

The Death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth 2

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[0 : 00] Well, we're all very aware that this week has been a week of massive change for our country, as you all know, on Thursday, 8 September, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II passed away.

She reigned for 70 years, which means that for most of our population, she's always been there, and her passing marks a change that most of us will never have experienced before.

Now, I think it's really important to acknowledge that everybody reacts to that in different ways. For some people, it's a devastating blow. For others, they may not have had that same level of affection for the Queen and for the royal family that others may have. So some of you here today may feel sorry, but on the whole, okay. Others may feel a huge sense of grief. Many of us might be somewhere in the middle.

And all of these are okay. And today, I'm certainly not imposing on anybody one particular kind of reaction to the passing of the Queen. We are all different in that sense. Scripture commands all of us to be loyal to a king or queen, to pray for them and to honour them. But there's no explicit command in terms of how a moment like this should affect us all personally. So please don't worry where you sit on that spectrum of responding to the news. But the one thing I want to recognise is the one thing that's undeniable, the fact that this is a massive change for our nation. Our longest reigning monarch has died.

So this morning, in light of the passing of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, I'd like us to turn back to Hebrews chapter 13 and read again at verse 8, where we find the wonderful words, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. And I'd like us to spend a little bit of time this morning thinking about Queen Elizabeth. But that's not just so that we can think about her. It's actually because I think thinking about her is going to help us see and understand a new more of our great king, King Jesus. So a little bit about Elizabeth, then a little bit about Jesus. In many ways, I think everybody's been aware that the Queen's health has been in decline for the past year or two. But even with that knowledge, the news that came this week has shaken the country.

[2 : 38] Everything changed on Thursday afternoon. TV channels changed, news websites, political debates, sporting events, even planned strike action. All of that changed instantly when the news came through. And since our death was announced, people from all across the world have paid tribute to her. And I can't really remember, I can't remember a death that has had such global acknowledgement. I'd say Nelson Mandela is probably the only death I can think of that may become close, but the whole world has stopped to acknowledge her passing. And lots of people have said lots of nice things about the Queen. And what I'd like to focus on is three things that I think have been very prominent in all the comments, tributes and news stories that have arisen in the days since she passed. There's been great emphasis on three things.

On her dignity, on the stability that she provided, and on her extraordinary commitment to her duty. Dignity, stability and duty. And I want us to just think about these a little bit more for a few minutes. So dignity, first of all, even a short look into world history will tell you that a scandalous monarch is not an unusual thing.

And our countries know different, there's people who ruled our nation and their lives and their conduct has been frankly awful in many ways. And you can still see it in the world today, not just with kings and queens, but presidents, prime ministers, business tycoons, mega celebrities. It's incredibly easy for people who are in positions of power to use that power as an opportunity for the flesh, as an opportunity to gratify all sorts of sinful desires that every human conscience knows is wrong. Queen Elizabeth has been a remarkable exception to that pattern.

[4 : 44] Nobody, I don't think anybody would argue that her reign was marked with an incredible dignity. And what's even more amazing is when we recognize how much she was scrutinized for her whole life.

Every move was watched and yet after 70 years people can look back at an extraordinary lifetime of dignity. She conducted herself in a way that was exemplary for somebody in her position as queen and even more so as a Christian.

Her faith wasn't just seen in her Christmas messages where she would point the nation to Jesus. It was also seen in her conduct and the way she carried herself. We said this at the prayer meeting on Thursday evening, just an hour or two after we'd heard the news. In a world where tabloid media is so merciless and greedy, a scandal about the queen would have been worth millions.

And yet they never got one. They never had one to publish. Now I'm not saying that she was perfect and I'm sure things might emerge in years to come that will reveal her weaknesses and mistakes. But it's still remarkable that after 70 years in such a public and prominent position, the most public and prominent position that anyone in her country could have, she was never coarse, never aggressive, never scandalous, never stupid, never drunken, never lewd or anything like that. She was such a model of dignity.

