

Requiem Mass for King Henry VII

21st April 2016

The Lady Chapel, Westminster Abbey

The Dean

We have ample reason to celebrate today on the 90th birthday of Her Majesty The Queen, our Visitor, many of whose most significant moments have been marked here. And indeed we have celebrated this significant milestone. Starting at one o'clock, the Abbey's excellent company of ringers successfully completed a full peal of the Abbey's bells that lasted over three hours. They only ring peals on the happiest and most important occasions. At five o'clock, Evensong began with the national anthem and included not only, as every day, the prayers for The Queen and Members of the Royal Family but also the lovely setting by William Byrd of an anthem first sung as a prayer for Queen Elizabeth I but equally fitting as a prayer for Queen Elizabeth II.

'O Lord, make thy servant Elizabeth our Queen to rejoice in thy strength: give her her heart's desire, and deny not the request of her lips; but prevent her with thine everlasting blessing, and give her a long life, even for ever and ever. Amen.' Prevent her, of course, means go before her with thine everlasting blessing.

This evening's celebration of the Eucharist marks another of the many anniversaries in the long history of the Abbey. On this day, 21st April, 507 years ago, Henry VII died, his death drawing to a close a reign of almost 24 years. He with his queen Elizabeth of York was eventually buried in a grand tomb to the east of this high altar in this chapel he had commissioned. Here their bodies rest.

Today we give thanks for the king's life and commend his immortal soul to almighty God. This may seem a strange thing to do with such ceremony 507 years after his death. And indeed some of the content of the ceremony may seem strange. What we have not sought to do is slavishly to imitate the ceremony that might have taken place 500 years ago on the seventh anniversary of the king's death. The text of the Eucharist is largely from the Church of England's current prayer book issued in the year 2000 and called Common Worship. The ceremonial itself is much simpler than it would have been 500 years ago. But the plain chant of the Ordinary of the Mass and of the Proper for a Requiem Mass is as it would then have been. The rich 16th century polyphonic music which we so often enjoy comes from a later era than the one we evoke this evening, so we have settled for the beautiful simplicity of the plainsong.

The texts themselves are familiar to anyone who has enjoyed the great choral requiem masses of Mozart, Verdi or Berlioz, but the trumpet fanfares of the Tuba mirum did not exist in the early 16th century. The Tuba mirum is part of the Sequence sung between the epistle and gospel, that begins Dies irae, dies illa: 'day of wrath, that day will dissolve the world in ashes.' The text is commonly attributed to the 13th century Franciscan Thomas of Celano and is a meditation on the last judgement, as described by our Lord in the parable of the sheep and the goats and other biblical texts. The hymn closes with a supplication for mercy before the coming of that terrible day. The violent depiction of judgement and hell, evoked by this text, is familiar to us from the works of the Netherlandish painter Hieronymus Bosch who died 500 years ago this year.

In the reforms to the Roman Catholic liturgy initiated by the Second Vatican Council, the Dies irae was suppressed on the stated grounds that it overemphasized judgment, fear, and despair as against Christian hope and faith in the resurrection. But it is clear that the king feared the judgement of God. In his will he ordered and endowed 10,000 masses to be said 'for the remission of our sins and the weale of our soul' and the clergy and laity of the Abbey to pray for the repose of his soul 'as long as the world shall endure.'

He may well have been right to fear the judgement of God. English history has generally been kind to the Tudors, amongst whom both Henry VII's son and his younger grand-daughter are regarded with awe and fascination if not equally universal love and admiration. The king himself may well have repented towards the end of his life of some of the actions that no doubt at the time seemed entirely necessary, and therefore just, to secure his throne and the prosperity of his realm. And, although the admirers of Richard III, recently so noisy, object to the bias of historiography towards the Tudors, even if we find it reasonable that Henry VII should have defeated Richard III in battle and seized the throne, yet his measures to build up the wealth his son was to squander undoubtedly leave us feeling a little queasy.

But then we might ask whether the drift of the Church's understanding in the direction of a universalism in which everyone is thought to be destined for heaven whatever their beliefs or morals, whatever their way of life, has not somehow missed the point. We may not feel entirely at ease with the opening of the prophecy of Nahum, 'A jealous and avenging God is the Lord, the Lord is avenging and wrathful; the Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries and rages against his enemies. The Lord is slow to anger but great in power, and the Lord will by no means clear the

guilty.’ We believe that God is merciful. But God is also just. And if God were not a God of justice, it is hard to see how his people might have developed a true perception of right and wrong, of the standards by which we are called to live.

On this 90th birthday, I note that people have been struggling to find the right words to describe what it is that makes The Queen so admirable. The words used and honoured today have not always been equally honoured. But they are duty and service, with a hint of consistency, our rock. A word I have not heard used but surely one of the best words to describe what is being reached for here is ‘virtue’. Thank God The Queen is virtuous, as not all Her Majesty’s predecessors have been virtuous, after the pattern of the virtue, the justice, the steadfastness of God.

If God were not just, but only merciful, there would be nothing to strive for. We are impoverished without a doctrine of the judgement of God. But we are bereft without the mercy of God. Thank God that, as St Peter said, ‘Christ himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.’

This evening is no play, no reconstruction. We worship almighty God, we celebrate the Eucharist, we pray for our dead and the dead king that they might have a merciful judgement and eternal rest. And if we believe they have passed into eternity, then their death is as it were now. Every Eucharist is a celebration of the death and resurrection of our Lord and in every Eucharist we eat the bread of which our Lord said, ‘the one who eats this bread will live for ever, and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.’ This evening, as in every Eucharist, we plead before the throne of grace the eternal, once only once and once for all,

sacrifice of Calvary, for ourselves, for the whole world, for all the living,
for all the departed. May we all walk in newness of life!