

The coronation

Anthony Kilmister

For many people, today it seems incredible that 50 years have elapsed since our sovereign lady, the Queen, was anointed and crowned. The coronation was a time of acute expectation—mingled with prayer, excitement and patriotism. The Second World War had ended only eight years earlier. I watched the flickering images of the ceremony on a new television especially bought for the occasion.

The part of the service that moved me the most was the anointing. Even before the Norman Conquest, kings were anointed with oil, stressing the honour and dignity of kings as the 'Anointed of the Lord'. Anointing was a biblical practice. Saul, chosen when the Israelites asked for a king, was anointed by the prophet Samuel. And so also have our monarchs been anointed with holy oil. Anointing was used in 787, for example, and indeed in 973 when Edgar the Peaceful became the first King of All England and was crowned at Bath on Whit Sunday that year by St Dunstan. The religious importance attached to anointing is eloquently expressed in the words uttered by Shakespeare's Richard II on the invasion of Bolingbroke: 'Not all the water in the rough rude sea / Can wash the balm off from an anointed king'.

In 1953, the anointing oil was poured into the *Ampulla* before the ceremony and placed on the high altar. It was then consecrated by the Archbishop of Canterbury. During the service itself, the *Ampulla* (with its golden head shaped like an eagle's) and the Spoon were the only two items of coronation regalia used that had survived over time. The *Ampulla* (a Latin word for a globular vessel the Romans used for holding liquids and ointments), together with the Spoon, survived the Commonwealth—a republican period of oppression when the established Church of England and the Book of Common Prayer were driven underground until the Restoration in 1660.

The Book of Common Prayer in its original form was introduced by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer in 1549 during the reign of the boy king, Edward VI. Cranmer, in addressing the young King Edward at his coronation on 20th February 1547, said of kings:

For they be God's anointed, not in respect of the oil which the bishop useth, but in consideration of their power which is ordained, of the sword which is authorised, of their persons which are elected by God, and endued with the gifts of His Spirit for the better ruling and guiding of his people.

This I hold to be true today, but at least modern monarchs do not have to submit to the full 1547 anointing technique. Then, Edward VI was laid upon the altar of the Abbey for Archbishop Cranmer to anoint his back.

In 1953, the service was one of great splendour. The Queen accepted a beautifully bound Bible on being told: 'Here is Wisdom; this is the royal Law; These are the lively Oracles of God.' But after the Creed, the Holy Communion service was temporarily suspended for the anointing—the most sacred and mystical part of the coronation—one could say the 'hallowing' of the monarch. At this point the Abbey was filled with Handel's musical setting of:

*Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet anointed Solomon King; and all the people rejoiced, and said
God save the king,
Long live the king,
May the king live for ever. Amen. Hallelujah.*

While the hair-tingling hallelujah lifted in crescendo, the Queen was disrobed for the exceptionally solemn moments of anointing. Her jewellery was removed and her train was detached. At last, as a suppliant for divine grace, dressed only in a plain white garment of the severest simplicity, she took her seat in King Edward's chair. The archbishop thereupon anointed both her hands (palms) with holy oil and similarly her breast and her head, and gave her a blessing.

I recall the anointing being a deeply affecting section of the service. It was hidden from the television cameras (though not to be coy but because in former times it was supposed to take place in secret). It was undertaken solemnly beneath a canopy or pall brought forward by four Knights of the Garter. Just as the holy of holies in the Temple was hidden from the common gaze by a curtain or 'veil', so the canopy held above the Queen hid from our view the sacramental conveyance to her of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The Queen and the archbishop were, after all, engaged in a particularly special moment. By the anointing and the delivery to her of the regalia and her crowning, the Queen gained not only a temporal authority but a spiritual sanction. The words resonate over the years:

... be thou anointed, blessed, and consecrated Queen over the Peoples, whom the Lord thy God hath given thee to rule and govern, In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

The late Anthony Kilmister was a former Chairman and Vice-President of the Prayer Book Society. This article is an extract from the article 'Fifty Years On', first published in *New Directions* and published here with kind permission.