation have become more religious, with the years.

But hers is not a narrow or bigoted belief. To be sure, the Queen is the Head of the Church of England ; but in Scotland, she attends the Presbyterian Kirk. She is Patron of the Council of Christians and Jews. She has been both guest and host of Roman Pontiffs. During this year’s Jubilee celebrations, she found time to meet Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Zoroastrian and Bahai religious leaders, gathered in Lambeth Palace.

Then there is the example of the Queen's personal conduct. She does not rule her subjects, but serves them.

I think of her endless patient hard work, here in the UK, out in the Commonwealth and in the wider world. She reads State Papers, diplomatic despatches and intelligence reports assiduously (Mrs Thatcher considered Elizabeth II to have "a formidable grasp of current issues"). The Queen has in fact been the close confidant of a series of Prime Ministers, all of whom have, without exception, been profoundly grateful for the opportunity, in private, in one-on-one Audience, regularly to let their hair down, in the absolute certainty that nothing would ever get out. But Elizabeth the Second also likes to meet ordinary people and see what they are up to. The same is true of the armed forces. (She was a driver in the WRAC at the end of the war, remember, and knows from experience what military service can be like).

A word about Elizabeth Windsor, as a mum. She really cherishes her family. And what a lot she has had to cope with, by way of marital break-ups among her children! As Archbishop Carey recently put it, the Queen knows as well as any of us that failure can be part of the human condition, however hard we try. I have heard Princess Anne say that "Mother has had to put up with a lot from us – yet we are all still on speaking terms, which says a lot for her!".

I mentioned courage. Physical, sometimes. Remember how steadily the Queen reacted, when she was shot at, riding down the Mall to the Trooping of the Colour in 1981. Remember her nerve, on the recent State Visit to Ireland, mingling with the Republican crowds, in Dublin. There has also been her stiff upper lip, during the bad times. The "Annus Horribilis", as she called it, of 1992, with three marriages falling apart ; the publication of Lady Diana's 'peek-a-boo', 'tell-all' memoirs ; and the great fire at the Queen's beloved Windsor Castle. (Never one for over-statement, the Queen commented that it had not been a year on which she would look back with any particular affection!) Then came Diana's tragic death in 1997. Along with criticism of the Queen and Prince Philip for being initially slow to respond to public emotion. This, following on from the steady insinuations in the Murdoch press over several years to the effect that, by the middle of her reign, the Queen had become a dysfunctional parent and generally out of touch with the nation. (Decidedly, as the Duke of Edinburgh once said, being the Monarch in this country is not a job that any sane person could possibly ever want!)

I shall reach 80, next month. I wish I had half the energy and positive thinking of this remarkable woman, six years my senior. Of course, one of the aspects of us all living longer is our having to adjust to major social and political change, wave after rapid wave, which our grandparents and great grandparents never had to experience. These days, we 'oldies' have had to become accustomed to the ground shifting under our feet. And just think what a lot of change the Queen has seen in her long lifetime!

- Abroad, the change from Empire and from "Dominion over palm and pine" to Britain's diminished status in the modern world, as a middle-weight among many others.
- At home, the emergence of a multi-ethnic, multi-faith (and in part openly atheistic) society, and certainly a less deferential one.
- Latterly, the flourishing of the self-indulgent culture of "go-on-you're-worth-it! Of consumerism and "let-it-all-hang-out" emotions.

True, there have been many good things for which to thank God, since the Queen's accession :

- Better health and better education (when I left the army to go up to Cambridge in the Coronation year, I was one of only five per cent of the population accessing further or higher education).
- A doubling of home ownership.
- A quadrupling of the country's GDP.

But we have also had to face up to :

- Greater over-crowding (as the population has shot up from 50 million to over 60 million and is expected shortly to reach over 70 million).
- Four times as many divorces.
- A huge increase in the number of children living outside stable adult relationships.

Through all these changes, Elizabeth II has helped to give us, nevertheless, some sense of national continuity. Some stability, amid the shocks to the system. And she is a living reminder of what really matters – faith, hope and charity towards our neighbours.

Let me conclude. People do ask sometimes what the Queen is *really* like. As a person. In private. Beyond the majesty and mystique. Behind the veil of dignity, duty and decorum. And, does she really drink Gin and Dubonnet?

Certainly, we all agree that she has the great knack of being able to put people at their ease. Those who work most closely with her say that the Queen is the reverse of stuffy and detests pomposity ; that, off-duty, she can be very funny. Andrew Marr, in his biography, “The Diamond Queen”, goes on to ascribe to her a wry wit, a talent for mimicry. Describes her as very sharp, shrewd and intelligent. Possessed of an extraordinary memory for faces and people. (I can attest that last. Absent on secondment to an international organisation for fifteen years, I eventually came back into Court Circles, for my Investiture. After tapping me on both shoulders with a sword, bidding me rise, and pinning a star to my beating breast, Her Majesty stood back, looked me quizzically in the eye, and asked “Where have you *been?*”).

But I will not tell tales out of school. Not even about the Gin and Dubonnet. Enough of this tittle-tattle. The heart of the matter is that the Queen is a remarkable human being, as well as a great Christian Head of State. With her, we have been incredible lucky.

“The Diamond Queen”? Yes, God bless her! But praise God also for the woman, Elizabeth Windsor. Let us thank the Lord, for them both!