

Forgive us, Lord. We know not what we do.

*A sermon on Psalm 14:4 & 1 Timothy 1:12-17 in response to the death of Queen Elizabeth II
by Nathan Nettleton, 11 September 2022*

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Message

Our unwitting abusive treatment of the Royal family is a symptom of our entanglement in systemic persecution.

Sermon

On Friday afternoon at a meeting with a few other pastors, I got a bit of shock when a couple of them said that they had thrown out the sermons they had been preparing and were starting again with something to reflect on the death of Queen Elizabeth. My first instinctive response was, “Really?! That wouldn’t have even occurred to me.”

But then I got thinking about it. Looking back in my files to see what I have preached on this week in the past, it was clear that I have often taken my cues from the dominant stories in the news, and as the 24 page wrap-around on yesterday’s newspaper attests, the death of the Queen is a very dominant story. Today is September 11th, which since 2001 has been remembered simply as 9/11, and certainly this week 21 years ago I preached a sermon connecting the readings of the day to the terrorist attacks that had just happened in the USA. I also found a sermon from a few years before that that reflected on how our whole nation hung on every minute of the news from the Thredbo landslide disaster and the eventual rescue of Stuart Diver from the wreckage.

I realised that when a story is preoccupying us to such an extent, preachers who ignore it as I had initially been inclined to do, are rather foolhardy and are probably failing to meet their people where they are at. And besides, I hadn’t got any further than a few preliminary reflections on the readings in my preparation for this week. There wasn’t even a sermon to throw out yet. So here goes!

Prominent among the public reflections on the Queen’s death have been commendations of her unwavering sense of duty and commitment to public service. Even Paul Keating, the first Australian prime minister to have told the Queen that he hoped to sever Australia’s constitutional ties to the monarchy, reflected on Friday as follows:

In the 20th century, the self became privatised, while the public realm, the realm of the public good, was broadly neglected. Queen Elizabeth understood this and instinctively attached herself to the public good against what she recognised as a tidal wave of private interest and private reward. And she did this for a lifetime. Never deviating.

This unwavering commitment to the public good is truly astonishing, but there is a part of me that wonders what it says about us that we find it so astonishing. Paul Keating is clearly wondering the same, and answering it more succinctly than I could have. We find it astonishing because most of us have been swept away in “a tidal wave of private interest and private reward”, and so the Queen’s sense of duty to the public good was indeed highly unusual and especially commendable.

Then, as I followed that thought, I realised something else. Although we were astonished by the Queen’s sense of duty to the public good, we also expected it of her, and even demanded

it of her. It was pretty much part of her job description. We are pretty harsh on royals who don't live up to that expectation. The Queen never volunteered for this job; it was thrust upon her, and the expectations came with it. She had a public role to perform, and very little room to opt out or take another pathway.

Over the course of the Queen's reign, this role has become ever more complicated. The rise of international media and our obsessions with celebrity gossip have meant that in the public imagination, devotion to royalty has been fused with celebrity culture, and that has further closed off any opportunity for privacy or any pathway of escape for the royals. Our expectations of celebrities, that they will distract and entertain us with alternating images of human perfection and juicy scandal, have now been layered on top of our expectations of unstinting duty to the public good.

In the psalm we sang tonight, one of the lines asked, "Are these evil-doers mad? They eat up my people like so much bread."

"They eat up people like so much bread." If you listen to any of their dissident voices – the late Princess Diana, or Harry and Meghan – being eaten up like bread by the people sounds a lot like the experience of being part of the royal family. The Queen, with her unswerving loyalty to the institution of the monarchy, would probably never publicly describe it that way, but she came pretty close with her description of 1992 as an *annus horribilis* after numerous scandals engulfed her family and they were served up daily in the press for public consumption.

René Girard, whose theological reflections on human culture have been hugely influential for me, made an observation about the nature of royalty that I found very difficult to get my head around for many years, but this week it has come back to me and begun to make more obvious sense. Girard spoke widely about how sacrificing people functions to unify societies and maintain peace. He said that when society is tearing apart at the seams and everybody is turning on one another, we usually choose, almost at random, a sacrificial victim, and the process of uniting against the victim and sacrificing them binds us to one another, overcoming our differences, and peace returns. Post 9/11 America is a classic example. By declaring a war on terror and choosing Iraq as the sacrificial victim, America banished its self-doubts and hard questions and reunited against a common enemy.

But the chosen victims are not always enemies, and the part of René Girard's theory that most baffled me was his description of kings and queens as being sacrificial victims with a stay of execution. He said that the social purpose of kings and queens in human culture was generally to create unity among us by serving as our victims who would eventually be sacrificed.

Girard said that in some ancient societies that practiced literal human sacrifice, there was a practice of choosing the next victim a year in advance, crowning them king or queen, showering them with riches and privileges, and granting them the freedom to indulge their every whim for the year leading up to their sacrificial execution. He suggested that there were remnants of similar impulses in most systems of monarchy. We shower them with such riches and privileges that it becomes almost impossible to complain without seeming heartless to the poverty of others, and then we eat them up like so much bread.

