

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, October 15, 2023

Patronal Feast Day

Solemn Evensong and Te Deum

3 p.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Canon Paul Wright LVO, *Sub-Dean of His Majesty's Chapel Royal, United Kingdom*

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Bicentenary Weekend

Dearly beloved, I bring you greetings from His Majesty's Chapel Royal in St James's Palace in London on this your Bicentenary weekend. It is a joy to be with you, in this place where we experience and embrace the beauty of holiness. My thanks to Fr Carl, Alison and all of you for this invitation.

From the letter to the Hebrews:

"Here we have no continuing city; but we seek one to come."

These words were the text of the last sermon of the Reverend Cornelius Roosevelt Duffie, the founder of this Church. His short life and ministry have left a remarkable legacy, and it was said at his memorial service that his new church of St Thomas, was *the holy and beautiful house, of his own rearing*.

In 1824, this newly ordained young priest looked out over a small congregation assembled on the second floor of a commercial edifice on Broome Street in New York City, and it is recorded he said, in solemn, bright tones:

Lift up your hearts: We answer today, with that original congregation;

We lift them up to the Lord.

Cornelius Duffie was a clergyman well-known and well-loved in his day: and always called, following his premature death, 'the gentle Duffie.'

I was delighted to learn that he had also been a soldier, serving in the New York State Militia in the War of 1812. It is recorded that warm friendships were formed for him by his brother officers; and he discharged all his duties with fidelity and punctuality.

My own family regiment, the 8th of Foot served in this war, up on the Canadian frontier – on the other side - so I hope that the gentle Duffie will forgive this red cassoched, but not red coated, limey Army Padre for preaching in his beautiful house! The empire strikes back?

"Here we have no continuing city; but we seek one to come."

This bicentenary celebration helps us to concentrate on our minds on the enduring reality of our faith which is,

Yesterday, today and forever

Sometimes we view this like a picture – but it all is one thing. We stand in that space. It is our faith and witness.

Yesterday, today and forever

These are also themes for the Chapel Royal and the Royal Household.

And I would like to reflect on the last year in the Royal household, where we have witnessed the extraordinary change of Reign.

And it has been a remarkable year – so much has changed since the death of our Late Queen, and at the Chapel Royal we were given the privilege of being at the heart of the State Funeral, and then the Coronation. The Coronation Day was glorious.

The Coronation Day - these words are not often said; four times in the Twentieth century, and three times in the Nineteenth century – and now for the first time in this, our century.

However, at, 1053 hours on Saturday morning of the Coronation Day, as I was stood in the south cloister of Westminster Abbey, with my colleague, the Serjeant of the Vestry,

It was a very different picture: IT WAS TERRIFYING – with the world looking on. After all that preparation – this was the day.

But this terror is nothing new. Allow me to share a nightmare,

In the Royal Household, the dream of the Earl of Portland, before the Coronation in 1902 is remembered. You will not find this in any books – it is a folk memory.

This was an extraordinary moment – the first Coronation since 1838 and the Earl, as Master of the Horse, had a nightmare in the week before the event.

In his dream, the Gold State Coach was going under Horse Guards arch, when the crown on top got stuck - fast. Things got worse, as the cavalry troopers hacked at the crown. A nightmare. It couldn't be moved.

So the following day, he had the carriage measured – yes it would fit – he was assured. But being a proper Coldstream Guard's officer he decided to check the arch – and to his horror discovered that it had been repaved and lifted six inches - making it impassable to the carriage.

You can only begin to imagine how delighted my colleagues in the Lord Chamberlain's Office were to be reminded of this dream – in the week before our Coronation day.

But all went well, and our King was anointed and Crowned. He follows in the footsteps of the King of Kings, the one who comes to serve. And yes it rained, but as our first Nations Chief and friend from Canada told us on Sunday, it has to rain for things to grow.

And it had been a remarkable few weeks for the Chapel Royal, as we have received, on behalf of The King, a relic of the Holy Cross, a personal gift from Pope Francis, the blessing of the anointing screen – based on the Chapel window, and white wine from Orthodox Slavonia.

The relic was placed in the processional cross of Wales, that led The King's procession. A truly remarkable Coronation project and gift to the churches and nation of Wales.

The screen was central to the sacred moment of the anointing – when we heard that remarkable anthem, Zadok the Priest. Zadok the priest and Nathan the Prophet anointed Solomon King.

And the Orthodox white wine was a reminder of that new wine that we shall enjoy in the kingdom of Heaven. And all of this reminds us that our King follows in the footsteps of the King of King – who seeks a home in all our hearts.

The Coronation was a remarkable moment of yesterday, today, and forever. It is a celebration of a uniquely British orthodoxy, that is refreshed for every new generation. It is part of the deep fabric of this country – the words of the deeply Protestant William Tyndale and Thomas Cranmer and the music of deeply Catholic William Byrd. The beauty and austerity of the Gothic, and pomp and ceremony of the state.

The Coronation has a deep sense of the aura and mystery of sacrifice. The King wears purple and is given the burden of the Crown and the instruments of State. Like our Lord, his hands are outstretched to receive this burden. And he cannot put on these vestments or Crown himself – they are placed upon him.

And at the heart, our King and Queen, standing before God in the simplicity of their human nature, awaiting the anointing gift of grace, and the crowning of all their endeavours.

We can all recognise something of ourselves in this event – which mirrors our own trials, tribulations, and triumphs. And our need for God's grace in our hearts.

Humility and service lie at the heart of the Coronation, and not the pride and vanity that appear in so many other parts of our public life.

A very lovely man called Hugh Segal, died in the summer. He was the former Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister of Canada, and later the Master of Massey College.

Let me end with my favourite political morality and humility tale.

John Diefenbaker was Elected Prime Minister of Canada in 1957. The prairie politician with the odd name. At a great celebratory dinner, at the Chateau Frontenac in Quebec City, he was talking to his companion when the waiter was serving the butter. Diefenbaker, over his shoulder said,

'I'll take two pieces please.' To his incredulity, the waiter said,

'no, you can only have one.'

Diefenbaker said, 'do you know who I am – I am John George Diefenbaker, the 13th elected Prime Minister of Canada, and privy Counsellor to Queen Elizabeth II – and if I want two pieces of butter, I can have two pieces of butter!'

The waiter said – 'do you know who I am?' I am the guy in charge of the butter. To the great Dief's credit, he would often tell this story saying, I may be your Prime Minister – but I am not the guy in charge of the butter at the Chateau Frontenac Hotel.

Humility and service. The calling of The King, and the calling of this church and community. Yesterday, today and forever

Allow me to end with some words of the Reverend Cornelius Duffie, the gentle Duffie, about his vision for this place.

This is the house of the Lord; and because he is the God of whom cometh salvation, here shall the glad tidings of the Gospel, the good news for all people, the message of life which is for every creature, salvation through the merits of a divine Redeemer, being faithfully proclaimed.

May this church always lift up our hearts, and as we give thanks for these last 200 years of Christian service in this place, so we ask for God's blessing on all that shall be in the next 200 years.

And all in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.

Amen.

Lt. Col. the Reverend Canon Paul Wright, MA, MTh, LVO
Domestic Chaplain to The King and Sub Dean
St James's Palace