

Grand Duchess Elizabeth, Saint and Martyr
4th Sunday in Lent 2007
 at the Church of Our Most Holy Redeemer, Clerkenwell
 Mothering Sunday

I have chosen St Elizabeth of Russia as my saint for this Sunday in the current Lenten series. She was murdered by the Bolsheviks in July 1918 and recognised as a saint and martyr first by the ROCA in 1984 and then by the Moscow Patriarchate in 1992.

Grand Duchess Elizabeth was a grand-daughter of Queen Victoria, and married one of the uncles of the last Tsar. Her younger sister was Alexandra the last Tsarina. Elizabeth's mother was unconventional for her time and insisted on getting out into areas of society which were usually out of bounds: she founded hospitals and was constantly involved in charitable work. So Elizabeth was brought up with an ideal of service as part of her make-up. As the daughter of the Grand Duke of Hesse-Darmstadt, she was brought up a Lutheran but a few years after her marriage into the Russian royal family she became Russian Orthodox. She was exceptionally beautiful and took great trouble over her clothes: I like the description of her dressing given by her niece – it reminds one that she was human:

“While they [the maids] were dressing her, my aunt would regard herself attentively, usually with pleasure, in a high triple mirror, so arranged that she saw herself from all sides. The final adjustments she made with her own hands. If the costume did not satisfy her in every particular, she had it taken off and demanded another which she adjusted with the same care and patience...[...] Manicuring accomplished, the dress of the evening donned – now came my part in the rites. My aunt would tell me the jewels she intended to wear, and I would go to her jewel cabinets [...] and bring her her choice.”

Elizabeth's husband, Grand Duke Sergei was, according to most accounts, a nasty piece of work, and over time she seems to have withdrawn more and more into herself. Her niece wrote that *“It was as if she were being driven deeper and deeper within herself for refuge”*. With the outbreak of war between Russia and Japan in 1904 she set up workshops producing clothes for the troops, blankets and dressings for the wounded. She organized collection points for medicines, and well-equipped hospital trains. A dramatic turning-point in her life came in 1905 when her husband, who had been governor of Moscow, was blown up by a bomb thrown by a Russian revolutionary called Ivan Kalyaev.

The scene was gruesome: Elizabeth rushed from the building in the Kremlin where they were living at that time, and helped gather up what remained of the Grand Duke's body which was carried into a chapel within the Kremlin. Elizabeth's niece has left us a description of Elizabeth:

“My aunt was on her knees beside the litter. Her bright dress shone forth grotesquely amid the humble garments surrounding her. I did not dare look at her. Her face was white, her features terrible in their stricken rigidity. She did not weep, but the expression of her eyes made an impression on me I will never forget as long as I live.”

Elizabeth insisted on visiting her husband's murderer: we only have his account of the meeting but it seems that she went to see him in order to forgive him, rather like the last Pope when he visited his would-be assassin. Ivan Kalyaev records that Elizabeth said ***“I only wanted you to know that the Grand Duke forgives you and that I will pray for you [...] I beg you to accept this icon in memory of me. I will pray for you.”***

It was soon after this point of profound personal drama, that Elizabeth decided to found a religious order and to take religious vows herself. She wrote to the Tsar: ***“I took up the religious life not as a cross, but as a road full of light”***. She sold all her jewellery, her furniture, pictures and other works of art, and with the proceeds founded the Martha and Mary Convent in Moscow. This new religious community was to be ***“a convent in the service of Christ's love”***. It was committed to caring for the poor and to nursing the sick and was intended to combine the active with the contemplative aspect of the religious life. Before founding the order and while exploring different forms of monastic life, she visited the Sisters of Bethany at Holy Redeemer, so this area of London is linked to her. Although she did not call her sisters deaconesses, this was in fact what they were: she believed they were all called to the diaconate, to service within the church, which was a revolutionary development for the Russian Orthodox Church of the time. One detail which reveals that Elizabeth's artistic nature was still intact is that she got a leading painter of the time to design her order's habit: Prince Yusupov (the one who murdered Rasputin) described the habit as ***“a long pearl-grey robe of fine wool, a lawn wimple which framed the face and a white woollen veil that fell into long classical folds”***.