[6 : 22] In her we also saw remarkable stability. As we were saying to the kids, loads has changed in the world since 1952. Some of you will be able to remember when she became queen, but for most of us, even if we go back to our earliest memories of life, it'll be to a time when she had already been reigning for decades.

The Carlyway in 1952 would have looked very different to today. It's the same for the whole of the UK. And yet throughout 70 years of extraordinary social, technological and geopolitical change, the queen has provided wonderful stability to our nation.

And that stability stands in contrast to all the instability that we see around us in life. The last 70 years have seen remarkable advancements, they've seen horrifying wars, momentous political change, huge shifts in moral standards, alarming environmental challenges, astonishing advancements in communications, travel and industry.

And this week we've had another new Prime Minister, the 15th since 1952, and yet throughout all that, we've had the same queen. And many have commented on that stability, on the fact that she was always there. That's something that's been coming through very strongly in the reports.

And that was one of the amazing things about her, that she maintained that stability for so long. I often have thought the last couple of days, I wonder what she'd have thought if somebody had said to her in 1952, you're going to be queen for 70 years.

[7 : 56] Would have been amazing. It's very unlikely that we'll see anything like that for a long, long time. And then last of all, duty. People have spoken of her dignity, they've spoken of the stability that she provided, but I think most of all people have commented on her commitment to her duty.

That's been an incredible feature of her reign, but I think it's become even more remarkable in recent years as she remained incredibly active despite her advancing age.

And if you think about it, it's not uncommon for people to retire at 60. The Queen turned 60 when I was three.

So for my whole life, she's been working during that period of life when most people would expect to be retired. Now I know, and I don't need to tell you, that many privileges come with being queen, and there are many hardships that people suffer that she won't have suffered.

I'm sure there was lots of things about being queen that were nice, but I'm also sure that there were many aspects that weren't. And one thing's for certain that in her 70 years as queen, she had to get through a monumental list of duties, and her faithfulness to that duty was remarkable.

[9 : 18] And it's really interesting to think about that emphasis that's been made to duty, her commitment to duty, because if you think about it, it would be easy to think that the Queen would be the freest person in the country.

She's at the top. She's queen. She's got status and freedom and privilege and wealth and opportunity to do anything, and yet the truth is actually the opposite, isn't it?

She had a burden of duty, like no other. And that faithful commitment to duty is part of the reason why so many people admired her so much. And that was particularly because of the interest that she took in people and the effort that she made to visit communities and to talk to men and women, boys and girls.

And so despite having all the responsibilities of being queen, she seemed very down to earth. And that connection with people is incredibly important, and it's incredibly important for somebody in leadership.

When I was preparing this sermon for today on Friday, I looked up a sermon that I remember seeing previously that was preached by Thomas Jamersh in 1817, when Princess Charlotte of Wales died.

[10:32] Now, Thomas Jamersh, he was one of the founding fathers of the Free Church, and he was a very, very prominent preacher and minister in the first half of the 19th century in Scotland.

Back in 1817, he was minister of the Throne Church of Scotland in Glasgow. Princess Charlotte was the daughter of King George IV, and she would have been heir to the throne, but in 1817, aged 21, she died after giving birth to a stillborn son.

And the whole nation was stunned by her death. And Jamersh preached a sermon about her on the day of her funeral, and in it, he said something that I thought was really interesting.

He spoke about how often tension, particularly political tension, can arise in a nation and be manifested in terms of hostility between the ruler and the people.

And he explained what caused that. I'm going to read a quotation from him, and I'll put it on the screen. He said, it is the distance of the prince from his people, which feeds the political jealousy of the latter, and which by removing the former to a height of inaccessible grandeur places him, as it were, beyond the reach of their sympathies.

[12:00] Much of that political rancour which festers and agitates, and which makes such a tremendous appearance of noise and hostility in our land, is due to the aggravating power of distance.

