



Faith, Service and Love

His Excellency the Right Honourable David Johnston
C.C., C.M.M., C.O.M., C.D., Governor General and Commander-in-Chief of Canada
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Remarks by His Excellency the Right Honourable David Johnston

I would like to address three interrelated topics today – faith, service and love – and I will do so in the context of my own faith, as well as of my role as representative of our head of state, Queen Elizabeth II, who also serves as defender of the faith.

In my own case, the Christian faith has been my rock. I grew up in Northern Ontario in the Anglican tradition. While at university in Boston, I took a short course at the Episcopal Theological College to become a lay reader.

Among other things, it opened a whole new window in my life, because for several summers I filled in Sundays for the Anglican ministers serving the First Nations reserves at the edge of our town...and other rural parishes near my hometown of Sault Ste. Marie. It was my first in-depth encounter with First Nations people, both on and off the reserve, and a real encounter with people who had to struggle for their daily living. It was one of those transforming experiences of my life and I am very grateful for it.

Throughout her 65 years as the longest-reigning British monarch of all time, Her Majesty has stood for stability, steadfastness and stewardship. I have been much inspired by her life of service. Today I am drawing from a book about her faith that was published in honour of her 90th birthday, entitled The Servant Queen – and the King She Serves.

Faith

Let me begin with faith.

The Queen's public demonstration of trust in faith began early in her life. So here is the story.

In the foreword to this book, The Queen wrote...she referred to a little poem quoted by her father George VI in his Christmas broadcast in 1939. Remember the time. Europe again found

itself at war after 21 short years of peace. The invasion of Britain was an imminent peril. The King, who had to work to overcome a debilitating stammer, had been thrust onto the Throne only two years earlier, surprised and unprepared after the abdication of Edward VII.

Here is the poem which he read without a stammer:

I said to the man who stood at the Gate of the Year,
“Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.”
And he replied, “Go out into the darkness, and put your hand into the hand of God.
That shall be to you better than light, and safer than a known way.”

What is less known – a less known way – is who gave that poem to King George. It was the future Queen, Princess Elizabeth, his 13-year-old daughter. Typical of Her Majesty’s lifelong tendency to understate and depersonalize, that information is not contained in her foreword to the book. It is only disclosed later in the book by others.

The Queen’s faith is robustly rooted and ever-present. In her annual Christmas broadcasts she always always refers to Jesus Christ and his teachings.

In 1984, she said:

“For me, the life of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace whose birth we celebrate today is an inspiration and an anchor in my life. A role model of reconciliation and forgiveness, He stretched out his hands in love, acceptance and healing. Christ’s example has taught me to seek respect and value all people of whatever faith or none.”

The Queen’s strong Christian faith does not lead her to exclude other faiths or minorities, but rather to embrace them, to accord them the same respect and dignity she does to those who share her beliefs. This is an important lesson as we consider the ecumenical nature of this prayer breakfast which brings us all together – so inclusively – this morning.

Former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks of the United Kingdom recently said:

“We do not always appreciate the role The Queen has played in one of the most significant changes in the past sixty years: the transformation of Britain into a multi-ethnic, multi-faith society. No one does interfaith better than the Royal family, and it starts with The Queen herself. Her presence and her family role as the human face of national identity is one of the great unifying forces in Britain, a unity we need all the more, the more diverse religiously and culturally we become.”

Rabbi Sacks’ observations apply equally well to Canada. There’s a wonderful illustration of that that occurred in the last several years. As I travel abroad, people remark to me on Canada’s response to the Syrian refugee crisis and applaud our government – as they should for its response. But what for me is most overwhelming has been the response of communities

across the country: private citizens taking unto themselves response to that challenge in ways that reflect Canada's most fundamental, traditional values.

We hosted, convened a gathering for one day fairly early on, in the effort with the Syrian refugees to bring the stakeholders from different parts of the country who were private citizens who gathered together to welcome refugees into their homes and make their transition more easily done.

