

May 7, 2023
The Fifth Sunday of Easter
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Acts 7:55-60
Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16
1 Peter 2:2-10
John 14:1-14

Yesterday I watched the coronation of King Charles III. I felt almost a responsibility to partake of it. This was not because I am an Anglophile or particularly interested in the British royal family. Rather, it was because the coronation of an English monarch is a religious ceremony of the Church of England, the parent church of the Anglican Communion to which we Episcopalians belong. The coronation would be, on one hand, a rare and likely beautiful liturgy; and on the other, a disturbing demonstration of the church's entanglement with imperialism and colonialism.

Immediately after the coronation I spoke briefly with one of my non-churchgoing neighbors. I mentioned that I'd just watched the coronation. He replied that he turned it on, but it was just like being in church, and so he turned it off again. That's the thing: it *was* a church service, one that felt quite familiar to this Episcopalian. The Archbishop of Canterbury, the senior cleric in the Church of England, was the presider; as such, he crowned and anointed the new king.

Even with the elements of the coronation, it was most foundationally a service of Holy Eucharist, structured the same as every service of Holy Eucharist celebrated right here. The Eucharistic prayer was very similar to one of those in our *Book of Common Prayer*. I realized with some discomfort that the additional elements for the coronation were much like those for the ordination of a deacon, priest, or bishop. Most squiggly for me was the singing of the "Veni Creator Spiritus"—"Come Creator Spirit"—just before the anointing of the new king. At an ordination, the invocation of the Spirit is sung just before the laying on of hands. It is the final preparation for the moment that the new cleric—or apparently the king—is *made*. The king was later vested in a stole, one rather fancier than mine, with, I believe, real god thread.

I suppose all that makes sense, because the king is after all the head of the Church of England, bearing the title of Supreme Governor, and the Church of England is the established church of England. In his oath near the beginning of the service, Charles promised to "maintain in the United Kingdom the Protestant Reformed Religion established by law," and to "maintain and preserve inviolably the settlement of the Church of England, and the doctrine, worship, discipline, and government thereof, as by law established in England." In response, Charles declared himself to be a "faithful Protestant."¹

The worldly implications of all this were displayed the moment the newly crowned king and queen departed Westminster Abbey in the Gold State Coach. Besides hundreds of horses, the procession from Westminster Abbey to Buckingham palace included 4000 members of the military, who lined up on the grounds for an appearance of the King and Queen on the balcony. Their triple "Hip, hip, hooray" was kind of touching, but it was hard at that moment not to think of colonial escapades in India, in Africa, in the British Isles. Shortly thereafter a commentator said about the orchestration of that parading 4000, providing a moment of unintentional irony, "it was really a military operation."² Yes, of course it was a military operation.

The news buzz leading up to the event included talk about various modernizations to the ancient rituals, but even these contained slivers of unease. I could name several, but I'll stick with one: the first-ever participation of women bishops in a coronation. Courtesy of PBS, I watched the BBC coverage. After the procession back to Buckingham Palace, a BBC reporter interviewed two of the three women bishops who participated. One observed that there have only been women bishops since 2016. Let's say that again: in the Church of England, there have only been women bishops for seven years. I might as well add that gay clergy are okay in the Church of England, as long as they are celibate.

On Friday, *The Guardian* published an article by one British person critical of the coronation. It was titled, "The coronation offered a chance to reform and modernise the monarchy. It has been squandered." The authors saw the previously published liturgy and, among other things, offered this observation:

Many will instinctively want to be generous about the coronation and will not want to spoil the party. In that spirit, they might call this weekend's ritual a historical pretence that pleases many and does no particular harm. If they were being stronger-minded, as they ought to be about an event that inevitably says so much about this country to itself and the world, they could instead call the ritual what it is: a lie at the heart of the British state.

The lie is that Britain is a practising Christian nation, and that it is defined and held together by the established Protestant religion, of which the monarch is the embodiment. That claim may have been accurate in the 18th century. It is simply untrue in the Britain of 2023.

He goes on to observe: "Most Britons are not Christians. Few of those who are Christians are practising Anglicans."³

I want to take a step back here. My point here isn't really to poke at the Church of England. It's rather to use events in the UK to turn a mirror back at what's going on here in the United States. What's happening here in the United States is this: some insist that this is a Christian nation. They even seem willing to anoint a king, if that's what it takes to realize it. And they seem to be gaining some ground.

I don't have to tell you that far-right Christians are more than willing to court even farther-right Christian nationalists in order to achieve their goals. No matter that last week four members of the Proud Boys were convicted of sedition for their roles in the storming of the Capitol.⁴ Check out the news from Texas. Check out the news from Florida.

