

492 The Lively Oracles of God

The limited involvement of Her Majesty the Queen during the recent Platinum Jubilee celebrations has emphasised the obvious truth that she will not be with us for very much longer (hence for example Psalms 31.15a; 39.4; 90.12). Meanwhile, “Long may she reign”.

For the guidance of Almighty God as to leadership, kingship and national well-being we look mainly to the Old Testament, to God’s covenant people the children of Israel, who developed into the nations of Israel and Judah. (In New Testament times of course, God’s covenant people, both Jesus-accepting Jews and then Christians too, were severely “under the thumb” of the rigid Jewish authorities and the Roman Empire, and were thus seen - quite correctly! - as tiresome troublemakers who had to be dealt with (egs., John 11.53; 19.16 / Acts 7.57-60; 12.1-3 / II Corinthians 1.8-9; 4.8-11; 6.3-10; 7.5; 11.23-29 / ...). So New Testament teaching focusses more on how Christians are to behave in ungodly societies led by ungodly leadership).

The Old Testament is filled with examples of leadership both good, bad and mixed – as timely as ever in these chaotic days. We will just take King Uzziah here, as being one typical example for us. In II Chronicles 26.1-3, we read that Uzziah was made king of Judah by the people at the age of sixteen, and that he reigned for 52 years in Jerusalem. In vv. 4-5 – “And he did [that which] was right in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his father Amaziah did. (5) And he sought God in the days of Zechariah, who had understanding in the visions of God: and as long as he sought the Lord, God made him to prosper” (KJV). There in the proverbial nutshell of v. 5 is all the guidance that anyone needs who is entrusted with any form of leadership, from a parent to a monarch.

Uzziah did much good, (II Chronicles 26.15b), but then, so often does this happen – “But when he was strong, his heart was lifted up to [his] destruction” (26.16a); “for he transgressed against the Lord his God, and went into the temple of the Lord to burn incense upon the altar of incense” (v.16b). Azariah the priest and his colleagues “withstood Uzziah the king” (v.18) - always a risky business! Sure enough, “Then Uzziah was wroth with the priests” (v.19a), “and behold, he [was] leprous in his forehead ... they thrust him out from thence; yea, himself hasted also to go out, because the Lord had smitten him ...”. Truly, “God is not mocked” (Galatians 6.7).

Still today, following Scripture (from Article XXXVII of the 39 Articles) - “we give not to our Princes the ministering either of God’s Word, or of the Sacraments ... (instead) – they should rule all estates and degrees committed to their charge by God, whether they be Ecclesiastical or Temporal, and restrain with the civil sword the stubborn and evildoers”. Based on the scriptural precedents we are given, that Article gives an excellent summary of the duties and limitations of godly, monarchic rule.

Hence at the coronation in 1953 the Queen promised to keep the promises she had just made; she kissed the Bible; she put the “royal sign-manual” to the Coronation Oath she had just uttered; and she was then given a Bible with these words - “Our gracious Queen: to keep your Majesty ever mindful of the law and the Gospel of God as the Rule for the whole life and government of Christian Princes, we present you with this Book, the most valuable thing that this world affords. Here is Wisdom; This is the royal Law; These are the lively Oracles of God”. We could not imagine a more solemn scene or solemn set of commitments being made.

But as we have been covering in some recent Reflections, these responsibilities for godly governance in Britain have long since been transferred in practice to a democratically-elected government in Parliament. The monarch still “invites” the leader of the winning party to form a government; that government is still termed as “His / Her Majesty’s Government”; and any law passed in Parliament requires the Royal Assent. So the system is a curious, perhaps typically British, fudge: it generally works, but at what cost?

For in reality, “the lively oracles of God”, the true, solid lighthouse of Scripture, which a new monarch vows to follow and which her ministers, in serving on her behalf, should also follow, have been swapped too often for a great clanging, untethered marker-buoy, drifting about on the currents of whatever is deemed “public opinion”, with its name, “RE-ELECTION!”, writ large on its bobbing side.

We are reminded from all this that Almighty God takes oaths, promises, covenants and leadership very seriously, and He surely expects both the leaders and the led to do the same. We keep watching and praying, and next week, God willing, we will consider the next coronation and beyond ...