



Elizabeth I's coronation teachers' notes

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Follow-up questions

1. What personal qualities made Elizabeth suitable for the role of Queen? How did these compare to other 16th Century queens?
2. How significant was Elizabeth's insistence on changing the Coronation Service to include the Gospel reading in English?
3. 'Religion was the dominant issue of Elizabeth's reign'. Discuss
4. What does the reluctance of the bishops in anointing Elizabeth, reveal about the relationship between Church and State at this time?

Transcript

The story of Elizabeth's accession begins and ends with an oak tree. It is said that she first heard the news of her sister Queen Mary's death whilst sitting under an oak tree in the grounds of Hatfield House in November 1558. Two months later, on the 15th January 1559, Elizabeth was crowned at Westminster Abbey. She was crowned sitting on the Coronation chair, which has been used by every monarch since 1308. The oak tree itself is the symbol of strength and endurance, staying power. Elizabeth would certainly need these qualities if she was to make a success of her reign at a time when female leaders were rare and in a country divided by religion.

The decision on when Elizabeth's coronation would take place was made by the court astrologer, Dr John Dee. He believed that the planets and stars would be favourably aligned on that day. The day provided lots of opportunities for Elizabeth to charm her new subjects. There were many who remained wary or downright hostile over the subject of religion. Elizabeth had not declared her religious views at this point although it was generally thought that she would turn the country back to Protestantism. In the run up to the Coronation, Elizabeth suddenly faced a very real problem. Who would crown her at Westminster Abbey?

The role of anointing and crowning the new monarch traditionally belonged to the Archbishop of Canterbury. But the Archbishop, Cardinal Reginald Pole, had in fact died on the same date as his Queen (and first cousin) Mary I. The role of Archbishop of Canterbury was therefore vacant. The Archbishop of York, Nicholas Heath, and almost every other bishop refused to crown Elizabeth because she wouldn't guarantee that she would uphold the Catholic religion. This was a crisis. The coronation was, and still is

today, a religious ceremony. The anointing is always carried out by a senior priest of the church because it signifies that the monarch has been set apart by God for this special role. Without God's blessing, monarchs had no authority to rule. Luckily, the situation was saved when the Bishop of Carlisle, Owen Oglethorpe, was persuaded to officiate.

Elizabeth's coronation went ahead as planned. After a grand procession from the Tower of London through the streets of the City, Elizabeth arrived in Westminster. Over centuries, all coronations have followed the same format, laid down in this beautiful 14th century manuscript the Liber Regalis or Royal Book. Elizabeth's coronation also adhered to the traditions dating back centuries but with one significant change. For the first time at an English coronation, the Gospel reading from the Bible was read in English as well as in Latin. This sent a very clear message to her new subjects.

Contemporary reports claim that Elizabeth left the Abbey wreathed in smiles as she made her way to the banquet at Westminster Palace. The many years of fear and tension and the intense pressure of the Coronation day must have at that moment lifted in the most amazing way. She prayed 'O LORD Almighty and everlasting GOD! I give thee most hearty Thanks, that thou hast been so merciful unto ME, as to spare ME to behold this Joyful Day'. She started her reign as she meant to continue it, some key changes wrapped up in a lot of tradition.