

Postscript

Gerald Bray

The unexpected death of Diana, Princess of Wales, and the even more unexpected reaction to it have raised a number of questions which thoughtful people in Britain, and Christians foremost among them, must address. As far as the Princess herself is concerned, there can be little doubt that her tragic death saved her reputation. Had she lived and continued along the lines she was going, it is probable that public sympathy for her would have evaporated. She could so easily have capitalized on a fund of goodwill after her separation from Prince Charles. Most people believed, and many continue to believe, that she was the wronged wife, and dignified behaviour on her part would only have increased that impression. Instead, she consorted with various men of doubtful reputation, one of whom was her undoing. Quite how the mother of a future king could be allowed to link herself romantically with an Arab playboy is hard to imagine, and even without the fatal accident it was easy to see that such a relationship could only have ended in tears sooner or later. Poor Diana seems to have been without real friends, and without God in her life. That is a tragedy far greater than a car accident, and it is as well for Christians to bear it in mind when reflecting on those sad events.

As it turned out, death spared her to the point where there is a real danger that she may become a popular legend, and even a saint in the eyes of many. This would be taking things too far, though of course it is only right that we should all feel the deepest sympathy for her two sons, whose life will be even more difficult in the future. Prince William is sure to be marked by the experience for the rest of his life, but this may be a good thing. A boy of his age is old enough to be deeply touched by the nearness of death, but not so old for it to have become a commonplace. That the first death he has experienced should be that of his mother may instil in him a sense of seriousness which will serve him, and the monarchy, well.

Whether it will do anything to mature the Prince of Wales, however, remains to be seen. Diana's death showed the world that the so-called crisis of the monarchy is really a crisis of Prince Charles, who appears to be both unwilling and unable to take his inheritance seriously. This is not just a matter of doing the rounds of formal engagements. A British monarch has a special place in the nation, but even more important, he or she has a special place before God, and it is this which Charles does not seem to understand. He has kept his distance from the Church of England, even to

the point of letting it be known that he is sympathetic to Islam. He has tried to play fast and loose with the rules of the Church, particularly in the matter of remarriage after divorce. What an irony it is that, now that he is technically free to remarry in canon law, he is probably for ever prevented from doing so by popular sentiment – Diana's last, and perhaps greatest, victory. The damage which the Prince's behaviour has caused is incalculable and, if it is not put right, the monarchy will be in serious danger from an increasingly exasperated public. Already, most people want Prince William to succeed to the throne when the Queen dies, and there is little sign of anything happening which might change that attitude. Certainly, if Prince Charles were to become king in the near future, without changing his entire attitude and approach, it would divide the country in a way which has not been seen since the disastrous reign of James II, more than three centuries ago.

Many people believe that the best hope for the future is that the Queen should live as long as her mother has done. She is still relatively young by those standards, and could be on the throne for another quarter of a century or more. If that happens, then her duty is clear – she must take the lead in her own family and in the nation as a whole. As she gets older, that will be easier to do, because public respect for her, which has always been considerable, will only grow with age. She is known to have opposed the divorce of her son, and her instincts were right – the funeral cancelled out any sign of divorce and reintegrated Diana into the royal family in a way which nothing else could have done. Her Majesty has been very generous to her children and allowed them great freedom, which they have not always responded to in the best possible way. Perhaps now she must draw the reins in and give them more of a lead, as they take over some of her more routine duties. In the country as a whole, she has enormous power to set a strong moral example, and it must be greatly wished that the government and the Church authorities will encourage this in the years ahead.

We must pray hard, for, although the royal family has no political power, it can exert enormous moral and spiritual influence if the hearts of its members are right. Britain does not need leaders who compromise; it needs people of conviction in Church and government, who are in tune with the country's heritage of service and honour to Almighty God. There are signs, at long last, that the permissiveness of the sixties generation may be coming to an end. Certainly there are well-placed fears that this message has not penetrated the depths of the parliamentary Labour party, but we must not judge too quickly. If there really is a sea-change out there, the politicians will probably sense it and respond to it before anyone else, since their future so clearly depends on it. It is too early to say what will bring the Conservative Party back to power, but moral rectitude (much

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needed in their ranks) will certainly not hurt.

Here the Church of England has a pivotal role to play. If we are not preaching the gospel of repentance and new birth in Christ, others will do it for us, and our influence will be taken away. God will not be mocked, and does not need servants who are equally open to 'all religions and none'. There is nothing whatever to be gained from compromise on this issue, apart from mockery and a general sense that the Church is irrelevant. Whether our current leaders are up to the task before them may be doubted, if past performance is anything to go by but, here too, we must pray for a work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. They have been called to an awesome task, and put in a position where they can do a great deal of good for the Kingdom of God. Let us pray that this may be so, and that we may see a revival of true faith sweep through this nation as it has done at different times in the past. The stakes are high. May none of us be found wanting when God puts his hand on us and calls us to stand up for him in the spiritual battle which lies ahead.

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