

**Sermon preached by Fr John Stewart
At St George's Malvern
Remembering Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II**

Second Sunday after Pentecost

7 June 2015

Welcome today to our worship on this weekend when we celebrate the birthday of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth. We particularly welcome our guests this morning – the members of the Council of British and Commonwealth Societies. Your presence with us is a blessing and joy to us all.

Whatever our personal view about Australia as a member of the British Commonwealth or as a republic at some time in the future, I am sure we all hold our Queen in the utmost admiration and affection. As a young boy I can vividly remember the excitement about her coronation at Westminster Abbey and we had the photos of it – which arrived in the colonies weeks after the event posted up all around our home for ages. That was 62 years ago. Over all those years she has exercised all the duties of her office with great skill, compassion, steadfastness. Life has not always been kind to her, especially at times her family life. Yet she has carried on in the face of all that life served up to her.

She says that this is in large part due to her deep Christian faith. I always appreciate her Christmas Day reflection, and I understand it is one of the public addresses which she insists on writing herself. Over the years she has looked at many current issues and she always draws something from the life and teaching of Jesus to illustrate a point she wants to make. She does it unapologetically and with the conviction of her own life of prayer and faithfulness to her vocation.

She has served the Commonwealth and the world so very well and it is most appropriate today that our prayer and our song is “God save the Queen”.

It is also very appropriate that we have today's collection of readings from Scripture for they offer some insight and encouragement to us in our daily lives.

The first reading, read this morning by Jason Ronald representing our distinguished guests, has suffered much unhelpful commentary over the years. (Genesis 3.8-15)

We have in the first two chapters of Genesis the poetic description of how all things have come to be. It is not a scientific description. And all the way through there is the refrain that God beholds everything as very good. God loves everything that God has made. So we just cannot come to chapter three and accept the interpretation that God is not happy with it all but very angry. God is God is God and God's only disposition towards all of creation is love – unconditional, abiding love.

This story is really about marking a stage in the development of the relationship between God and humanity. This very early story talks about humans longing to enter into an intimate relationship with God. They exercise the free choice they had been given by tasting the fruit of knowledge, hoping this would mean they were more connected with God – more “like gods” the text says. When they ate they began the process of growing up but there were consequences and their paradise, their trouble-free world of beauty and abundance, was lost. The story has been used to warn us against “eating the apple” – against reaching for intimacy with God. An incorrect and damaging interpretation.

It is when Jesus turns up in history that we get to see this story for what it is. Far from being wrong to seek “the apple” – a deeper union with God, it is actually our destiny, it is what we have been born for. Our whole life is grounded in the love of God which brings us to birth, brings forth our best selves throughout our human life, and restores us to union in that same love when our human journey comes to its end.

So we have St Paul in our second reading (2 Corinthians 4.13-5.1). He is pondering the mystery of human suffering and finding in our times of suffering the work of God, renewing and strengthening our spiritual selves even when our physical self might be suffering. We are being prepared, St Paul says, for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure. We have to see our experience through the eyes of God from the perspective of eternity.

This morning’s reading from St Mark’s gospel is a rather complicated piece and needs a lot of scrutiny (Mark 3.20-35). Let me highlight just one strand of it. It starts off with Jesus friends and family saying “he has gone out of his mind; he is beside himself”. This arises because he has been doing all kinds of things which they did not understand – so he is the one with the problem. Does that sound familiar? Perhaps we might say “he is very eccentric”.

They didn’t understand because he was entirely focused on responding to God’s love and doing what God was calling him to be doing. It is quite explicit in the final verse where Jesus says “Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother”. For most of us most of the time we are on about doing what we want and that takes us off centre – away from the source of meaning and direction in our lives, namely God. Today’s message is that when we seek to do our own thing, follow our own desires and plans and priorities, we are not only “beside ourselves” but we are turning away from being our true selves, our deepest selves. God has created each of us in love and has something in mind for each of us – is constantly inviting us and drawing us to become the best self we can become. But we know better, we eat the apple and find ourselves off track, beside ourselves. But we are to be, as Jesus was, “beside ourselves” for God. We find our true self and become what we have been created to become when we are in union with God, taking our place in the Body of Christ, using the gifts God has given to us.

As we give thanks today for the life and work of Queen Elizabeth, we celebrate a life of steadfastness and devotion – utterly given to serving God and God’s people for her whole life.

Can we say the same of ourselves? That is what the scriptures call us to reflect on today – and maybe might find ourselves having to make some adjustments, change some priorities or attitudes or practices. And as we decide to respond to this invitation, this beckoning and

nudging, we hear St Paul's assurance "Grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. So we do not lose heart".