

Folks, I know today is a celebration of the Queen’s Jubilee, but I’m also aware that we are in the middle of a teaching series on the book of Ephesians so I want to remain faithful to it, and whilst it wouldn’t be the reading I would have naturally selected for the Jubilee, hopefully this passage today can help us as we think about the Queen’s servant nature in her reign as Sovereign and our duty to support those in authority.

So as we jump into our passage today, I am very conscious that this is the time of the year when many are either coming near the end of their exams or already have, and for some they will be thinking about their future. For example, our son Josh is thinking more and more about the next steps in September as he hopefully heads to Glasgow to study Neuroscience (he gets his brains from his mother). So it’s the time of the year when many like Josh will be thinking about what the next stage is in their lives.

For Queen Elizabeth, 70 years ago, she was beginning to embark on a huge responsibility to govern this United Kingdom but also the entire Commonwealth. I’m sure the task ahead seemed very daunting, and in her speech following her Coronation, she said these words, “Throughout this memorable day I have been uplifted and sustained by the knowledge that your thoughts and prayers were with me. I have been aware all the time that my peoples, spread far and wide throughout every Continent and ocean in the world, were united to support me in the task to which I have now been dedicated with such solemnity”.

She realised that the job ahead of her was only possible with the support of those around her and also the strength she received from God. But what a job she had to do, and I wonder whether she enjoyed doing it. I’m sure at times it was incredibly overwhelming.

As some of you may be thinking ahead to the next step in your life, are you looking forward to it. It’s clear from the Queen that the job she does is not something done reluctantly. She understands her duty, and she does it willingly.

So do you enjoy your work whatever it is you do? And just because you may be retired doesn’t mean you suddenly stop working. For all of us it’s about how we invest our time – it may not be for money, but do we enjoy how we spend each of our days? Are we committed?

In church life, I like many other pastors have seen a great reshuffling take place as a result of the pandemic. We don’t see the same commitment to church and service from people that maybe there was previously. Is that a good thing, that people have rethought their priorities? A study was done last year, the largest study ever done on work place happiness, and it found that over one third 36% of people are unhappy in what they do. Other reports would suggest the numbers are higher.

Today the Gospel has lots to say about how you serve. And today as we have been thinking about a Queen who has served with such diligence and consideration and joy, my main point today is that ‘we must treat others in relationship to how our Heavenly Master treats us’.

Now obviously this passage today refers to slavery, and therefore it is important not to ignore this, so here’s a mini-sermon. Slavery was a critical part of the Greco-Roman world. In a city such as Ephesus a full third of the population would have been servants. Some areas treated slaves very cruelly and others were very fair. Similarly we may think back in history to the way in which the British Empire was first built on slavery and the incredible cruelty

that grew from it, and actually still today in our multicultural United Kingdom we still see signs of racist bigotry which clearly there is no place for. But when the bible talks about slaves it is a different thing altogether from the slavery that the Queen’s 3rd Great-grandfather King George III signed to abolish in 1807. Biblical slavery was based on economics rather than race. That’s why other bible translations use the word Bondservants rather than slaves. Many voluntarily entered into service. Many slaves were released in Rome by the time they were 30. This was no lifelong bondage. Bondservants served in key roles such as teachers or doctors or scribes. There was no class. Obviously it wasn’t a desired lifestyle but it did have many more rights than you may realise. It was part of everyday life. So Paul is teaching Christians how they should live within an existing structure without condoning it. It doesn’t mean it is right for people to be owned, but what our reading shows us today is the need for equality between a master and a bondservant. Paul is levelling out equality between the classes. Remember that Paul would speak to the Galatians in chapter 3 verse 28 saying *“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for **you are all one** in Christ Jesus”*.

The book of Philemon tells the story of Onesimus who runs off, a bondservant. And he owed a number of things to Philemon. But he gets connected with Paul, and becomes a Christian and so in Philemon verse 15 Paul writes this, *“Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— ¹⁶ no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord. ¹⁷ So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸ If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me”*.

