

## 8 Sqn/ 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of coronation – 2 Jun 13

So this is a special service this morning in 2 respects: on this 8 Sqn association reunion weekend, we celebrate all that 8 Squadron stands for, and we remember with fondness and pride those who have served on the squadron, and especially those who gave their lives in doing so. But it's also 60 years ago today that the Queen was crowned – we had the jubilee celebrations last year, but today we think of that special day and what it represents.

And I want to weave these two themes together and show you the link between them and our bible readings this morning.

8 Squadron has a long and illustrious history: it's now only 18 months away from its centenary. The squadron has served 4 monarchs, but for well over half that time, it's been a **Queen's** crown that's stood above its crest. Like the Queen's reign it's seen glorious moments, and some rather more difficult ones; changes in the way its role is seen, concerns about its future; but like the monarchy itself, the Squadron has weathered storms, lived to prove its value, and seems set to continue in service.

And that's the first link: service. It seems quite natural to talk of 8 squadron in terms of service – those who've **served** on the squadron; the squadron having seen **service** in many different theatres; **servicing** the crown. And of course, service is a word we use regularly when we talk about the Queen. The casual republican may want to characterise the monarchy in terms of **privilege**, but I believe a clear-eyed examination of

the Queen's role paints a very different picture, that of a life devoted to serving her people.

And that links in closely with this morning's gospel reading, in which Jesus' followers, not unlike junior officers awaiting the outcome of a promotion board, are arguing among themselves about who's the best. But Jesus tells them: that may be how the world around you operates, but it can't be how **you** operate. I'm your leader, but I stand among you as one who serves. He could have milked the public adoration, but he came to show a different way of doing things – leadership through service. It's something many people pay lip-service to today, but in Jesus' day it was truly radical. Then great people proved they were great by displaying all the trappings of greatness. Not so with Jesus. Yet Jesus has a claim to be considered the greatest leader ever – with little or no resources, opposed by all the powerful interests in the country, he took a small group of uneducated folk, and turned them into the leaders of a movement which quickly spread throughout the known world, all the while refusing to use force, and often triumphing through self-sacrifice. Even after his criminal's death, he continued – and continues – to be seen as an inspirational leader.

We've also alluded to the need to soldier on through good times and bad – or as Churchill so memorably put it, “when you're going through Hell, keep going!” The Queen has seen some black times. The Suez crisis occurred in 1956. 8 Squadron was heavily involved, flying its Venoms from Akrotiri, destroying close to 50 Egyptian aircraft on the ground, before taking up an armed reconnaissance role. Despite this, the whole

episode was a massive setback to the UK and its place in the world. The Queen was still a young woman and relatively new in her role as head of state. Arguably, the failure of the Suez mission was down to opposition from the United States, yet when the Queen visited the States only the following year, she charmed a nation and began a terrific job of rebuilding Britain's relationships as the country adapted to its new place in the world order. Over the years she has continued to charm leaders and peoples across the world.

She has also experienced difficult times as family problems have been played out very publicly, and of course she was caught up in the extreme public reactions to the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. All of these she faced with dignity and her quiet and simple, yet profound faith – a faith which she does not flaunt, but of which she is not embarrassed, and to which she regularly makes reference in her Christmas broadcasts.

So the Queen, and in different ways, the Squadron, have faced all kinds of difficulties. The story is told of how Lord Trenchard was at an 8 Sqn dining-in night at the end of the Great War, and expounded his view that the future of air power lay with the bomber, rather than fighters or ground attack aircraft. For a squadron which had taken heavy losses in those roles during the war, this was too much, and, I quote, “a great deal of drunken heckling of this very distinguished snr officer took place.” Now, I've been to a couple of 8 Squadron dining-in nights, and really the very thought of “drunken heckling” ... I just can't see it! But as a result they were swiftly posted to the Middle East, with the instruction that they

should never again serve at home. It was more than 50 years before they were allowed back to the UK, and even then it was Kinloss!

