

“The most valuable thing that this world affords”

The English coronation ceremony and the KJV

THE CORONATION ceremony of British kings and queens has its origins, like many of the rites of the ‘Christian’ world in which we live, in both Biblical and pagan sources. The part of the service still considered the most sacred is the anointing, when the archbishop smears oil on the head, breast and hands of the monarch to symbolise that he or she has been chosen by God to rule. Since the coronation of King George II in 1727, every anointing has taken place to the strains of Handel’s famous anthem *Zadok the priest*, reinforcing the connection with the anointing of kings of Israel such as Saul, David and Solomon, all of whom God raised to authority by this means. Yet other aspects of the ceremony are derived from eastern prototypes: the placing of a jewelled ornament on the head of the new monarch seems to have been adopted from the Eastern Roman Empire; and the eagle of Byzantium can still be seen embroidered on the heavy golden mantle worn by the sovereign while being crowned.

The basic form of today’s coronation service can be traced back to the crowning of King Edgar by Archbishop Dunstan in Bath Abbey in A.D. 973, component parts of which were still recognisable at the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in Westminster Abbey almost a thousand years later. Finer details of the coronation ceremony have never been cast in tablets of stone, however, having been revised and adjusted at the beginning of each reign to reflect the political situation prevailing at the time and, on occasions, the religious scruples of the individual monarch.

Medieval kings of England were Catholics, and their coronations fully reflected the fact; but since the English Reformation the opportunity has been taken at each coronation to emphasise the independence of the Anglican Church from Rome. To this day, on their accession each British monarch must swear on oath that he or she will defend the Protestant succession to the throne, even if by the twentieth century the earlier requirement to deny transubstantiation and to denounce “the Sacrifice of the Mass . . . [as] idolatrous and

superstitious” was watered down somewhat, with Queen Elizabeth II simply declaring herself “a faithful Protestant.”

The coronation itself is an overtly religious ceremony, and the Scriptures have always featured prominently in it. At the coronation of Queen Elizabeth I in 1558, the monarch insisted that the Bible should be read in English, rather than in Latin as had been the case at the coronation of Elizabeth’s fanatically Catholic half-sister ‘Bloody’ Mary (Mary I) only five years before. A Bible is carried in the procession into Westminster Abbey, and on this the sovereign makes the coronation oath, as the wording of the 1953 order of service for Queen Elizabeth II described it, “laying her right hand upon the Holy Gospel in the great Bible . . . Then the Queen shall kiss the Book and sign the Oath.”¹ This is the only occasion on which the British monarch makes any kind of written agreement with his or her subjects.

The kingdoms of England and Scotland parted company with their last Catholic monarch in the ‘Glorious Revolution’ of 1688, when King James II fled to France following the failure of his unpopular pro-Catholic policies. After a brief interregnum, the crown was offered by Parliament to James’s older daughter and her husband, who, uniquely, then reigned as joint monarchs. William III and Mary II were both great-grandchildren of James I (of KJV fame). At their coronation on 11 April 1689 a significant innovation was made, reflecting the new political scene in Great Britain: for the first time the Bible was formally presented to the new King and Queen as part of the service.

Given the deep significance of so much of the coronation ceremony, it cannot be coincidental that such a change was made at such a time. The point was being made not only that Britain now intended to be rid of Catholic influence for good,

1. <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons/lib/research/briefings/snpc-00435.pdf>.

but also that all spiritual authority came from the God of the Bible (itself a book now accessible to all) rather than from the Pope in Rome.

A copy of the King James Version of the Bible has been presented to the Sovereign at every coronation since; and the words spoken by the Archbishop of Canterbury are of more significance than most people perhaps realise. Archbishop Michael Ramsay said to Queen Elizabeth II in 1953: "Our gracious Queen: to keep your Majesty ever mindful of 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."

In a nod towards inclusiveness, it was the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland who took up the dedication at that point and continued: "Here is Wisdom; this is the Royal Law; these are the lively Oracles of God!"² The implication is obvious: by reading and meditating on the Bible the new Queen would learn how best to order her life for her own good and for the benefit of those over whom she reigns.

The Moderator's words are taken from Proverbs (one would like to think 8:15), James 2:8 and Acts 7:38, and they therefore include both Old and New Testament Scriptures. In our increasingly secular age the words have a frankness about them which is most refreshing, reminding us that, not so long ago, there was a general acceptance that the Bible comes from God, and that its contents are authoritative and demand respect. Kings and queens, ruling "by the grace of God,"³ require His grace, and can hope to remain in close communion with Him only by reading regularly from His Word. Only then might they expect to

receive Divine guidance to preside justly over the affairs of their kingdom.

The British monarchy is a constitutional one, operating within the constraints set by a democratically elected parliament, and power is now exercised on the monarch's behalf by 'ministers of the Crown.' Long gone, therefore, are the days when the religious views of the sovereign might have had any real influence on government policy, and the steady stream of legislation which increasingly reflects humanistic public opinion rather than any respect for godly values is a truly depressing spectacle. By the end of his life another king, one "after [God's] own heart," had reached the conclusion that "He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God" (2 Sam. 23:3); and all too often we find ourselves wishing that those who make our laws could revive something of that spirit.

For a brief moment, however, just once at the start of each reign, all those watching the glittering ceremony in Westminster Abbey are reminded of an unshakeable truth—that before their eyes is indeed "the most valuable thing that this world affords." We who believe those words, showing our love for this book by constant application to it, look forward in faith to the time when "a king shall reign in righteousness, and princes shall rule in judgment" (Isa. 32:1), when the Word of the living God will at last be the royal law of the whole earth.

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2. <http://www.oremus.org/liturgy/coronation/cor1953b.html>.
3. A phrase which is still part of the official style of the British monarch.

From a loyal address accompanying a copy of the King James Bible, presented by Lord Northampton to King George V in 1911

"We pray that from these same Holy Scriptures your Majesty may derive comfort and counsel in the perplexing problems that devolve upon one placed in the providence of God in so exalted a position. We pray also that your Majesty's subjects may continue to read this Book until its spirit and teaching are vitalised in personal character and in domestic relationships, and so enter into every sphere of corporate life—business and professional, social and political, national and imperial. God save the King!"