Coronation Civic Service

Sermon given in Sherborne Abbey by the Bishop of Sherborne

I wonder how many of us, or our children or grandchildren had or have a barbie doll?

This week, a Down's syndrome Barbie was the latest doll to be released by Mattel in a bid to make its range more diverse. The US toy giant had faced previous criticism that the traditional Barbie did not represent real women, so in recent years it has created dolls with a hearing aid, a prosthetic limb and a wheelchair.

Mattel's goal was for "all children to see themselves in Barbie" as well as "play with dolls who do not look like themselves". The original Barbie doll launched in 1959 featured long legs, a tiny waist, and flowing blonde locks. However, academics from the University of South Australia suggested the likelihood of any woman having [Barbie's body shape was one in 100,000](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/7920962.stm).

Now you could ask, what has that got to do with today. As a mother of a child with Down’s Syndrome said in an interview last weekend, it is all about seeing the world through an unfiltered lens.

Seventy years ago, television had only just been invented as people gathered around a set or listened on the radio or travelled to London to experience the Coronation. A couple I once lodged with in Hull would describe the highlight of the lives as the time they cycled, yes cycled, to London to be there on that day joining the crowds in the Mall.

Our worldview was small, our lenses were filtered. There was mystique, and for everyone who ever dreamt of being a prince or princess, or marrying one, there were plenty of magical moments – seeing Cinderella like carriages pulled with horses and footman across London, seeing the priceless robes that people were wearing, the lavish jewellery. It was all so other worldly. And even as we gathered just last year to give thanks for the life of Queen Elizabeth II although much has been invented in intervening years, there was still much that remained a mystery, about her life, her views on many things, and in a way, we remained in awe of her. There remained something incredibly special about those times, however black and white has since given way to colour.

How things have changed in 70 years, as we have come to see the world, and those who have a special part in it through that gradual unfiltered lens. As the fairy-tale façade has come down to reveal real lives, real joys and sorrows, real disasters and flaws.

Talk shows, documentaries, the paparazzi and ‘Hello’ magazine have all played their part in opening up, what has previously been in a way a very hallowed, private and even secret world. Has exposed many of us in new ways, with our vulnerabilities and frailties, our weaknesses and warts. And try as we might the vanishing cream, or the security gates are never enough to stop it.

And so, for the first time before an English Coronation, we already have a relatively intimate knowledge of our King and Queen Consort, not only through the life already lived of public service, of enthusiastic engagement but also of their hobbies and views, and we even know things that they wish that we didn’t!

That makes tomorrow’s Coronation an unusual event, a less mysterious, and in a way less magical event than Coronations of old. The order of service has been updated, not only to make a 3 hour event shorter, but to reflect the fact that for all of us watching, the king and queen are in a way not remote characters in some fairy tale, but people just like us, and to reflect the fact that the world has changed considerably too.

Many here will know King Charles III, as he has visited our county often, particularly to Poundbury, where resident and dignitary alike have experienced his interest and influence. Dorset is well known too to Camilla as some of her close family live here.

So, as we watch tomorrow, we will be able to identify much better than we did 70 years ago with our monarch and be able to recognise something of the man crowned to be King.

And in a way that helps us identify even more with the daunting calling on his life and the seriousness of the commitment he has already made and will make again tomorrow. A life that will continue to be lived out in public, and through our 21st century media lens in all its rawness and uncompromising truth. Even more reason then that we pray for King Charles and Queen Camilla as they continue to endure the spotlight.

We can also rejoice because we know that we have a King who brings many interests to the role, not only of social enterprise, and young people but of the arts, the countryside and the environment.

Yet, that is not the whole picture. As I spoke here last year reflecting on the life of the Queen, any successful life lived out in public comes from being strengthened in private, and so one of the unchanging moments in the Coronation service and perhaps the most profound tomorrow, will be the moment the King is anointed, and where through prayer it is acknowledged, that the only way he can undertake the daunting role that he is called to uphold, is in God’s strength, and with God’s power.

The story goes that in 1743, at the premiere performance in London of Handel’s Messiah, King George II rose to his feet during the performance of the majestic "Hallelujah" chorus because even the king of England, knew there was a power higher than his and he stood to pay homage to his King, the King of Kings.

And with perhaps even greater symbolism than ever before, as King Charles is anointed tomorrow a screen will separate him from the camera lens, and the Abbey congregation. Reminding us all, that in that moment, what is private, what is intimate, what is between God and man, remains that way.

In Matthew’s Gospel we read Jesus’ words ‘But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.’

Only God can see the secret places of all our hearts, can know our private thoughts, and it is in that most vulnerable place, of laying everything bare before him, that he comes with love, and acceptance and his extra-ordinary strength to resource each of us for whatever task he has called us to, be that for public office or supporting our families, for volunteering or living with infirmity.

That is what our first reading, from St Paul’s letter to the Church in Ephesus is all about, encouraging the early church, and us to come to God to be strengthened in our inner being; to come to acknowledge the breadth, length, height and depth and love of God.

We cannot do that in the busyness of public life, or in the hectic social whirl, we cannot do that running between thing to thing to thing. For only in stepping aside and acknowledging our own weakness in the face of our creator God can we be strengthened to fulfil our calling, which is to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine.

This is what a successful life of service looks like. A calling echoed in our second reading from the end of Matthew’s gospel, for us to go as the early disciples did, as those sent out into the world to do good, to bring peace, to share the love of God with all those we meet.

In Jesus Christ we have an example of service, lived for others and strengthened by God through prayer, through sacrament, through time set apart to receive as well as give.

Tomorrow’s Coronation puts all that in perspective for us, as we see King Charles and Queen Camilla equipped for service and then sent out into the world as God’s ambassadors.

For, despite what the media have us believe, a truly authentic life is not to be lived all out there for everyone to see, nor is it to be lived all in here. We don’t have to look very far to see the damage that an insular life, or a totally transparent life can do.

So, let’s take a moment this weekend to consider the lives that we are all called to live. To reflect on how we need to be strengthened for the task. For many here, they are lives already given in service to others. For all of us it’s to be a balanced life, a humble life, seeing the world through that unfiltered lens, it’s a life which accepts the realism of a Google search, but that acknowledges the need for respect and privacy and a dependence on God’s help in all things.

That is my prayer for our new King and the new era that he ushers in. May that new era be one of joy, of spiritual breadth and depth, may it be one of love and integrity, of honesty and of humility, of rich diversity and inclusivity, of care for and preservation of our environment, may it be one of service.

May King Charles III and Queen Camilla be blessed and be a blessing. As we pray for them and swear allegiance to them. God save the King.