# Address by the Rt Hon. the Lord Patten of Barnes KG CH PC, Chancellor of the University of Oxford, at the Service of Thanksgiving for the Coronation of King Charles III

## University Church of St Mary the Virgin Friday, 5 May 2023 at 4.30pm

Last year we met in this church, in which some of the worst chapters of our national story in the sixteenth century were written, in order to thank God for the life and service of Queen Elizabeth the Second, the mother of our new King. Her reign had embraced the final years of the British Empire, indeed her son had presided over the end of our last great colony in Hong Kong. It was an age whose first political leaders were Attlee and Churchill. The role they once played has passed down to, well, others. Those years had seen the relative economic decline of Britain as a great global power, a country which had played a major role in preserving freedom around the world in the first half of the century. But then, inevitably, our global significance, economically and politically, declined, especially after the disastrous Suez venture. Yet our country has retained many of its abiding and most cherished national attributes, which we still celebrate today, whatever has happened to our relative political and economic weight. Throughout these turbulent years, Queen Elizabeth’s commitment to duty and service gave continuing focus and purpose to her disparate nation and to the Commonwealth which she so loved.

For many years now, King Charles has waited with, we can surely assume, apprehension about the moment when the challenge of being a modern Head of State, a constitutional monarch, would fall on his own shoulders. Apprehension as well because of the knowledge that this would only happen on the death of his much-loved mother. And finally, apprehension because of the challenge of matching his own qualities and passions to the task of negotiating the predicaments of a role that institutionalises the fusion of a known past, and an unknowable future.

What he knows already, perhaps too well, is the truth of St Mark’s gospel ‘whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant’. That is from time to time the rhetoric of the political class in democracies and sometimes it is more than a passing piety. But for King Charles III, like his mother the late Queen, what the gospel says forms the agenda for every year, every week and every day.

The new reign begins in global turmoil. A war rages in Europe; autocracy is everywhere, challenging the values of open societies, and the global order that we believed embodied them; the second largest nation on Earth presses on its neighbours and far beyond, a brutal system of one party, indeed one man, rules; and the planet, both free and unfree, rich and poor, is confronted by existential threats that we have ourselves created. At home, in what seem like days of excessive political rancour, we confront economic problems which we are nervous about acknowledging explicitly, and at the same time, too many of our institutions, from Parliament to those that should be the custodians of the Rule of Law, have been corroded. The unity of the state, which has to hold in common this archipelago off the coast of Western Europe, is menaced by identity politics.

And yet, despite all this, our new King brings us a character and a dream that can encourage the flourishing of our best qualities and banish the worst.

First, King Charles has already, in his life, understood the importance of bridging the gaps between generations, and social classes. The Prince’s Trust, and his Foundation, give young people and older citizens too the chance of learning, creating and prospering in ways that would otherwise have been denied to them. They are offered the prospect of developing sustainable lives and businesses in their communities. They learn, for example, traditional arts and crafts in order to do this.

Second, I believe that the King’s approach to life is forged, not simply by the Gospel of Mark, but by another passage from the New Testament with which, at every Easter time, Christians are made familiar. St John’s Gospel describes what is probably the most famous trial in history, with a carpenter from Galilee dragged before Pontius Pilate. He is accused by the Chief Rabbi and the Sanhedrin of being a rebel against Rome. Pilate is anxious about how to respond, given that he has already been under attack twice in Rome for his handling of uprisings in Judaea. He is desperate to avoid another riot and plays for time. So he interrogates the carpenter and asks what his purpose is. The carpenter replies that he is ‘witness to the truth’. ‘Quid est Veritas’ jests Pilate. ‘What is truth?’ He knows in this case exactly what it is. He knows full well that the man in front of him is innocent of the charge of rebellion. But it is not expedient for him to say this. The truth is under his nose, but he ignores it and the carpenter is crucified. How often is it the case that expedience subverts truth.

Frequently in politics, indeed, in every walk of life, saying what we know to be true is side-stepped, obfuscated or even denied. It is not timely or immediately helpful for us to speak up for the truth. It might hurt us. For almost 50 years now, King Charles has said what he believes to be the truth about our environment. He has spoken of biodiversity, of the state of our oceans and climate change. And in doing so, he was continually derided, regarded as eccentric, slightly cranky, mocked not least for saying that he talks to plants. I have to confess, as a keen gardener myself, that I have similar conversations, though they are not always very successful. Many of us will also have learnt from a best-selling book by a German forester that trees certainly communicate with one another! If only other Heads of State and political leaders had been so ‘cranky’, we would have made greater progress in the defence of our planet and the livelihood of those who live on it.

Moreover, his concern about preserving the best of what our planet has itself provided also fuses with his belief that we should conserve the best of what we have created ourselves. The words of the song by the Canadian folk singer, Joni Mitchell, who comes if I may say so from the same vintage as the King and myself, should be remembered – ‘you don’t know what you’ve got until it’s gone’. This goes well beyond the environment. The King’s love of our language, and its greatest writers, and his passion about our built environment (whatever your views about his opinions on some aspects of modern architecture), all underline his concern to save the best from the bulldozers – both the real ones and those of the intellect. He has always tried to use what we have ourselves done best as an example of how to make a better future, in both our cities and our countryside.

The third quality I want to emphasise will be seen at the Coronation tomorrow. The Coronation is a sacrament, with the Head of our national church as its anointed centrepiece. He recognises that the sacrament is one in which he is sharing his dedication with others. The country of which he has become King and whose national church he heads, has seen a decline in the number of practising Christians even while these figures worldwide have been on the increase. As our monarch, he inherits a title first awarded by Pope Leo X in 1521 to the young Henry VIII, which was the then king’s prize for having denounced the teachings of Luther. Our monarch is known as ‘defender of the faith’ yet he knows that following all the changes of recent years, Britain is now a community of communities. So he recognises his duty to protect, not only the Church of which he is Head, but also the space of faith itself and ‘its practice through the religions, cultures, traditions and beliefs to which our hearts and minds direct us as individuals’. As a Christian, as well as our monarch, he regards himself as ‘bound to respect those who follow other spiritual beliefs as well as those who seek to live their lives in accordance with secular ideals’. He knows that you don’t need to be a member of an organised religious community to have moral values, and I am sure that he will want to associate with the commitments he makes to protect all faiths, the safeguarding of those who practice the values of civic humanism. Perhaps we should be particularly mindful of these issues, meeting in a church where, as I observed earlier, we once tried Christians and sent them to the gibbet or the funeral pyres because they were men and women of conscience.

So we are fortunate to have King Charles III as our Monarch and we wish him and his Queen, who is so clearly a strong, intelligent and generous-spirited partner in the formidable tasks which he confronts, many happy and glorious years. We can be sure that we will always be able to sing with commitment and enthusiasm — ‘thy choicest gifts in store, on him be pleased to pour, long may he reign, may he defend our laws, and ever give us cause, to sing with heart and voice, God save The King’.