

The Queen on the Emerald Isle

Ken Briggs | May. 25, 2011 NCR Today

Before the memory of Queen Elizabeth visiting Ireland becomes too distant, a moment of tribute.

It was moving to see the British monarch walk among the descendants of those who had been abused by her predecessors with what appeared to be sincere contrition and good will.

She made the overture on her own volition, as seems true of most of what she does, and with the gracious welcome of her Irish hosts. Both sides showed a graciousness I found remarkable in the midst of strife and warfare not far away.

It was a stunning, inspiration moment of peacemaking, the likes of which we rarely witness.

Many factors from both sides contributed to that moment, but the one aspect that struck me was that the queen was only able to do it because the monarchy had been stripped of any real power.

Events stemming from the Magna Carta had steadily eroded the English throne's political might, leaving it with symbolic meaning which, judging by the recent royal wedding, is still there in abundance.

Symbols don't mean much if they don't bring worthy character to it. They can't compel anyone to do much of anything. That can leave a monarch an empty, vacuous vessel, or, as in the case of Elizabeth, evoke innate, real nobility that exercises a benevolent, non-coercive influence that far exceeds command and control.

Influence without control permits those who observe those embodied symbols the freedom to respond with their best instincts. The Dalai Lama fills this leadership model as did Nelson Mandela while he was yet a prisoner.

And then there is Jesus, of course.

Queen Elizabeth's example isn't like any of those except that she could accomplish a moment of peacemaking by going to Ireland as a powerless yet pedigreed symbol with a touch of humility. It's a beautiful contrast to power politics on the main stage that so often ends in futility.

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