I think that's a wonderful phrase there, the aggravating power of distance. What Jamersh is basically saying is that when you've got a king or a queen who's just in an ivory tower detached from everybody, and when they take no interest in the lives of ordinary people, there's this huge distance between them, and that distance aggravates things.

It causes tension. And he's reminding us that in terms of a nation, it's incredibly easy for people to hate each other from a distance. That applies to rulers and subjects, that applies to the rich and the poor.

Jamersh unpacks that a bit in his sermon, and we can see the same thing today, where different groups of people will have great suspicion of one another, whether that's because of wealth and status, or political party, or sexual ethic, or even football team, or even the year below you in school.

And what Jamersh says goes on to say is that if you actually bring people together, then so much of that hostility goes, because we realize that we're all just people.

[13:17] The Royal Family in 1817 had lost a 21 year old daughter and a baby. And in that moment Jamersh said, instead of crowns and canopies of grandeur, you have a forlorn husband, a weeping father, and human tears flowing down their cheeks.

It's so easy to be harsh and hostile and unsympathetic from a distance, if we come close to people, then we see their humanity and their fragility, and the hostility and suspicion that may have been growing fades away.

I think Queen Elizabeth was an amazing example of somebody who did not keep her distance, and therefore she did not feed the aggravating power of distance that Jamersh speaks about.

Instead her commitment to duty manifested itself in innumerable visits and waves and handshakes and conversations with ordinary people like us, all across our country and all across the world.

Over the past few days the Queen has been rightly honored for her dignity, for the stability that she provided, and for her astonishing commitment to her duty.

[14:36] And we thank God for all of that. But what does all of this have to do with the Gospel and with our lives as Christians? Well there's two things that I want to say.

The first is that all of this appreciation that we've seen over the past few days for the Queen's dignity, stability and duty, all of this is showing us something incredibly important. It's showing us that humanity has a deep craving for these things.

Humanity longs for dignity, especially among those who are in leadership. Now when I say dignity I don't mean kind of pomp and ceremony and all that kind of stuff.

I don't mean that kind of fanciness. What I mean is the glorious dignity of someone who is just decent and polite and kind and honorable.

Somebody who's not corrupt or rotten or cruel. We crave decent dignified leadership. And you can prove that by the fact that nobody in the last few days has said, oh I wish the Queen was more

immoral.

[15:52] Humanity also longs for stability. So while in some ways we enjoy and embrace change, everyone's delighted when you get a new phone or a new house or a new car, or when we see new schools being built, hospitals, when we see ferries changing, all that kind of stuff.

We love that kind of change, but in amongst all of that advancement, people still crave stability. People long for a constant in their lives for someone who is always there, someone you can always rely on, someone who provides a stability in an ever-changing world.

And that ties in with dignity. And people don't want a corrupt leader to be a constant. When we have a corrupt leader, we long for change, but a dignified leader is a constant that everybody longs for. And that explains why even people who have never met the Queen are devastated at her passing, because she was part of the fabric of her lives.

She brought a wonderful stability to it. And so humanity longs for dignity, humanity longs for stability, and humanity longs for leaders to be committed to their duty.

[17:07] Why? Why is that? Why do we place such value on a leader fulfilling their duty? It's because it shows that they care about us.

A leader who neglects their duties is immediately going to be resented by those under their rule. Now that's true for a king or a queen. It's also true for a line manager, or a teacher, or a parent. Duty is an expression of care, and it's something that every human craves. We long to have a leader who will care for us, who will fulfill all their responsibility towards us, a leader who is not there to be served, but to serve.

I think the last few days have provided a fascinating insight into some of the deepest cravings of humanity. And that brings me to the second thing that I want to say, which is the most important thing that I want to say.

These cravings for dignity, stability, and duty. Queen Elizabeth has been a wonderful model of these for 70 years, but the person in whom we really find them is in her king, our king, Jesus Christ.

[18:34] In Jesus we see ultimate dignity. Now I think that's easy to forget, and yet it's such a huge emphasis in Scripture. We see it in Hebrews 13, the passage that Myrtle read for us.