We should grieve that slavery has been abused in the way it has, especially across the British Empire over centuries, but hopefully in that little mini-series I’ve just given, you can see how Paul is addressing the need for equality until such times as it will be eradicated, and we pray that some day the abusive regimes that still fuel slavery will be destroyed and modern day trafficking and slavery of people will come to an end.

So in light of the context into which Paul was speaking here, let’s read those verses from Ephesians again – verse 5 *“⁵ Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. ⁶ Obey them not only to win their favour when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. ⁷ Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, ⁸ because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free”*.

The passages says that Bondservants are to change their perspective of their day to day reality, reminded that they are working for the Lord. They are to serve a higher audience. So slaves obey your masters. But the balance can be seen in our previous chapter of Ephesians. Remember alongside earlier passages about wives and their relationships to husbands, husbands’ relationships to wives, children to parents; this folks is all an expression of the Christian life. We are to submit to one another out of reverence to Christ. Paul is overlaying this behaviour in every aspect of living. So they and we are to respect those who are in authority over us. Therefore today we should respect the Queen and the monarchy.

Now we all live in a culture today where everyone’s opinions matter, we have a freedom to free speech, but that means at times it brings an element of disrespect on those who have been placed in authority. We see more attacks and threats on political representatives. I know that not everyone in our country believes that a monarchy is necessary or relevant

today, but as we read this passage today we are reminded that we are to respect and obey our earthly masters just as we would obey the Lord. The implications of having a true and heavenly master are significant. It means that as we look on those who are in any authority, we are to serve them as though we are serving the Lord. Remember Colossians 3:23 *“Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, ²⁴ knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ”*.

The Queen is not exempt in whom she serves. She has committed to serve the interests and lives of her people. It is also clear from the many addresses that the Queen has given over the years that she understands that she serves just as she obeys the Lord. In her Christmas address of 2000 she said this, “For me the teachings of Christ and my own personal accountability before God provide a framework in which I try to lead my life”. Even in her position of authority she herself knows who she is accountable to, not to another person, but to God.

And so verse 9 says “And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favouritism with him”.

This is an astounding instruction. Paul assumes that there is equality between a master and those who serve. He is telling these earthly masters that they are to serve the same master that their slaves should serve. So when you realise that, there’s two implications. Firstly leading people doesn’t come from manipulation or intimidation to garner loyalty. Instead because they are compelled by the gospel of Jesus Christ they are to use their authority in a way that resembles Jesus Christ himself. Jesus never threatens, he never intimidates. We all I think can agree that our Queen has been a woman of the people – she has never Lorded over us, she has ruled with great love for all of us, and that is because he herself knows the love from the Lord Jesus.

And then secondly, Paul is teaching masters to not assume that your social standing will garner you favour before your heavenly master. Whatever position or benefits that the Queen has in this life, none of that will be there when it comes to her place in heaven. There is only one person sitting on the throne. No one, not even the Queen will get preferential treatment. All including her will stand before the Lord together, and each one of us will have to give an account. And in her we have an example of how she understands her accountability to the one and only God, the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords.

So we thank God today for the remarkable example of loyalty that the Queen has shown; firstly that loyalty has been to her Lord and Saviour who she trusts. And that through such service, she is able to serve in her role as Monarch. She has known the model on which her service has been built upon. Jesus came to give his life as a ransom. Though he was equal with God, he did not hold it as something to be grasped, but took on the role as a servant. The Ultimate Master became the Ultimate Servant. So if Jesus does that for us, then each of us need to do the same, to serve those around us. And so I finish with a quote from Queen Elizabeth as part of her Christmas Broadcast in 1952 *“Pray for me...that God may give me wisdom and strength to carry out the solemn promises I shall be making, and that I may faithfully serve Him and you, all the days of my life”*

She has served us as though she is serving the Lord. May she know God’s blessing in this year of Jubilee.