Princess Diana is the most glaringly obvious example of this in recent decades. We deprived her of her privacy and freedom, showered her with every wealth and privilege, and then fed on her ravenously until our insatiable appetites literally drove her to her death. She might have been the most explicit example, but the whole social construct of royalty is built on that same pattern. Harry and Meghan have turned themselves into something of a parody by trying to have it both ways – trying to escape the suffocating scrutiny of royalty while still hanging on to the social media celebrity status that was given to them through it. But, parody or not, they still lift the lid on how crippling it is to be a royal and be eaten up like so much bread.

Christian critiques of monarchy as a system often focus on the wealth, privilege and power that are granted as a birthright, regardless of merit. Objections are raised to an unjust system of government where there is no possibility of any ordinary person ever attaining the highest office, because it is reserved for members of a single family. While I have sympathies with that objection, I don't think it really qualifies as a properly Christian critique. If we are to take seriously what Jesus says about it being the poor, the meek, and the rejected who are truly blessed, then we will find little reason to be jealous of those whose birth has shut them out of those blessings forever.

If we are to read our culture as followers of the one who dies as the ultimate sacrificial scapegoat, then we need to look at things like the monarchy and ask, "Who are the victims here? Who are we preying upon and eating up like so much bread?"

Now, in truth, it is very very difficult for us to see clearly the answers to such questions. Sacrificial systems have always been designed to conceal the truth from our gaze. They have to be, because if we recognise the horrible truth about what we are doing to our victims, the system will no longer work to unify us and bring about peace, or even to entertain us. That line from our psalm asked, "Are these evil doers mad? Do they have no knowledge of what they are doing?" And the answer is Yes. We mostly have no knowledge of what we are doing to these people.

The system of monarchy is inherently abusive, because it takes innocent children and subjects them to constant intrusive public scrutiny, deprives them of the right to choose their own pathways, and forces upon them a public duty to be the rallying point for public unity and national identity. The Queen was described in today's news as having been "Britain's Soother in Chief." You might protest that they can walk away if they want to, but look what we did to Diana, and ask yourself again what kind of choice she had.

We rightly revere Queen Elizabeth because she accepted that duty without ever complaining publicly, and without ever wavering from the onerous task of living up to our demands while being subjected to our voracious scrutiny. We rightly revere her for accepting the sacrifice of her own interests and committing herself selflessly to the public good.

We rightly revere her too as an example of Christian faith. Admittedly it is a bit hard to discern the nature of her faith, because that too was a compulsorily prescribed part of her role, so for someone so mindful of her duty, it would be difficult to imagine her not conforming to that expectation too. But in truth, her faith may well be deep and real, because it is very often those who we have chosen to sacrifice for our own societal ends, those we have

eaten up like bread, who are most able to see and comprehend what Jesus went through, and cling to him as the only living example of finding a path to life beyond sacrifice.

So Queen Elizabeth certainly deserves our admiration, our gratitude, and our praise. May she rest in peace, and be raised in glory. But in my opinion, the abusive system of monarchy that forced upon her the burdensome duty that she so stoically bore all her life deserves no such admiration and praise. It chews people up like so much bread, and with its gratuitous displays of pomp and pageantry, it blinds us to the truth of the systemic sin that we are entangled in. And of course, not only does the system of monarchy ruthlessly chew up the royals themselves, but it has been used as a pretext and a cover for the systematic chewing up of millions of first nations people's whose lands were invaded in the name of king and empire.

Every week here in this Sunday liturgy, we confess that we are entangled in sin. Much of the time, we manage to do that without pausing to ask ourselves what that looks like for us and who is paying the price of it. I pray that this week, as we reflect on the death of the Queen, we might ask God to open our eyes to see and understand a little more of what we are entangled in and how it deprives innocent people, both rulers and subjects, of freedom and hope.

In the words that we heard from the Apostle Paul tonight, I pray that we might learn to see the blasphemy, violence, and persecution of the systems we are caught up in, and look to Jesus to not only forgive us, but help us to break free. As the Apostle says, we are receiving mercy because we have acted ignorantly, but as he says elsewhere, the fact that grace abounds does not give us licence to continue to participate in sin, now knowingly (Romans 6:1). Remember that next time you are tempted to pay for one of those celebrity gossip magazines that pay reporters to invade the privacy of the Queen's family and serve them up on an altar for our consumption.

You have probably never heard me say "God save the Queen" or "God save the King" before, and you may never hear me say it again, but I will say it now. Let us commend the Queen into the saving love of our God and saviour Jesus Christ, who like her was chewed up like so much bread by the evil systems that we so ignorantly participate in. And let us pray that God will save King Charles and his son and grandson who are all similarly being groomed, and I use that word 'groomed' with all the negative weight it has recently acquired, groomed to be similarly sacrificed to our voracious abusive appetites without complaining or lifting the lid on the ugly truth of what we are doing to them.

God save the King and his family from the heartless system that forces a grieving man, within 48 hours of the death of his beloved mother, to participate in the accession and proclamation rituals as though it was all about him, because he and his needs to grieve in peace have been sacrificed to our need for the pomp and pageantry that reaffirms our treasured myth that Britannia rules the waves and the monarch keeps the nation secure and united.

Rest in peace, Queen Elizabeth, and may the Lord have mercy on us and lead us into pathways of justice and life where never again will we do to anyone what we have been doing to you and to your family. Amen.