Jesus is the one who is raised from the dead. You see it there. He's the great shepherd of the sheep, and he is the one to whom there should be glory forever and ever.

The same emphasis is made right from the very start of this letter. You go to chapter 1 verse 3, describes Jesus as the radiance of the glory of God, the exact imprint of his nature.

He upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high. And there's numerous passages in Scripture making it exactly the same point.

In Jesus there is unparalleled glory, majesty, purity, beauty, decentness, and utterly unspoiled dignity.

[19:36] Or to put it the other way, when is Jesus rude, or bad-mannered, or unfriendly, impatient, cold, cruel, manipulative, hot-headed, corrupt, lewd, reckless, immoral, selfish?

When is Jesus these things? Never. Never, ever, ever.

And Jesus, therefore, is the ultimate object of our admiration, and he's worthy of every bit of it. You might say, I don't want an object of admiration. I don't need that in my life. I don't want an object of admiration. Yes, you do.

Yes, you do. Because everybody does. In fact, so much of our society is dominated by that desire to find something to admire.

The kind of cult of celebrity that we have today, the enthusiasm for sport that we have today, all of that kind of stuff, it's just manifestations of the same thing. Everybody is craving something to admire. It might be the queen, it might be your girlfriend or boyfriend, your husband, your wife.

[20:53] It might be a celebrity, it might be a colleague, it might even be yourself in that kind of very weird way. At one level, it's good, apart from the admiring yourself, but there's lots to admire in people, but only in Jesus will you find impeccable, unapproachable, eternal dignity.

In other words, Jesus is just thoroughly, thoroughly decent and thoroughly, thoroughly good. Don't you crave that?

And if you don't know that about Jesus, or if you don't think that about Jesus, you don't think that he is decent and good, if you don't think that about him, then you don't know him.

You don't know him and all you're doing is judging him from a distance, and you need to get to know him far better before you decide what he is or is not like. In Jesus, you will find magnificent dignity. In Jesus, we also see stability. 70 years is a long time, 70 years is nothing. Both those statements are true. Elizabeth's reign provided stability for a lifetime, yet now her name just becomes another in a long list of kings and queens who've come and gone. The stability of her reign has ended. It was always, only ever temporary.

[22 : 20] I saw a comment on the BBC. I'm sure you've seen many like it. Somebody's saying it just felt like she should be there forever, because humans crave stability. That's what makes verse 8 so magnificent. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today, and forever.

In the past week, British history changed forever. A new Prime Minister, a new King. In that time, nothing about Jesus changed.

Hebrews describes him as the exalted risen King, the one who's at the right hand of God, the one who's fulfilled, all that the Old Testament pointed to. He reigns over everything. He's utterly glorious, and he's never, ever going to change.

And I think that's so incredibly helpful for us to recognise, because change is so unsettling. Even when it's expected, the loss of someone who's so integral to our nation has been a huge blow to so many people.

And yet every tear that's been shed because the Queen has died is a reminder of how amazing the Gospel is, because we've got a King that can never die. His reign is never going to end, and he provides a stability that can never be shaken.

[23 : 36] If you go back to the chapter just before this, at the end of Hebrews 12, it says, let us therefore be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken.

No wonder it tells us to be grateful, because this is one of our deepest cravings. And it all makes sense if you think about it, because almost every fear that we have, that you have and that I have, almost every fear that we have is tied to change.

So fear about illness, that's a change in our health. Fear about climate change, well that's obvious, that's change again. Fear about the cost of living this winter, that's a change to our finances.

Fear about growing up, that's change. Fear about getting old, that's change. Fear about death for you and for the people you love so much, that's change.

Change lies at the heart of so many of our fears. Jesus is so wonderful because he is never going to change. It's the same yesterday, today and forever.

[24 : 55] So Jesus' dignity is majestic. Jesus' stability is wonderfully reassuring, but I think most amazing of all is Jesus' commitment to duty.

If you read through the Gospels, you soon discovered that Jesus understood everything that he was doing in terms of duty, in terms of obeying his father.

