



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 5th June 2022
Readings: Acts 2.1-21; Romans 8.14-17

Pentecost

My text today is taken from Romans 8, verses 14, '*all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God*'.

It is not unusual to think that status matters. As we look back on a long life, we may be either content or disappointed, depending upon the status we feel we have attained. From the other end of life, as we continue in education or find ourselves launched onto the ocean of career and relationships, we may find that we're aspiring to a particular status. As I look at my life, and other people's, I realise that we might measure status by all sorts of things.

In this parish, it can be measured by our *learning*. Why wouldn't it be in a place of fine universities, colleges and schools?

In this era, as much as in any other, *wealth* can also be the measure of our status. If we have enough riches to support ourselves, we have a different status in most societies than if we are dependent upon others. And the more we have, the more we are looked up to ... or do I mean 'envied'?

Status can also be achieved by things like *success*. The one who gains a reputation for achievement can seem to attain a respectable status in a way that is denied to the one of more hum drum attainment.

And what about the status of *celebrity*? However vulnerable to the fragility of stardom, the ones we put on pedestals, before we knock them off, are given a profile that sets them apart, despite their feet are made of clay.

For those less learned or affluent or famed, it may be that *good works* and *devoted ministry* earn the particular status of being beloved. As one pastor once said of another, 'His love for us was [both] sustaining and bracing. He reflected his Master in this ...'.¹ High status indeed.

And then, there is the status of *birth*. The Platinum Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II finds the nation thanking one whom President Obama describes as 'a gift to the United Kingdom and to the world';² one whom Bear Grylls, the Chief Scout, with an eye to the future, sums up as a 'shining light for young people'.³ And for what it is worth, so I believe, too. Moreover, we honour one for whom a reign of seventy years has been a mix of joy and fulfilment, of more than one *annus horribilis*, and of evolving attitudes to monarchy. I wonder if she ever has found herself echoing the words Shakespeare gives King Henry IV:

'Canst thou, O partial sleep, give thy repose to the wet sea-boy ... and ... deny it to a King? ... Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.'⁴

¹ Goodall, Norman 1949, 1985 *One Man's Testimony* London SCM page xix of Kenneth Slack's *Memoir* of Dr Goodall in the 1985 reissue.

² Obama, Barack 2022 Twitter message to mark the Platinum Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II. Available at https://twitter.com/BarackObama/status/1532406846232924162?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Etweet. Accessed 2nd June 2022

³ Grylls, Bear 2nd June 2022 Available at <https://www.scouts.org.uk/news/2022/may/shining-lights-87-scout-groups-prepare-to-light-platinum-jubilee-beacons/> Accessed 4th June 2022

⁴ Shakespeare, William 1599 *Henry IV, Part II* Act III, Scene I, Lines 326ff

And yet she remained ‘ever faithful, ever sure.’⁵

Like so many others, I have known no other Head of State, nor wished for one. But it is nevertheless true that this remarkable jubilee highlights a status due to birth – and, actually, to an aunt’s divorces and an uncle’s abdication, too. And even though 70 years enabled her to attain the status born of wealth and wisdom, of good works and dedication, and of affection, it all began with whose daughter she was.

Her Majesty is demonstrably a person of Christian faith. Her consistent willingness to assert that with a regally understated ardour, has profoundly impressed many of us, not least in an era when it is seriously counter-cultural. And I can well believe that as a Bible-honouring Christian, she is persuaded that ultimately the status that matters most is the one she shares with each of us, for as St Paul has it: ‘all who are led by the Spirit of God are *children of God*’.⁶ As the Bible Society’s publication for her 90th birthday summed it up, her life is that of a ‘Servant Queen and [of] the King she serves’.⁷

You see, the Christian idea is that we gain our status neither from what we achieve, nor from what we are born to, but from being *re-born* as children of God. Essentially, a child of God is one who trusts God. That does not happen because we want it to. Nor because we work our fingers to the spiritual bone to deserve it. Rather, it’s the work of the Holy Spirit in us. So it is that there is such significance in the Platinum Jubilee celebrations being on the weekend of Pentecost. That faith from which our Queen seems to gain such strength and encouragement is little to do with the royal status to which she was born. It’s the status that God gives to her, and to each and every one of us who opens ourselves to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Crucially, the Holy Spirit doesn’t just enable us to believe – to call God ‘Abba, Father’.⁸ That Spirit is also the source of the new life we live. Just as the Spirit inspires us to faith so that we can face Shakespeare’s ‘visitation of the winds’⁹ even death with a resilient trust in God’s love, so the Spirit also re-shapes the way we live in the here and now. It’s not so that we can earn God’s redeeming love, but rather so that we can answer it with our lives of faith, hope and love,¹⁰ be we sovereign, sweeper or schoolchild.

Crucial to this new life, is dying to the old one. Children of God are willing to examine what their priorities should be. They’ll evaluate whether their aspirations are for the common good, or just to feather their own nest. And influenced by the Spirit that was in Jesus, they will turn their backs on lifestyles that destroy the planet or mar community. Instead, they will make themselves pliable to the Spirit so that they’re shaped by the Spirit’s gifts and bear the Spirit’s fruit.

Those gifts of the Spirit equip us for the Christian life of making real God’s radically inclusive love in a world that otherwise seems intent on prejudice and war; of speaking a prophetic word into today’s world of self-congratulatory delusions; and of awakening the world to its need of the One by whom alone it ‘lives and moves and has its being’.¹¹

⁵ Milton, John 1608-74, from the hymn *Let us with a gladsome mind* 1623 CH4 92.refrain

⁶ Romans 8.14

⁷ Bible Society 2016 *The Servant Queen and the King she serves* Swindon: Bible Society

⁸ Romans 8.15

⁹ Shakespeare, line 321

¹⁰ I Corinthians 13.13

¹¹ Acts 17.28

At the same time the Spirit's fruit each refresh our spirits, so that we are enabled to live not just for the self but for the other; not just for the neighbour but also for the stranger; not just for the already-lovely but also for 'the loveless that they, [too,] might lovely be'.¹²

One of Christianity's special words for status is glory. Essentially, I think 'glory' defines the superlative nature of God: God's beauty, God's righteousness, God's wisdom. God's love. The cocktail of these and of so many other divine virtues is what comprises God's glory. Somewhere at the heart of the Christian faith there is also the awesome thought that those who trust God as God is in Jesus Christ, will also share God's glory. As we grasp that this glory comes to us not from our own good works but from the Holy Spirit, we embrace that truth which is as real for a monarch as it is for someone more modest: that 'glory is not ours to be won, but rather it is God's to give.'¹³

For every way that the spirit has enabled Queen Elizabeth to serve with the distinction, dedication and resilience that she has, thanks be to God. And thanks be to God, too, for every way that the Spirit enables us to wear that same crown, be our life starting or ending, long or short.

And, when all else is said and done, when all who are worthy have been thanked and honoured, to God alone be the glory.

N. P. Uden

5th June 2022

¹² Crossman, Samuel 1624-84, from the hymn *My song is love unknown* 1664 in *The Young Man's Meditation* RS 207.1.3

¹³ Lancaster, Sarah Heaner 2015 *Romans: in the Belief theological commentary on the Bible* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press page 142