7th May 2023

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The last time a Rector of St Marylebone stood in this pulpit after the coronation of a king, was on Sunday 16th May 1937. The King was King George VI and the Rector, the Revd William Douglas Morrison.

Morrison, an international renowned criminologist and prison reformer, was Rector of St Marylebone for 35 years, dying rather prematurely in post from an accident, aged 91; my mere 62 years and 13 years of incumbency here, rather pale into insignificance.

Things had changed much during Morrison’s long tenure at St Marylebone. He had, after all, been born in 1852 and lived through the wars in Crimea and South Africa, the Great War and the Blitz.

Yet Morrison’s life and incumbency were but brief, within the scope of the monarchy of these islands.

Through times of change, anxiety, bewilderment, terror, threat and rejoicing, the sovereigns of this nation, good, bad and indifferent, have provided a constant back drop, all but for the disastrous disruption between 1649 and 1660 which followed the execution of Charles I at his Palace of Whitehall.
We now have another Charles on the throne, anointed, vested, consecrated and crowned, set apart through a quasi-ordination in the tradition of Melchizedek, priest-king of Salem and Solomon King of Israel.

How the reign of King Charles III will unfold is, at this point, unknown and it will be left to future historians, or at least Wikipedian AI Bots, I suppose, to assess whether his incumbency will have been as golden as the carriage that bore him and his Queen back to Buckingham Palace from Westminster Abbey yesterday.

In his first televised and broadcast speech, as the world mourned the woman who was simply “the Queen” to billions of people around the world, Charles, the new king spoke of a promise kept with destiny, a destiny which his mother had fulfilled through a life of Christian witness and self-less service to her peoples.

The huge and onerous task of keeping that promise with destiny is now the heavy burden which has been placed upon Charles’ shoulders, as the crown has been placed upon his head.

As Anglican Christians, we are subjects of two kingdoms, the kingdom of this realm, and the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of which Charles III is as much, and as equal a subject, as anyone who has been baptised.

Living in these two Kingdoms can be a hard juggling act. As hard for Charles III, King of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, his other realms and territories Head of the
Commonwealth and Defender of the Faith, as for the most recently baptised member of the Kingdom of God, if not harder. Here in St Marylebone, we have two images of kingship set permanently in front of our eyes: Christ the bruised and battered dying servant pinned to a rough cross of wood, and Christ in divine majesty, crowned and in splendour, robed and sitting on a canopied throne surrounded by the courtiers of heaven holding their crowns and proclaiming his praises. 

For us, Charles III, Defender of the Faith, Supreme Governor of the Church of England is king, with us, Charles has to fix his eyes and model his life on the self-less service of the Crucified One, if he is to fulfil that destiny about which he spoke and find a welcome in the heavenly courts, embraced by what he has called “a grand mysterious harmony”.

At the beginning of the Liturgy of the Eucharist and Coronation, the king, who had come to be crowned was addressed by a young Child of the Chapel Royal who informed the king that he was welcome in the name of the King of Kings, to which he replied that he was there in the name of this other King and that he would, after that King’s example, serve rather than be served.

In that most profoundly moving act of the Coronation, King Charles was stripped of his robes and regalia and knelt before the Archbishop of Canterbury in a simple white shirt; he must have known that he was, at least in part, enacting, the moment when his predecessor, Charles I, knelt to be stripped before his execution as well as the moment when the Builder Carpenter of Nazareth, the King of Kings, knelt to be stripped before his Crucifixion.
Christ calls not just King Charles III to follow him in the way of the cross, but each and every one of us who has been baptised. To take up the cross and follow Jesus, is hard, very hard; it is a journey which no-one can make alone, unaccompanied.

May our prayers and the prayers of all people of faith and good will sustain King Charles in faith and hope and love, in selfless service through the vicissitudes of this increasingly sceptical, secular age, and, at the last, as he prayed for his mother, may flights of angels speed him to his rest, and may he find a welcome in courts of heaven.

God save the King!

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i Article on J H Newman published in L'Osservatore Romano and reprinted in The Tablet

ii op. cit.

iii Broadcast by HM The King following the death of HM Queen Elizabeth II