We jump now on to the First World War during which Elizabeth visited hospitals, collected medicines and clothing for the wounded; she insisted on visiting not only the Russian wounded but also German and Austrian

prisoners. As a result, and because of her family origins as a princess from Darmstadt, she and her convent were accused of being German sympathisers and became the object of frequent attacks. There were demonstrations outside the walls of the convent, and during one Elizabeth came out, told the crowd that there were very sick people needing peace and quiet within the convent, and managed to disperse the crowd. With the war the Russian revolutionary movement gathered momentum until the events of 1917 and the arrest of the royal family. During the growing chaos, Elizabeth wrote in her letters about *“seeing the inner light shining through the darkness in the midst of the storm”*; about feeling the Holy Spirit *“lighting our way”* and about sensing *“the divine compassion”*. Elizabeth could have escaped: the German ambassador tried to persuade her to leave (Russia had made peace with Germany by this time), the Patriarch tried to persuade her, ordinary Russians offered to hide her, but she insisted on remaining at her post. On 7 May 1918, in Holy Week, she was arrested and transported to the Urals, to the town of Alapaevsk, where she with Sister Varvara and other members of the Romanov family were held in a school on the edge of the town. During the night of 18 July 1918 she, Sister Varvara and the royals were awoken, blindfolded and with their hands tied were driven off through the night. One of the Bolsheviks who had been given orders to murder them has left us with a description of what happened next. According to this witness, Elizabeth was thrown first down a mineshaft (this part of the Urals was known particularly for its mining) and then Sister Varvara, followed by the other members of the royal family; a grenade was thrown in:

“We decided to wait a little to check whether they had all perished. After a short while we heard talking and a barely audible groan. I threw another grenade. And what do you think – from beneath the ground we heard singing! I was seized with horror. They were singing the prayer: ‘Lord, save thy people!’ We had no more grenades, yet it was impossible to leave the deed unfinished. We decided to fill the shaft with dry brushwood and set it alight. Their hymns still rose up through the thick smoke for some time yet. When the last signs of life beneath the earth had ceased, we posted some of our people by the mine and returned to Alapaevsk [...]”

Other evidence gathered by the White Army when it captured this part of the Urals three months after the murders took place, reveals that Elizabeth and the others were battered over the head before being thrown down the mineshaft, and because the bodies were not dismembered when discovered by the White Army, it seems unlikely that grenades were thrown in. Local oral history, however, has also recorded that the sound

of liturgical chanting was heard on the night of the murders. Exactly how Elizabeth died we shall never know; what we do know is that her life of sanctity made her death special: like St Paul, she made up in her own body ***“that which is lacking in the suffering of Christ so as to build up His Body which is the Church”*** (Col 1:24).

It seems strange to have chosen a martyr to talk about on Mothering Sunday: however, there is a link. The meaning of martyr in Greek is “witness”; a martyr witnesses to/ points to the Cross and the suffering of Christ, and thus to the love of God expressed through Christ. Some characteristics of a mother’s love are that it is unconditional, it does not judge, it accepts, it forgives. This type of love is expressed by the father in today’s Gospel about the Prodigal Son: when the son was a long way off, the father saw him, ran out to meet him, and did not at that point start asking him questions about his past behaviour; instead the father said “Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him” - let’s celebrate! Our second reading also points to the importance of forgiveness as the key element in being a witness: we are told to be ambassadors for Christ which involves handing on God’s reconciliation. Then comes the extraordinary phrase: ***“it is as though God were appearing through us”*** when we express unconditional love, when we forgive. And that is what happens when we look at St Elizabeth: we are able to see God appearing through her, through her life and through her death.