And then we've had several meetings in communities across the country to celebrate and bring together those particular communities that had been so helpful. And we were in Oakville one evening, with 500 people in a room like this, all private citizens who had come together to welcome quite a large number of Syrian refugee families into the Oakville area. And the evening began with a blessing offered by a Protestant minister, a Roman Catholic priest, a Jewish rabbi and an imam from the local mosque.

When they finished their blessing, I came to the microphone and said:

“You know it's lovely to hear the expression from these four people, but do you know that their four congregations amongst themselves have sponsored three refugee families. I don't mean that each of their church, synagogue, mosque has done three quarters of the cost of a refugee family by way of a cheque. I mean that all four congregations have come together and altogether have adopted three refugee families.”

That's Canada working very well. [...]

Service

Let me turn to service.

The Queen sees service as a lifetime commitment. In her 21st birthday address delivered five years before her own accession to the Throne, Her Majesty anticipated her lifetime of service when she said:

“I declare before you all that my whole life, whether it be long or short, shall be devoted to your service and the service of our great imperial family to which we all belong.”

And then reaching out for the compass for that life, she added, “God help me to make my vow, and God bless all of you who are willing to share in it.”

Sixty-one years later, in her 2008 Christmas broadcast, she said:

“I hope that, like me, you will be comforted by the example of Jesus of Nazareth who, often in circumstances of great adversity, managed to live an outgoing, unselfish and

sacrificial life. He makes clear that genuine human happiness and satisfaction lie more in giving than receiving; more in serving than in being served. We can surely be grateful that, two thousand years after the birth of Jesus, so many of us are able to draw inspiration from His life and message, and to find in Him a source of strength and courage.”

What is the secret of The Queen’s remarkable consistency of service, 65 years as our monarch? In 2002 she said:

“I know just how much I rely on my faith to guide me through the good times and the bad. Each day is a new beginning. I know that the only way to live my life is to try to do what is right, to take the long view, to give of my best in all that the day brings and to put my trust in God. I draw strength from the message of hope in the Christian gospel.”

As we reflect on The Queen’s 91 years of life this year and 65 years on the Throne, again and again we see the theme of steadfast service persists.

Love

Let me turn to love.

My wife often says, “Service is love made real.”

I speak of that love which St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13: “Faith, hope and love and the greatest of these is love.”

It is interesting to me, but not surprising, that love, especially the commandment to “love thy neighbor,” is at the core not only of Christian religion, but of so many other great faiths around the world.

It’s interesting, I was at a conference several years ago. It was on economic change and the key speaker was Robert Shiller of Yale, Nobel Prize winner...we know of the Shiller index and so on. And I thought he would be giving us a learned lecture on economics and so on, but he did not. He spoke about that concept of “love thy neighbour.” And then he listed the great religions of the world, all of which had that fundamental theme as their basic creed.

Love is a universal value and the most basic of all values.

In another Christmas message, The Queen showed her understanding of the practicality of this commandment. She said:

“Many will have been inspired by Jesus’ simple but powerful teaching: love God and love thy neighbour as thyself. In other words, treat others as you would like them to treat you. His great emphasis was to give spirituality a practical purpose.”

And which parable of Jesus does she most often quote? [...]

It is the story of the good Samaritan, which tells of a Hebrew man beaten by robbers and left wounded by the roadside. He was bypassed by his well-placed kinsmen, first a priest and then a Levite. Then along comes the Samaritan, who was from a different tribe – not a friend or kin – who took him up and restored him as a simple act of compassion and followed up to be sure that the man was healed and set on his way again.

For Her Majesty, another of the essential guideposts of love is forgiveness.

In her 2013 Christmas broadcast, she said:

“Although we are capable of great acts of kindness, history teaches us that we sometimes need saving from ourselves – from our recklessness or our greed. God sent into the world a unique person – neither a philosopher, nor a general (important though they are) – but a Saviour with the power to forgive. Forgiveness lies at the heart of the Christian faith. It can heal broken families, it can restore friendships and it can reconcile divided communities. It is in forgiveness that we feel the power of God’s love.”

