

Sunday 12th February 2017, 3rd before Lent. Canongate Kirk.

The 65th Anniversary of HM The Queen's Accession.

St Matthew 5:33 *You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.*

The other day a number of us found ourselves up the road in St Giles Cathedral attending a fine Memorial Service for the late Lady Marion Fraser, Lady of the Thistle and former High Commissioner to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland among many other achievements and commitments, not least wife, mother and grandmother. In due course the insignia that Marion Fraser received as a member of the Order of the Thistle will be returned to The Queen as Sovereign Head of the Order by members of the Fraser family and amongst those who wonder about such things there will be a degree of speculation in Scotland as to who the next Knight or indeed Lady of the Thistle will be. It is only when one has died that a new one is appointed in succession and the announcement is traditionally made on St Andrew's Day. Quite a long time to wait. There was no such delay of course, and no such speculation, when it came to The Queen's own Accession, 65 years ago last week, after the King's death on 6th February 1952. The very next day the following proclamation was published in The Times:

WHEREAS it has pleased Almighty God to call to his mercy our late Sovereign Lord King George VI, of blessed and glorious memory, by whose Decease the Crown is solely and rightfully come to the High and Mighty Princess Elizabeth Alexandra Mary: WE, therefore, the Lords Spiritual and Temporal of this Realm, being here assisted with these His late Majesty's Privy Council, with representatives of other Members of the Commonwealth, with other Principal Gentlemen of Quality, with the Lord Mayor, Aldermen, and Citizens of London, do now hereby with one Voice and Consent of Tongue and Heart publish and proclaim, That the High and Mighty Princess Elizabeth Alexandra Mary is now, by the death of our late Sovereign of happy memory, become Queen Elizabeth II by the Grace of God, Queen of this Realm, and of Her other Realms and Territories, Head of the Commonwealth, Defender of the Faith, to whom Her Lieges do acknowledge all Faith and constant Obedience with hearty and humble Affection, beseeching God by whom Kings and Queens do reign, to bless the Royal Princess, Elizabeth II, with long and happy Years to reign over us. God Save the Queen.

At first sight the very formal terms of the proclamation of Her Majesty The Queen's Accession to the throne have little if anything in common with the scripture readings set for today, except that they coincide with the Sunday following its 65th anniversary, a Sapphire Anniversary apparently. Yet each in its own way is about accession or perhaps more accurately succession, the process of finding a successor, of carrying on the tradition, of continuing a line. The Old Testament reading in particular, from near the end of the Book of Deuteronomy, represents the climax of a stirring speech by Moses when he is preparing to hand over all responsibilities for leading the people of Israel to his successor Joshua. And he puts his and Joshua's leadership into the context of the great and familiar names that have gone before them, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It was to them that the Lord had once sworn to give the Promised Land, and now they were so nearly there, but it would not be Moses who would lead them

there in the end, it would be Joshua. The next in line. Like the young Princess Elizabeth at the time of her father's death, Joshua had no choice, it had been decreed that he would succeed. But like Queen Elizabeth at her subsequent coronation, the people had a choice, a choice between on the one hand life and prosperity and on the other death and adversity. "Choose life", Moses urged them. "If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees and ordinances, then you shall live...and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess." And whatever her people's choice, it can hardly be denied 65 years on that The Queen herself chose to walk in his ways, to obey and observe his commandments, decrees and ordinances and to seek his blessing in the land. On the day of her Accession. And every day since. Every single day. *You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.* Words that rings as true today as they did then. They are words from our Gospel reading and our Epistle too as it happens is all about following on, literally about planting and watering and growing and metaphorically about evolving under God. "For we are God's servants", St Paul reminds the Corinthians, working together; you are God's field, God's building." And it is with that very sense of service and duty that Her Majesty The Queen has lived and reigned these last 65 extraordinary years. *You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.* At this anniversary time, and in this particular place we give thanks for the way she has carried out the vows she once made to the Lord. And we call to mind the vows we ourselves have made, once and for all long ago, or every Sunday since, vows to the Lord, to walk more deliberately in his ways and to obey more immediately and to observe more closely his commandments, decrees and ordinances and to seek his blessing in our land, in our lives.

*O Jesus, I have promised
To serve you to the end;
Be now and always near me,
My master and my friend:
I shall not fear the battle
if you are by my side,
nor wander from the pathway
if you will be my guide.*

You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord. Queen Elizabeth II by the Grace of God, Queen of this Realm, and of Her other Realms and Territories, Head of the Commonwealth, Defender of the Faith, to whom Her Lieges do acknowledge all Faith and constant Obedience with hearty and humble Affection, beseeching God by whom Kings and Queens do reign, to bless the Royal Princess, Elizabeth II, with long and happy Years to reign over us. God Save the Queen.

And now may God bless to us this preaching of his most holy word, and to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be all praise and glory now and forever. Amen.