



The Queen: her faith and life as Supreme Governor of the Church of England

## Defender of the Faith

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"God help me to make good my vow, and God bless all of you who are willing to share in it."

*Her Late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II - 1947*



# The Queen and the Church of England

The Sovereign holds the title 'Defender of the Faith and Supreme Governor of the Church of England'.

This dates back to the reign of King Henry VIII, who was granted the title 'Defender of the Faith' in 1521 by Pope Leo X. When Henry VIII renounced the spiritual authority of the Papacy in 1534 he was proclaimed 'supreme head on earth' of the Church of England. This was repealed by Queen Mary I but reinstated during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, who was proclaimed 'Supreme Governor' of the Church of England.

At Her Late Majesty The Queen's Coronation in 1953, she was anointed by the Archbishop of Canterbury and took an oath to "maintain and preserve inviolably the settlement of the Church of England, and the doctrine worship, discipline, and government thereof, as by law established in England".

The Queen formally appoints Archbishops, Bishops and Deans of the Church of England. Church of England deacons and parish priests also swear an oath of allegiance to the Sovereign.

In 1970 The Queen became the first Sovereign to inaugurate and address the General Synod in person. After this, Her Late Majesty inaugurated



Her Late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II attending a 100th Anniversary Service for

Royal Army Chaplains in 2019.

"I have been – and remain – very grateful to you for your prayers and to God for His steadfast love. I have indeed seen His faithfulness."

*Foreword for The Servant Queen*

## The Queen: Serving as Jesus served

In 1947, as Princess Elizabeth, Her Majesty toured South Africa with her parents and sister Margaret Rose. In a speech broadcast from Cape Town on her 21st birthday, she referred to her ancestors' motto, 'I serve', saying: "I declare before you all that my whole life whether it be long or short shall be devoted to your service and the service of our great imperial family to which we all belong."

In her speeches, particularly those she delivered at Christmas, the Queen increasingly reflected on her Christian faith. The theme of service was one she came back to often, and in this she took Jesus' example as a pattern for her own life.

In her 2000 Christmas broadcast she spoke of the reminders of Christ's life in cathedrals and abbeys, with their music, stained glass and pictures.

However, she said: "The true measure of Christ's influence is not only in the lives of the saints but also in the good works quietly done by millions of men and women day in and day out throughout the centuries". Christ's 'great emphasis was to give spirituality a practical purpose,' she said, adding: "For me the teachings of Christ and my own personal accountability before God provide a framework in which I try to lead my life. I, like so many of you, have drawn great comfort in difficult times from Christ's words and example."

She referred to his example again in 2008, when she said Jesus made it clear that 'genuine human happiness and satisfaction lie more in giving than receiving; more in serving than in being served'. "We can surely be grateful that, two thousand years after the birth of Jesus, so many of us are able to draw inspiration from his life and message, and to find in him a source of strength and courage," she said.

In 2010 she spoke at the opening of the General Synod of the Church of England, and said: "At the heart of our faith stand not a preoccupation with our own welfare and comfort but the concepts of service and of sacrifice as shown in the life and teachings of the one who made himself nothing, taking the very form of a servant."

And in 2012, she spoke again of God sending Jesus 'to serve, not to be served': "He restored love and service to the centre of our lives in the person of Jesus Christ." She quoted the beautiful carol, 'In the Bleak Midwinter', which 'ends by asking a question of all of us who know the Christmas story, of how God gave himself to us in humble service: "What can I give him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb; if I were a wise man, I would do my part." The carol gives the answer, "Yet what I can I give him – give my heart."'

In Cape Town all those years ago she prayed: "God help me to make good my vow, and God bless all of you who are willing to share in it."

We thank God that he answered her prayers, and for her life of service.

## The Queen and the Good Samaritan

The Christmas 2020 address by Queen Elizabeth to her people was delivered in the shadow of the Covid-19 pandemic. She praised those in the front line of the response to it, saying: "We continue to be inspired by the kindness of strangers and draw comfort that – even on the darkest nights – there is hope in the new dawn." The parable of the Good Samaritan, she said, was another example of kindness: "Good Samaritans have emerged across society showing care and respect for all, regardless of gender, race or background, reminding us that each one of us is special and equal in the eyes of God."

In her Christmas messages to her people, the Queen has returned several times to this familiar story. It seems to have struck a particular chord with her, resonating with her strong belief in service to others.

In 1989, she reflected on the damage humanity was doing to our environment – this before the world really woke up to the terrible danger posed by climate change. While she payed tribute to the efforts of scientists and engineers, she said: "But these technical skills are not enough by themselves. They can only come to the rescue of the planet if we also learn to live by the golden rule which Jesus Christ taught us – 'love thy neighbour as thyself'. In the story, she said, the neighbour was the man who stopped and cared for the injured man. Speaking particularly to children, she said: "It's not very difficult to apply that story to our own times and to work out that our neighbours are those of our friends, or complete strangers, who need a helping hand. Do you think they might also be some of the living species threatened by spoiled rivers, or some of the children in places like Ethiopia and Sudan who don't have enough to eat?"

She returned to the story in 2004, stressing the fact that the Samaritan and the man he helped were strangers and foreigners to one another. "The implication drawn by Jesus is clear. Everyone is our neighbour, no matter what race, creed or colour," she said. "The need to look after a fellow human being is far more important than any cultural or religious differences."

She modelled this in her own life by reaching out across these boundaries herself. When he was Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks recalled an event at St James' Palace in 2005 commemorating the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. Queen Elizabeth was meeting a group of Holocaust survivors, and contrary to her usual practice she stayed for a long time after the event was scheduled to finish, talking patiently with each of them until they'd finished telling their story. It was 'an act of kindness that almost had me in tears', wrote Lord Sacks. He continued: "We do not always appreciate the role the Queen has played in one of the most significant changes in the past 60 years: the transformation of Britain into a multi-ethnic, multi-faith society. No one does interfaith better than the Royal family, and it starts with the Queen herself."

In drawing such inspiration from Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, the Queen showed not only the depth of her own Christian faith but also the richness of the story, which still speaks powerfully across the millennia.

***This articles on this page are written by Mark Woods and used with the permission of Bible Society, which has more tributes and reflections on the Queen's life **on its website.*****

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