

One thing is certain this morning. Everyone who is preaching will have had to write their sermon from scratch. It may be the fifth Sunday of Easter, and I have half a dozen sermons squirrelled away for that, but none of them are the slightest use. Because, of course, yesterday saw an event which was a first in most people's lifetimes. Even if you are old enough to have been around for the last coronation – as I am, just – you certainly won't have been preaching sermons about it.

Given the acres of print and hours of airtime that have been devoted to the coronation over the past few weeks, it's hard to know what else can be said about it. We've been told everything from the history and significance of each item of the regalia to the lack of proper suspension in the state coach and the difficulty of playing the clarinet on horseback. We've heard magnificent music and seen so much splendour that we could have ticked off everything in the I-Spy Book of Uniforms in half an hour. It was wonderful to see such a mixture of guests in the Abbey, even if quite a lot of them (and I don't mean the foreign heads of state or the representatives of other faiths) clearly hadn't a clue about singing either of the hymns. And I'm quietly rather pleased that the King himself seems to have squashed the proposal that we should all leap to our feet, wherever we were, to pay him homage. It's just not quite British, and it would have been a jarring note in a ritual which had a very different focus.

So much colour, so much dignity, so much symbolism... I wonder what particularly caught your attention? Was it the Chapel Royal chorister welcoming the King to the Abbey? The heralds and pursuivants looking like walking playing cards? Prince Louis behaving impeccably? The Lord President of the Council standing stock still with a huge sword for over an hour (it probably helped that she is a Royal Naval Reserve officer). Some of you know that when I have time I'm studying illuminated medieval manuscripts, and for me it was the appearance of St Augustine's Gospel Book carried in the gospel procession ahead of the Bishop of London. That book was made in Italy at some time in the sixth century, hand-written and hand-painted on parchment, and either brought to England by St Augustine himself or sent as a gift from Pope Gregory. We know it was regularly used in St Augustine's Abbey in Canterbury, carried in services, placed on the altar and the gospel read from it. Suddenly fifteen hundred years were swept away, and there we were in a little wooden church surrounded by black-robed monks and flickering candles. That book is the tangible proof of the depth of our Christian tradition, in which yesterday's service was rooted.

Yesterday's service. The coronation is a service, and its theme was service. The first words the King spoke were an acknowledgement that his role is to serve his country and his people. The anointing consecrated him as the head of a church whose purpose, set out in the Bible given to him, is to serve. The sword, the sceptre and the rod of mercy symbolise his power to serve, and the spurs urge him to be fearless and brave in that service. Even the coronation symbol on the front of our service sheets today emphasises the primacy of faith and service. Our readings continue the theme. The passage from Isaiah is an exhortation to everyone, even the most powerful and privileged, to be humble in God's presence and to acknowledge that we ourselves are powerless without his help. Our gospel contains those defining words spoken by Jesus: 'I am among you as one who serves.' This isn't about status or power or wealth or position. It's about the commitment we make to serve other people.

As I watched the procession back to the palace I realised that everyone in it – the squadrons of troops, the soldiers and policemen guarding the route, the British Legion volunteers lining Parliament Square – have all made that same promise. Each of them has taken an oath of loyalty to serve this country and its people – to serve us. When you think about it, it is an extraordinary commitment. Each of them is or has been willing to put their own life at risk in our service. Thousands of men and women dedicated to service. Thousands more around the country, and hundreds of thousands of others who simply give time and skills in voluntary work of every conceivable kind. ‘Ask not what your country can do for you’, said John F Kennedy at his inauguration as US President. ‘Ask what you can do for your country.’ We heard our King pledge himself to our service, and he asks the same of us. It’s his message and it is the message of the gospel, the same now as when St Augustine’s book first arrived in Kent, and the same as the command that Jesus gave to his followers. ‘The greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader as one who serves.’ Feed the hungry, heal the sick, let the oppressed go free, do good to those that hate you. Seek peace and pursue it. Do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your God. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and your neighbour as yourself.