

Praying for our rulers

AS with most other citizens of the Commonwealth, until 2022 saw the death of Queen Elizabeth I had only known a woman on the throne.

I grew up singing "God Save the Queen" as our national anthem (New Zealand has two national anthems, the other being "God Defend New Zealand"), but since the death of Queen Elizabeth, we now sing "God Save the King".

Church liturgists have been updating church prayers for the Queen with prayers for the King. In May 2023, the King also initiated a change to the official prayers for the royal family, replacing "Camilla the Queen Consort" with "Queen Camilla".

Why should we pray for the King and other political figures?

I've met many Christians who do not enjoy praying for their political leaders. Why pray for politicians who sometimes act in despicable ways or lie or defraud us?

Isn't praying for rulers offering support to them and their policies, which might be at odds with our professed Christian ideals or political preferences? Can republicans pray for the King or Queen with a clear conscience?

All Christians should remember that praying for our rulers is a biblical notion, as seen in 1. Timothy 2. 1-3 (RSV): "First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be



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made for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way.

"This is good, and it is acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour".

Here, Paul wrote that praying for rulers is for our benefit, not theirs.

Praying for one's rulers does not mean giving them support.

After all, Jesus said: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5. 44).

This answers the objection of those who do not wish to pray for unjust rulers, but there are further points that can clarify what we are doing when praying for our heads of state and government.

Access

Paul says that first, we pray for rulers, not to them. This implies that our access to God is not mediated by rulers. More importantly, here is the point that such prayer places God above rulers and rulers below God.

We should be aware that when we pray to God for our rulers, we are locating the rulers in a subordinate position to God. We are praying for God to help our rulers, not for our rulers to help God.

Praying for rulers elevates God and brings our rulers down to earth, especially those who think that they are like gods, with power over life and death, or think that they are infallible and deserve special treatment.

Remind

These points remind us and should remind rulers that they are in need of God.

What should we pray about when we pray for rulers?

I think that those who feel uncomfortable praying for rulers have not prayed for them long enough. The longer we pray for someone, even ourselves, the more we realise how much of our lives depend on God.

For example, when praying for ourselves we pray for our daily bread, meaning that we acknowledge that our very sustenance comes ultimately from God.

Praying for the health and well-being of rulers is acknowledging their frailty, their mortality and their vulnerability. The longer our prayer for our rulers, the more we will realise how much of their lives also depend on God.

Kings and Queens, Prime Ministers and Presidents are human too and the more we pray for their human needs, in this world and the next, the more human they will appear to us. This makes prayer for others an equaliser of status and offers us a glimpse at the divine view of the humanity of ourselves and our rulers.

For this reason, I was surprised that in the coronation service that the liturgy included prayers that the King live forever.

Is this to ask God for immortality of a human being?

Only gods are immortal, which is why God calls human "mortal" in the Bible so often, as a reminder of our relatively low status.

Reign

The coronation liturgy was also confused when explaining that it is Jesus alone, as "King of Kings", who rules forever, while also praying for Charles that he "may reign forever with (Jesus) in the life which is to come".

To ask for the King to rule forever confuses Charles with Jesus. The officially released coronation liturgy explained this as an interpretation of Psalm 61, which appears to me a weak basis for such a misleading political theology on this important occasion.

What, then, should we



Subordinate to God: King Charles III. (Photograph: Hugo Burnard.)

pray for in relation to rulers?

The standard Christian answer is that we should ask God that our rulers should have sound judgment, administer justice, promote the common good, ecological sustainability and the welfare of the city, look after the widows and orphans and other vulnerable people, and work to bring about peace within and between nations. But asking for these traditional things we must

work to understand what they mean in our time with the challenges we face in a society struggling with climate change, systemic racism and patriarchy, huge inequalities and war in Europe.

In one church I worshipped in, we prayed for all MPs on rotation. Each week we would write to the MPs and inform them that we had prayed for them and those in their electorates. We sometimes got a letter back.

Watching

Such a prayer is general encouragement to do the right thing and remind them that citizens are watching them and supporting them to do the right thing.

In summary, we should pray for our King and our Prime Minister, not for their political agenda, but for their souls and well-being before their Lord and judge Jesus Christ.

We should pray that they rule us fairly and protect our human rights and bring greater peace and justice to the land. This is our duty. Their duty is that and more.

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"May all kings fall down before him": Adoration of the Magi (Sandro Botticelli). (Photograph: The Yorck Project (2002) / Wikimedia Commons.)