That's where our friend the Rev. Nathan Empsall is going next week, in his work as executive director of the national organization Faithful America. One of the things Nathan has been doing is leading counter-events to Michael Flynn's Reawaken America tour. Next weekend the Reawaken America tour will be convening at Trump National Doral Miami, and so Faithful America and Nathan are going, too. The Faithful America email blast I got last week about it included this: "Featuring baptisms, praise music, and a litany of evangelical speakers spreading hateful MAGA talking points in Jesus's hijacked name, these pro-Trump political rallies are designed to radicalize Christians, use the church as a vehicle for QAnon misinformation, and seize power for conservative white evangelicals at any cost."⁵ Last week Faithful America got a great mention in Newsweek for its work in opposition to the Reawaken America Tour.⁶ Nathan himself has been regularly showing up in national media in relation to his work on a variety of issues. I am so glad and grateful that Nathan is doing this hard work on behalf of us all.

Also in my news feed last week was a video message from the rector of All Saints Church in Pasadena, California, Mike Kinman. His message started with this: "Earlier this week two threats were made Against All Saints Church for this coming Sunday. One was that there was a bomb placed at the front of the church that would be detonated during Sunday worship, and the other that someone would come to Sunday worship and use a gun to, quote, "kill the pastor of the All Saints LGBTQ Ministry Church," unquote."⁷ Likely it was an idle threat. In any case, the leadership of All Saints is doing everything they can to protect the congregation—even as they will gather later this morning to worship God.

The reading for today from the Gospel of John—that bit about "the way, and the truth, and the life"—is used by some Christians to justify marginalization and oppression. Of course, the point ends up being *their* way, *their* truth, *their* life. The thing is, by the time the John's Gospel was written down, the message of Jesus was already being theologized in ways that even Jesus wouldn't have recognized. We might be better off sticking with the Jesus of Luke-Acts, for whose message the apostle Steven offered the ultimate sacrifice. This Jesus made his table not with kings or bishops or even priests, but with the marginalized and oppressed. I'm pretty sure *that* is the way, and the truth, and the life.

Clearly this sermon is filled with a whole bunch of things that have been cooking for me this week. I really haven't had time to digest the coronation or even really to get my head around the images I came away with. But for now I'll say one more thing about it: one of the ways that Charles III "modernized" his coronation liturgy was to emphasize a theme of faithful service. In connection with the coronation a national day of service is being held tomorrow. It's called The Big Help Out. I'm still tempted to grump about the vast privilege of the British aristocracy, and yet I need to acknowledge that this is a great idea. I read that 1200 businesses signed up to give their employees a day "off" so that they can go volunteer instead. A website and app were set up to connect volunteers with volunteer opportunities around the country.⁸

Last week, coincidentally, I preached about the priesthood of all believers, the priesthood that we share. In our second lesson today, 1 Peter says this: “let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” I think those spiritual sacrifices also call us to action. This priesthood of all believers is one we share with all humanity, even if we allow others to call it something else. I admit, I’ve feeling a bit discouraged about the things that have been going on lately. But I know that the solution is not to isolate and judge and blame. It’s to reach out and reach out and reach out, in vulnerability and in love.

Notes

¹ The Church of England, “The Authorised Liturgy for the Coronation Rite of His Majesty King Charles III,” available at https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/23-24132%20Coronation%20Liturgy%20Commentary_v4.pdf (accessed May 7, 2023).

² This was during the BBC coverage offered by PBS. I cannot say who the commentator was.

³ Martin Kettle, “The coronation offered a chance to reform and modernise the monarchy. It has been squandered,” *The Guardian*, May 5, 2023, available online at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/may/05/coronation-king-charles-reform-modernise-monarchy-religious> (accessed May 7, 2023).

⁴⁴ See, for example, Alan Feuer and Zach Montague, “Four Proud Boys Convicted of Seditious in Key Jan. 6 Case,” *The New York Times*, May 4, 2023, available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/04/us/politics/jan-6-proud-boys-sedition.html> (accessed May 7, 2023).

⁵ Faithful America, in an email to supporters with the subject “Donald Trump himself is about to host the ReAwaken America Tour and its unholy Christian nationalism,” received May 4, 2023.

⁶ Fatma Khalid, “Thousands of Christians Condemn Trump Allies’ ‘Hateful Political Agenda,’” *Newsweek*, May 5, 2023, available online at <https://www.newsweek.com/thousands-christians-condem-trump-allies-hateful-political-agenda-1798678> (accessed May 7, 2023).

⁷ Mike Kinman, in a video posted to the All Saints Church Pasadena YouTube channel, May 4, 2023, available online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i7oO_hu3D98 (accessed May 7, 2023).

⁸ The Big Help Out website is <https://thebighelpout.org.uk/> (accessed May 7, 2023).