

Editorial

As Head of State and Supreme Governor of the Church of England, Her Majesty the Queen enjoys the special respect and affection not only of Anglicans, but of Christians everywhere. Her tireless devotion to duty, her personal example and her abiding sense of tradition combine to make her one of the most admired sovereigns this country has ever had. After more than four decades on the throne, she is also one of the longest-serving, and may well outlive her great-great-grandmother Queen Victoria. Yet in spite of her obvious qualities and the deep respect in which she personally is held, the institution of the monarchy has lately come under a kind of scrutiny more severe than any which has dogged it since the 1830s. Not even the abdication of Edward VIII in 1936, serious though it undoubtedly was, led to the kind of questioning which we have seen and heard in recent months.

To some extent, the reasons for this are clear enough. For more than a generation, the monarchy has been seen in the popular press as a kind of running soap opera, and the essence of successful soap is never-ending scandal in the family. It does not matter that some of the players have very minor rôles, nor does anybody much care about whether they wish to be associated with the goings-on at the Palace. Even non-royal relatives, like the late Earl and Dowager Countess Spencer, could and did become involved, thanks to the romantic link created by royal marriage.

As in other soap operas, it is marital unhappiness which provides the best source of new plots, and the Royal Family has certainly fallen victim to that. The divorces of Princess Margaret and the Princess Royal, and the apparent separation of the Duke and Duchess of York have undermined the image of stability which the House of Windsor strove to rebuild after 1936. The Princess of Wales has also suffered the glare of publicity in a way which can hardly contribute to the happiness of her own marriage, and other members of the family presumably await their turn.

As Christians, we look on in bewilderment, wondering what to believe and fearing still further erosion of the family values which we regard as so important in our national life. It is cold comfort to be reminded that of the nineteen sovereigns since the Protestant Settlement of 1559, very few can be said to have had a happy home life. Perhaps the most successful in this respect was Charles I, though his conspicuous lack of any other qualities make him a rather embarrassing example to quote, and there is a sad history of pious monarchs like George III and Victoria turning out a large supply of less than satisfactory offspring. Measured against these standards, the children of the present Queen are models of propriety whose private conduct scarcely deserves a passing mention in the press. But unfortunately we live in the age of mass media and universal democracy, where the press thrives on gossip and knows that it can print lies almost

with impunity. Whenever this is questioned, the now-sacred right of freedom of speech is invoked in order to pretend that curbing the press in one area will lead to far greater abuses in another. In addition to that, the aura of sanctity which used to surround the monarch has largely gone, and it is not uncommon to hear people say that if the Royal family is not performing properly, it ought to be sacked, just as any other troupe of actors would be in similar circumstances.

In the face of attitudes like these, Christians are rightly inclined to rally round the throne and demand that some kind of protection be offered to the sovereign and her family. No society can survive if its basic values are dragged through the mud, and members of the Church of England have a special duty to ensure that Her Majesty is honoured and supported by her subjects, even when that might mean that they would have to suffer considerable loss of income from rumours left unpublished. Malicious attacks on other people can never be right, and when they are made against those who have no real right of reply they are even more scandalous. Freedom of the press, important though it is, can never be extended to include the right to print lies about defenceless individuals who are being hounded merely because of their exalted position.

At the same time we ought to begin praying more seriously than we have done of late for the Royal Family as a whole, remembering them before God and asking Him to fill each of them with the grace of His Holy Spirit. Royal persons are only human, and they are as subject to sin and the wiles of the Devil as the rest of us are. The difference is that whereas our failings are known to only a few people, theirs are the public property of millions. The strain which that must cause is more than any human being should be expected to bear, and so our prayers for them are that much more necessary.

Christians should also be in the forefront of the drive to make the press more responsible for its activities, and we should take the lead in resisting the temptation to revel in the sufferings of others and indulge in gossip. When members of the Royal Family fail, then it should be compassion and forgiveness which they meet from us, and not the kind of censorious and self-righteous condemnation which is ultimately rooted in jealousy. If there is to be public discussion of these matters, then it is essential that the Christian voice be heard loud and clear. The reputation of our monarch and the good of her church and state are far too important to be allowed to be compromised by a pusillanimous stand in the face of such vicious and sustained attack.

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