

## **Address for the Commemorative Service marking the death of the late Queen Elizabeth II**

“Life of course consists of final partings as well as first meetings” words of the late Queen as she mourned her beloved husband Prince Philip, that Prince Harry recalled in his own tribute to his Granny.

Life consists of final partings as well as first meetings.

We gather tonight in this period of national mourning for the Queen whose reign was the longest our nation has known. She was born before many of us, she was Queen before so many of her subjects were born and despite her age, I think many are finding it hard fully to recognise the final parting that her death brings and that her State Funeral on Monday will visibly complete.

In an age of television this mourning period has enabled us to see or remember so many of her first meetings. We have seen the images of the playful little girl, and the child who already showed her love for her dogs and her horses, and later those serious images of a young woman sharing in the war effort. Then her coming of age when a twenty one, through the relatively new medium of international broadcasting she made her solemn act of dedication to her nation and commonwealth:

I declare before you all that my whole life whether it be long or short shall be devoted to your service

Not many years later she would return from the foreign visit during which her life as a Princess ended and she first met her own countrymen and women as their Queen.

There would be first meetings with fifteen Prime Ministers and later with first ministers in Wales and Scotland, thirteen US Presidents and numerous heads of state from all the nations of the world. As her reign progressed she became the constant in the midst of international change, as so many of the international tributes now demonstrate.

There would also be numerous treasured first meetings for so many people as she visited the length and breadth of the country to support charitable causes, mark moments of local history, share compassion at times of disaster and distress, and celebrate recovery and

innovation; or the times of inviting others to meet her at investitures and garden parties.

Now, a nation's final parting from their Queen is becoming real to us as her coffin has travelled through Scotland, and now lies in State in Westminster Hall for the final days before the funeral. A journey made while her son Charles, travels his first journey to meet his people across the United Kingdom as King. Final partings, first meetings. Ends and beginnings.

Yet the reading we have been given today reminds us that something more constant and eternal is at work beyond all that we are watching.

In today's reading we have heard about a vision, picture language for what is beyond our earthly eyes and understanding. Here the picture is of God journeying to us, to bring us a place of new life, a place where there is no mourning, no pain, where we are in the closer presence of God, the closer presence of God's eternal love.

And we hear the words of Jesus, the one who comes to us as God in person: "It is done, I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end"

Christians understand these words to mean that through his life, death and resurrection Jesus has overcome the finality of death. Beyond all meetings and partings – he is the beginning and end of all things, in companionship with him we are drawn into an eternity, which is the constancy for which we crave, and a unity with those from whom we have been parted on earth.

These words promise us that whilst life here consists of final partings as well as first meetings – the final parting of death is in Christ the journey into an eternal meeting with God which is eternal joy, eternal love, eternal life.

The poet laureate, Simon Armitage, chose a simple symbol as the heart of the poem he has written to mark the Queen's death: the lily of the valley.

His poem, by its title recalls all the pictures we are seeing of flowers laid at the palaces, it is his Floral Tribute. Very gently he also lays before us the burdens of the Queen's office, and perhaps even the unacknowledged suffering of old age. It is a poem of parting, of ending. Yet in the image of the flower, the evocative fragrance we

might recall, and the rising sense of light as he evokes a new dawn, he opens the possibility of looking beyond, to the eternal: beyond endings and beginnings, beyond partings and meetings.

**Floral Tribute by Simon Armitage:**

*"Evening will come, however determined the late afternoon,  
Limes and oaks in their last green flush, pearly in September  
mist.*

*I have conjured a lily to light these hours, a token of thanks,  
Zones and auras of soft glare framing the brilliant globes.  
A promise made and kept for life - that was your gift -  
Because of which, here is a gift in return, glovewort to some,  
Each shining bonnet guarded by stern lance-like leaves.  
The country loaded its whole self into your slender hands,  
Hands that can rest, now, relieved of a century's weight.  
Evening has come. Rain on the black lochs and dark Munros.  
Lily of the Valley, a namesake almost, a favourite flower  
Interlaced with your famous bouquets, the restrained  
Zeal and forceful grace of its lanterns, each inflorescence  
A silent bell disguising a singular voice. A blurred new day  
Breaks uncrowned on remote peaks and public parks, and  
Everything turns on these luminous petals and deep roots,  
This lily that thrives between spire and tree, whose brightness  
Holds and glows beyond the life and border of its bloom."*

In the language of flowers, Lily of the valley, chosen because it was one of the late Queen's favourite flowers, has a number of meanings but across much of the world its first meaning is as a symbol of new life.

So the gift of the lily of the valley is the hope of eternal life.

Through these final days of her lying in state, in our prayers we commend Queen Elizabeth II to almighty God, that she may receive like a gentle gift of the flowers she loved, the mercy of the one who comes to meet her with the gift of life eternal:

Bring her, o Lord God, at her last awakening into the house and gate of Heaven, to enter into that gate and dwell in that house, where there shall

be no darkness nor dazzling, but one equal light; no noise nor silence,  
but one equal music; no fears or hopes, but one equal possession; no  
ends or beginnings, but one equal eternity, in the habitations of thy glory  
and dominion, world without end Amen

(prayer of John Donne)