

Good King George

We are talking here of the new King's grandfather of course, not his grandson. And we are recalling a photograph of George VI at the airport farewelling his daughter and son-in-law as they depart for Africa. The man is but a husk, in a shabby coat, hollowed out not just by cancer but also by unprecedented and unforeseen service during wartime.

Londoners who would never dream of an invitation to a Royal Garden Party had found the Monarch in their own streets, climbing over bomb debris to connect with the people. The King would never see his daughter again, on this earth at least. But what has this to do with us as Anglicans? Firstly, the Monarch is earthly head of the Church of England. Secondly, we have (through the medium of Westminster Abbey) a monopoly on Coronations. And on a broader front, we will sooner or later face debates about these relationships, and indeed about New Zealand's constitutional arrangements.

Spreading the net even further, we think we see a drift towards despotism, challenges to the very legitimacy of democratically elected leaders, and a widespread distrust of government at many levels.

If the Church is to enter the fray, especially if it is intending to defend the Monarchy/Church status quo, then it needs to equip itself with scriptural tools for the arguments to come.

What was it about Jesus that made him such a magnetic leader that he had to be executed? What qualities of self-sacrifice proved at once so attractive, but also such a threat to the status quo?

There were echoes of these themes in the Coronation service itself, in the vulnerability of the newly-anointed man, partly clothed, and in the repeated assurances about service above self. These themes are often missed among the symbols of power and influence, many of which originate in the geopolitics and theological clashes of the 1500s.

So what do we look for in a 21st century King? And more importantly, what should Christians advise others to look for? It can be a hard sell, because many see empty pomp, expense, and personal scandal, and simply turn away. But the very nature of leadership is up for debate here, and one of the tough questions will be about inherited power and influence; can that be legitimate?

So much depends on the person wielding that influence. Have they offered to empty themselves for others?

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