For me, perhaps the most powerful of her lessons is the one from her 1975 Christmas message, which speaks of this fundamental truth of love and its impact throughout our society. She said:

“Christ’s simple message of love has been turning the world upside down ever since His birth. He showed that what people are and what they do, does matter and does make all the difference. He commanded us to love our neighbours as we love ourselves, but what exactly is meant by loving ourselves? I believe it means trying to make the most of the abilities we have been given, it means caring for our talents. It is a matter of making the best of ourselves, not just doing the best for ourselves.”

Impact

I want to end this brief journey through The Queen’s inspiring dedication to faith, service and love by appraising the impact of her observations and her life.

My installation address delivered just less than seven years ago when I became Governor General, was entitled, An Informed and Benevolent Nation. It’s a call to duty and to help our society using human values. And so much of what I have tried to do since I became Governor General in 2010, has been influenced by Christian faith, as illuminated by The Queen’s messages.

So let me end with a final quote from her 1975 Christmas message where she spoke of the impact and legacy of love:

“We are all different, but each of us has his own best to offer. The responsibility for the way we live life with all its challenges, sadness and joy is ours alone. If we do this well, it will also be good for our neighbours. If you throw a stone into a pool, the ripples go on spreading outwards. A big stone can cause waves, but even the smallest pebble changes the whole pattern of the water.”

“Our daily actions are like those ripples, each one makes a difference, even the smallest. It does matter therefore what each individual does each day. Kindness, sympathy, resolution and courteous behaviour are infectious. Acts of courage and self-sacrifice, like those of the people who refuse to be terrorized by kidnappers or hijackers, or who defuse bombs, are an inspiration to others. And the combined effect can be enormous.”

“If enough grains of sand are dropped into one side of a pair of scales they will, in the end, tip it against a lump of lead. We may feel powerless alone, but the joint efforts of individuals can defeat the evils of our time. Together they can create a stable, free and considerate society.”

My final words are a personal story, connected to this gathering today. It was another prayer breakfast, in Montreal about 30 years ago, and Mother Teresa was our guest speaker.

Before the breakfast began, a group of about 50 or so neighbours gathered with her and she spoke briefly about her institution in Calcutta for the homeless. When she finished this short statement, one of our neighbours, being so moved, said, “Mother Teresa, we are so taken by your mission and what you’re doing. What can we do to help?”

And I, being a university president of some tenure at that point, expected that she would say, “Send a large cheque to my institution in Calcutta and I assure you it will be of good use.”

But she didn’t. She looked at our neighbour and said, “Look in your own home. Look in your own neighbourhood. I guarantee you that there is someone who needs your love and care.” [...]

She spoke at the breakfast and she gave a wonderful testimony. And the four Montreal newspapers carried it the next day. Three of the four were very praiseworthy and picked up the spirit of her message.

The fourth was the newspaper that at that time was practicing...“Real Politik.” Seeing things with a detached view. Stripping away the emotion and all that kind of stuff. And began by saying that Mother Teresa was here and she gave a speech and it was filled with her message of love and care...marvellous woman...she’ll probably be canonized by the Roman Catholic

Church as she later was. But let's be practical...let's be realistic: she provides a home and food, livelihood for 250 people in Calcutta, India – a city of 20 million people, over half of whom who are in desperate straights, a country of over a billion people, half of whom are in even more desperate straights. If you're realistic about it, in the grand scheme of things, it's a mere drop in the bucket.

That bothered me for the longest time. [...]

A few weeks later, I realized the shortcomings of this criticism and that I had it all wrong. I was thinking about that drop in the bucket, that drop in the ocean, from the point of view of physics or mathematics...relative space, relative relationship. I should have thought about it as chemical engineering. Just as one drop of red dye dropped into a glass of water changes the colour and the "culture" of the entire glass as the dye interacts with the H₂O molecules, that's what we do every day with our drops of love.

Thank you.