Our old testament reading this morning recalled God's words to Joshua: “be strong and courageous, do not be terrified or discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.” Words that can sustain us through many a trial or temptation. We may find ourselves in some very dark places at times in life, but that doesn't mean God has abandoned us, that he's not there with us. Easy words for me to say here today, but backed up by the experience of many, many people – from the Nazi concentration camps to Chinese prisons to hospitals and hospices across the world.

And this throws us back to the coronation. The coronation service is full of some profound words and profound symbolism, and it's clear that the queen takes them extremely seriously. Very early in the service, she is presented with a Bible, the Archbishop of Canterbury saying, “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.” And then the Moderator of the Church of Scotland continues: “Here is Wisdom; This is the royal Law; These are the lively Oracles of God.”

Big claims made on behalf of this book – but claims the Queen has taken very seriously in her life. Hence the way we can see that she has put **service** at the heart of her reign, and been **courageous** in the face of 60

years of challenges. And the key word, of course, is that phrase “lively oracles” – a rather archaic way of saying, “living words”. **Living** – this is not a set of instructions set in stone, a monolithic rulebook to give fixed solutions to specific problems. There’s no doubt that many many times in history it’s been treated just like that, but if we do that, it fails the test of being the most valuable thing that this world affords – it’s no longer a living word.

It’s only as we see it as something alive, something ever changing, something that we have to relate to and sometimes struggle with, that it gains its power. It’s then that we’re empowered to follow the example of that great leader Jesus, to learn that true greatness doesn’t come with rank, that it may not even be recognised at all by many people, because it comes through service. As the great doctor and theologian Albert Schweitzer wrote, “I don’t know what your destiny will be, but one thing I do know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve.”

That’s why it’s not a rulebook, but mainly stories – some of them records of things that happened, some of them myths in the proper sense of the word: stories that embody a deep truth. Not legal requirements to slavishly obey, but something that can work on our **imagination**s and give us the inner resources, the character us know how to behave in unpredictable circumstances.

This book is less like QRs or the Manual of Air Force Law, and more like a combination of the RAF’s Ethos and Core Values and the 8 Squadron

history. We seek to embody certain values and live them out whatever happens to us. But we also seek to live up to the memory and example of those who’ve gone before us. Or some of them, anyway. We take the e.g. of someone like Freddie West, an 8 Squadron pilot who won the RAF’s first VC. Despite one leg being partially severed by an explosive bullet, spouting out fountains of blood and blocking the controls, and the other leg also injured, he got his aircraft back, delivering both his observer and their vital intelligence into safe hands.

On the other hand we’ll probably gloss over the experience of the Squadron commander in 1929, Sqn Ldr the Hon RA Cochrane, who decided to introduce the squadron to night flying. He took off one evening with a view to landing in time for a formal dinner in the officers’ mess. Naturally no-one waited for him when he was late, and coffee was being served before a rather wet boss turned up, having mistaken the shallow water near the shore for the airfield and thus landed in it.

Being part of a long tradition gives us a sense of pride, it gives us something important to live up to, it can inspire us to give more than we think we have to give, in order to be those who write the next chapter of the story. A squadron is one such story. The Queen is part of an even longer story, which has some good and some frankly pretty unpleasant chapters in it. But she’s ensured that the monarchy has gone through a time of massive social change, and has adapted to it, and come out strong and sustainable. In that she is an example and inspiration to us all to carry out our calling – whatever that might be – with a quiet humility and sense of duty.

She epitomises those words from that great son of Lincolnshire, Alfred Lord Tennyson, who wrote, “kind hearts are more than coronets, and simple faith than Norman Blood.” More than that she epitomises those words which Jesus said, and then demonstrated on the cross – “the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves ... I am among you as one who serves.” Our own calling in life may not be quite so exalted, but the calling to serve is a strong for each one of us. We here as the church are part of that long story, with its beginnings in the gospel story, but still being written in every country across the globe. And we trust that we’re empowered not simply by the **example** of Jesus, but by the living word of God in Scripture and by his very spirit living within us. So to God almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be all glory now and forever. Amen.