

Her Majesty the Queen has been a permanent and positive presence in the life of the nation throughout my life. I do not particularly wish to praise her for her longevity, though I am sure we deeply appreciate her length of service to this nation. Nor do I wish to claim to be able to cover comprehensively all her skills and contributions to our nation's life. There are, however, qualities that I deeply admire and which we, as a nation, have needed over many years.

The Queen has been outstanding in her dedication to duty and public service. Every impression is that she is also a deeply private person. This has led on many occasions to her being criticised and misunderstood. The cultural assumption today that we are prepared to talk about intimate matters in public, at the drop of a hat, needs challenging. The Queen's behaviour has done just that. Reticence can be a virtue; an inner life needs nourishing and deserves privacy. One aspect of her inner life is her faith. She has rarely spoken about it – yet it is clear that she could not perform her public duties without a profound and renewing source of strength and hope. During some very dark years, she has found courage from her faith, without imposing or indicating that the same path is appropriate for others. I am confident that, when I hear her speak, she knows what motivates, shapes and encourages her soul. This can be hard to understand for those with little experience of nurturing this inner life; and even in the church, many presume that such matters should be readily shared with others. Yet I see a person of hope whose reticence about speaking about the source, only deepens my confidence in her.

The Queen has held a central position in our nation, without explicit power. Again, today's culture puzzles over this, as the widespread assumption is that power should be accumulated and used. Her Majesty has often held the central ground so that no one else can claim it. Celebrities claim our attention – but they come and go. Politicians relish position that leads to power. Yet her example shows that we are all accountable – we do not owe an account to her; rather, anyone in a public position owes an answer to everyone else: 'how did you use your power/talents/moment of fame, for the good of others?' I wish that the Honour System in this country could be radically de-politicised as, for now, it is evident that Honours are awarded to many who are simply close to power – or who endorse those who have power. What would it be like if honour were bestowed on those who have shaped, guided or inspired the nation not because they are near the top of the tree, but because of their influence for good? This applies as much to those in business life as to those in public service – to the military and civil service, to sporting heroes and celebrities. The Queen's example is not one of self-aggrandisement, but of holding a position in such a way that others are motivated to shine.

On so many public occasions, the Queen has paid gracious attention to people, institutions and activities. I am not sure that I share many interests with her – horses, as a species, for example, have always left me cold. But I am confident that, were the Queen to visit Guildford and ask me 'so what are you interested in?', she would manage well my response "Ancient manuscripts and archaeology". She displays a remarkable ability to show an interest in people, whatever it is that fascinates them. A person who becomes bored with others will most surely become bored with life. Or to take the opposite tack – attend to others, build them up so that they flourish and help others flourish too, give space and time for your own spiritual needs, and you will be a positive presence wherever you go.

At the start of this new year, the spiritual heart of the Covenant Service finds an echo in the dedicated life of Her Majesty. For both, I am truly grateful.

I am no longer my own but yours.
Put me to what you will,
rank me with whom you will;
put me to doing, put me to suffering;
let me be employed for you or laid aside for you,
exalted for you or brought low for you;
let me be full, let me be empty,
let me have all things, let me have nothing;
I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things
to your pleasure and disposal.

Canon Robert Cotton