

A GUIDE TO THE CORONATION SERVICE

Richard Coles: The Anglican Church sticks to the script but draws in other Faiths and other Denominations

(Richard Coles is a Church of England clergyman who was the vicar of Finedon in Northamptonshire from 2011 to 2022. He first came to prominence as the multi-instrumentalist who partnered Jimmy Somerville in the 1980s band the Communards. This article first appeared in last Saturday's The Times and has been slightly adapted.)

I half expected the BBC to call its coverage *The Great British Coronation*, the sort of thing that an algorithm would normally come up with for an event like this. It is at the heart of national life, and tries simultaneously to acknowledge historic responsibility and the present day.

The King has been doing this since he was a boy, and the peculiarly twinned institutions — the BBC and the Church of England — have to attempt the same. The liturgy, which basically means “what happens in the service”, is optimised for this task.

The coronation is solidly built around the historic rite with its five elements: the recognition, the oath, the anointing, the investiture and crowning, and the enthronement and homage.

We all know what a coronation looks like, even if rare, and paying homage sounds today like doing a cover version rather than swearing loyalty to the sovereign. To ease the movement between the familiar and the strange, the language has been adapted to make it more accessible.

Some of the fiercer sentiments have been dropped or altered, and there are some new prayers which try to contextualise the ancient rite. The emphasis is on loving service rather than majestic rule. For example, the Sword of State used to be offered to the sovereign “for the terror and punishment of evildoers”. This is now replaced by the Jewelled Sword to “resist evil and defend the good”.

There are two notable innovations at the beginning and the end. The service starts with one of the youngest members of the congregation, a child chorister called Samuel Strachan, 14, welcoming the King to his own coronation. We do this sometimes to bishops at their consecrations, to encourage humility I suppose, but it has never been enforced before on the sovereign. The official

commentary on the service assures us of a commitment to inclusion for young people.

The theme of inclusion is stressed too at the very end of the service when the King is greeted by a group of representatives of other religions — “neighbours in the faith”, as they will be called in the service. In a notable gesture of respect, this will not be amplified so the rabbi may observe Shabbat regulations, which forbid the use of a microphone.

The service itself is, of course, Christian. It takes place around a Eucharist, with the King and Queen receiving communion, and there is strong emphasis on the sacramental, the expression of the action of divine grace.

The King is vested in what looks like an alb, the long-sleeved white robe worn by candidates at an ordination. He will be anointed with holy oil from Jerusalem, an act still seen as so sacred it will be hidden from view, not by a golden cloth carried on poles by Knights of the Garter like his mother’s coronation, but by a screen embroidered with the names of Commonwealth nations hanging on poles made from a tree that was blown down in Windsor. It is not only Christian but explicitly Church of England. It is solid in the declaration of the historic constitutional requirement of the sovereign to uphold the Protestant religion, which sounds jarringly sectarian in a service which is notably broad in character.

Ecumenical partners, who are Christians of other denominations, are for the first time involved. The blessing at the end of the service is given by a group of church leaders including the Greek Orthodox Archbishop, and the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, representing Roman Catholics.

...The preface tells us that the constitutional elements were put together in consultation with the government, which also gets a look-in in the person of the prime minister, who gives the first reading from the Bible. In the past that job has gone to a bishop — so another innovation there — and it is significant that Rishi Sunak is a practising Hindu.

Elsewhere the order of service is careful to maintain a respectful distance between representatives of other faiths and the explicitly Christian elements of the service. It cannot do so here. The prime minister gets to read the Epistle *ex officio*, regardless of his or her faith allegiance, or lack of faith allegiance. Some get worked up about this, but it is hardly a novel situation for someone who is not of the faith, or of any faith, doing a reading in a Church of England service.