One of the places you see it very clearly is in John 17. Jesus prays to his father and says, I glorified you on earth having accomplished the work you gave me to do. That is the language of duty. Jesus came on a mission, he came to fulfil the duty that his father had given him.

Hebrews and the whole of the Bible in fact speaks of that duty in the language of covenant. You see it very clearly in Hebrews 9, I won't read all of that passage, I've just highlighted and read the bit at the bottom where it describes Jesus as the mediator of the new covenant.

There's loads we could say about that. Just put very simply, what that means is that Jesus is the one who bridges the gap between God and humanity that sin has caused. Jesus is the one who takes upon himself all the implications of our sin and failure and he is the one who fulfills all the responsibilities and requirements that God extended towards humanity.

[26 : 19] And because Jesus fulfilled that duty perfectly, our relationship with God can be beautifully restored. And when you see that language of covenant, that's what it's talking about, the deepest kind of relationship that we can have.

Jesus has come to fulfil that duty to restore our relationship, our covenant relationship with God.

And the passage that Myrtle read, Hebrews 13, gives us a magnificent one sentence description of all that Jesus's duty involved.

You find it in verse 12. So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Behind that sentence lies so much. Behind that sentence lies the horror of the crucifixion.

Jesus, arrested, condemned, led out of Jerusalem, nailed to the cross and left to die. But by doing that, by suffering outside the gate, he saved us. His blood made atonement for our sins. His suffering was in our place. His death was so that all who trust in Him might be saved. And as this sentence describes, sanctified, made holy by His blood.

[27 : 51] Now here is where we actually see an amazing contrast between the duty fulfilled by Queen Elizabeth and the duty fulfilled by Jesus.

Elizabeth, as we all know, was amazing at coming to the cities, towns and villages of our nation. That was a key part of her duties and she always did it with an amazing interest and care towards the people that she met.

Now some of you can testify to that because I know that some of you met her when she came here or when you were away on the mainland. And in many ways that was why people loved her so much.

Because by coming to towns and cities and villages, she showed how much she loved the people she ruled over. But with Jesus it's actually different. With Jesus it's magnificently different.

Because ultimately, Jesus wasn't welcomed. Jesus wasn't loved by the crowds.

[28 : 58] And ultimately Jesus's duty didn't involve coming into a city. Jesus's duty involved being thrown out.

Outside the gate where he was condemned and rejected.

That means that Jesus's duty involved being despised by the very people he created. His duty involved coming to his own but his own not receiving him.

His duty involved him crying over Jerusalem and their rejection of him. His duty involved him hearing the crowds around him shout, crucify him.

His duty involved him leaving heaven, emptying himself, taking the form of a servant, being found in human form, being obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.

[30 : 04] Jesus's duty involved humiliation, rejection and unimaginable suffering as he was thrown out of the city.

Throne outside the gate. Why did he do it? He did it because of how much he loves you.

He did it because of how much he loves you. He did it to save you. Humanity craves a leader who cares. A leader who will fulfill their duty no matter how much that duty involved.

A leader who will do it because their love is so deep. The pinnacle of that kind of love is Jesus Christ.

Queen Elizabeth knew that. Jesus was her king. She died in his arms and now she's home with him forever.

[31 : 21] She understood the incredible dignity, stability and duty of Jesus. She knew that it's only by trusting in him that all of our longings can be satisfied.

She knew it. Do you? Amen.

Lord Jesus, we praise you for your glorious dignity, for the magnificent stability that you provide and for the incredible duty that you fulfilled to save us.

Thank you for being the perfect King. Amen. We're going to close singing the wonderful words of Psalm 72.

The last three stands us that speak so powerfully of Jesus, acknowledging his reign, his glory and splendour as our King. As we sing these words, we are praising him, but we are also praying that the whole world again would be filled with his glory.

[32 : 38] That is exactly what our world means so much. The murder will lead us and we'll stand to sing these great words as we conclude.