

May Day and King Charles III's Coronation

Assembly by Alastair Tighe, Head Master, 1 May 2023

If you lived in Oxford the chances are you would have had a very early wake up call this morning - or possibly not been to bed at all last night - so that you could see the sunrise and be part of a very long standing tradition at one of the university's colleges - the tradition at Magdalen College of greeting the symbolic first day of summer by hearing the chapel choir singing madrigals and other songs from the top of the Chapel tower. Last year over 12,000 people gathered on the bridge opposite the college, or in punts on the river that flows past it, and witnessed the centuries old tradition which includes the singing of the Renaissance madrigal or secular song 'Now is the month of Maying'.

May Day, or the first of May, has its roots in ancient pagan symbolic celebrations that marked the arrival of spring and the renewal of life after a long winter. These festivities have evolved over time, often including in England, the tradition of dancing around a maypole, which symbolises the tree of life, the lighting of bonfires, and closer to home here in Somerset, the rampaging of a Hobby Horse through the town of Minehead. The horse or the Oss, as it is normally called, is a local person dressed in flowing robes wearing a mask with a grotesque, but colourful, caricature of a horse.

One other common pagan tradition - which is still popular today in many May Day celebrations - is the crowning of a young woman by the local population as the May Queen, who symbolises the goddess of fertility and the bounty of nature.

As Christianity spread across Europe, the Church, as it so often did, adopted some of these pagan traditions and transformed them for their own purposes. The crowning of a May Queen was replaced in many European countries by the crowning of statues of Mary, Jesus' mother, with garlands of flowers. It's appropriate, then, that the choir will be singing an anthem in honour of the Virgin Mary this morning.

More recently, in response to the growing use of May Day by communists to promote the rights of workers, the then Pope, Pius XII, instituted the Feast of St. Joseph the Worker on May 1 as a counter-celebration to that of the communists.

But let's return to the theme of crowning, given that at the end of this week our new King,

Charles III, will be crowned in what will undoubtedly be a feast of pageantry, music and ceremony at Westminster Abbey. Given this time of year's long association coronation rituals it is perhaps not surprising that King Charles has chosen to be crowned this week and especially since, as a lifelong advocate of the natural world, at a time of year traditionally associated with celebrating the abundance, beauty and blessings of nature.

A coronation of any type is an act full of symbolism. A crown has come over time to symbolise different things in different contexts - but invariably this includes royalty and power, legitimacy or wealth, victory and even divinity.

Whatever your own personal views about the monarchy, and regardless of your own nationality, I urge you all to watch this Saturday's coronation service on TV. It will without a doubt be a moment of major historical significance both for this country and the world; and it will be the first time in the lifetime of any of us here today that we have witnessed the crowning of a British monarch.

And as you watch, ponder the history and symbolism of what you are seeing. Despite the inclusion this time round of new elements, as reported this weekend, the essential elements of this coming week's coronation service have been in use since the crowning of King Edgar in Bath Abbey in AD 973. His was the first coronation of a King of all England, and the service not only took place locally, but was devised by a local man - his name was Dunstan and he was born just outside Glastonbury at exactly the same time as our School was founded. Indeed there is a strong possibility - though impossible to verify, sadly - that he was one of the first boys to be educated here in our School. Dunstan went on to be Abbot of Glastonbury - one of the most powerful monasteries in Europe at the time - and eventually became Archbishop of Canterbury. He was made a saint after his death and was one of the most popular saints in England for nearly two centuries. It was in his capacity as Archbishop of Canterbury that he devised the coronation service for King Edgar - and we will see elements of Dunstan's service on Saturday in Westminster Abbey.

Monarchs in this country have always been crowned in the context of a Eucharist, with the coronation ceremonies being interpolated at various points in the Euchaistic liturgy. We will see this again on Saturday and these are perhaps the most symbolic of the acts which will take place. At one point the King will be placed in the Coronation Chair and, screened from view to indicate the solemnity of the moment, the Archbishop of Canterbury will anoint the King with holy oil which has been blessed in Jerusalem at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. At this most sacred part of the Coronation service, he will be anointed on his hands, breast and head - the oil symbolising the monarch's being set apart or consecrated for the duties of a Sovereign. The choir will sing the words 'Zadok the Priest' - as was instituted by Dunstan for the coronation of King Edgar; since the coronation of George II in 1727 it has always been sung to the famous setting by Handel. And as has been the tradition since the coronation of Richard I in 1189, and perhaps with a nod to Edgar's coronation

taking place in Bath, our own Bishop of Bath and Wells – Bishop Michael – will, along with the Bishop of Durham, accompany King Charles into Westminster Abbey and stand to the side of the Coronation Chair during the anointing.

Later in the service, the King will be invested with the Regalia or ‘symbols’ of monarchy. Among numerous different objects, he will be presented with the Orb – which symbolises the world, which has bands of jewels dividing it up into three sections which represent the three continents known in mediaeval times. The King will then receive two sceptres, which symbolise his sovereignty and temporal power, one of which is surmounted with a cross and another with a dove, symbolising the Holy Spirit.

And then finally the King will receive St Edward’s Crown, placed on his head by the Archbishop of Canterbury – the most visual and symbolic act of the ceremony to highlight the new monarch’s position and role.

So the events which will take place on Saturday are ancient, imbued with historical and religious significance, and overflowing with symbolism. Yes, it will be a spectacular occasion – but just as we are encouraged to do in all things, I urge you to dig below the surface, to go beyond the pomp and ceremony and appreciate the broader and wider significance of Saturday’s coronation so that you can gain a deeper and more meaningful understanding of such a momentous occasion.

And in so doing, conscious that the ceremony itself may well have been devised by a Wellensian, let us not forget that just like our own School, the monarch is not just an historical symbol of tradition and continuity, but is also a living institution that must adapt and change to current times and circumstances. The inclusion of new elements for this coronation, such as the involvement of people from many different faiths, is a tangible sign of that evolution. Because at its best, the role of the monarch is not just to rule, but to serve, inspire and unite.

And that’s a calling that each and everyone of us has. Just as our reading this morning made clear, and as those of us who were at yesterday’s Confirmation service here in the Cathedral were reminded, we are all, in our own way, set apart, anointed, consecrated for a special purpose. We are all called upon, according to our own talents and circumstances, to be beacons of light rather than darkness in the world. I hope, then, that our engagement with this week’s Coronation will encourage all of us to recommit to our own vocations and to realise our own calling as a people set apart, called to make our own lives, and those around us, better.