

Tribute to Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh

St. Mary Magdalene, Bolney

Thursday 15th April 2021

Introduction to Eucharist Service, 9.30am

Dear friends, we meet this morning not only to express our sorrow at the passing of a great public servant but to give thanks to God for Prince Philip's life and all that it has meant for this nation and the Commonwealth.

Most particularly, this communion service enables us to reflect on the personal grief and deep sense of loss felt by the Queen and all the members of her family.

But we do so, mindful of the countless families in this country and throughout the world mourning their loss of loved ones taken away so cruelly by the Covid pandemic.

The Tribute

The death of this country's longest serving consort is an historical event. I'm so glad that St. Mary Magdalene has already marked Prince Philip's passing with the brand new St George's flag flying at half mast, by Sunday service's minute's silence, by the playing of the National Anthem at the end of that service and by the lighted candles and photograph you see positioned near to this altar.

This morning I would like to put before you just a few observations about this remarkable man and to place on record, on behalf of the people of Bolney and of St Mary Magdalene's congregations, our deepest gratitude for the contribution Prince Philip has made to our national life and for his dedicated life of love and service to the Queen.

The saddest press report I have read in recent days was the news that the BBC has received a record number of complaints as more than 100,000 have objected to the BBC's blanket coverage of the Duke of Edinburgh's death. It has become, quite literally, the most complained about event in British television.

Reading that Prince Philip hated a great fuss being made of his presence on royal visits, and seeing how he has helped arrange his own more modest funeral, I suspect that he might well have had a certain amount of sympathy with those complainants. In that same vein, you may also have heard that when it came to the length of a speech or sermon the Duke advised that "what the backside cannot endure, the brain cannot absorb!"

I never met Prince Philip personally although I was present a few years ago at a 'Help for Heroes' charity carol service held in the Guards Chapel where my niece, who had organised the event, escorted him proudly to his seat.

However, I have read enough about the man to suspect that, were he sitting in your place waiting impatiently for the priest present to begin the communion consecration, he would simply be thinking, 'come on, oh do get on with it!'

What has fascinated and enormously encouraged me personally these past six days is the repeated references to Prince Philip's Christian faith and the importance that faith played in his long and adventurous life.

When you think about it, it's surprising that his faith hasn't rated more attention. We know the Queen's faith is frequently mentioned, understandably so, but Prince Philip's faith was a powerful influence on both his life and on his writings.

In advance of his funeral on Saturday I just wanted to share with you what some leading Churchmen have said on that very subject. They are mostly their words, not mine.

I treasure the story told by my own former Bishop of Norwich, Graham James who, arriving for the first time at Sandringham, met Prince Philip in the hall who bellowed out to him 'Are you happy clappy? To which, quick as a flash, Graham James riposted with 'No, I'm smells and bells'!

He was once asked whether he felt at home in Buckingham Place and he replied rather brusquely "it depends what you mean by 'at home'".

This, a reply from a man who, in his childhood, suffered exile, separation from his mother for years, the early death of his father, being virtually stateless and being passed from one relative to another.

Extraordinary to think that a man with such an unstable, shifting background could have contributed so much to the stability and shaping of the modern monarchy. A royal outsider who became a pillar of the nation.

Everyone has referred to one of Prince Philip's lasting legacies which undoubtedly will be the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme expanded now so impressively to 144 other countries. Stephen Cottrell, the Archbishop of York, has said that the scheme underpins the values of community service, volunteering, team work and simply being outdoors.

In his BBC interview on Sunday Archbishop Stephen was asked about Philip's 'questioning faith' as it has often been described. Yes, said Cottrell, that's sometimes been said quite critically. But I don't see that way at all, he said.

He elaborated the point by saying that *without* a questioning faith you end up with no faith at all. He thought it was impossible to understand the Queen and impossible to understand the Duke of Edinburgh and the values of service and commitment to public life that sustained them without also understanding that the heart of their life was their faith in Jesus Christ, knowing that there was someone that they also 'bent the knee to'. His was an obedient, questioning faithfulness that would be good for all of us, he suggested.

Faith he said, is about going deeper into a relationship with God. Christian faith is not a list of things to believe in, it's a way of life rooted in the person of Jesus Christ. So, like every relationship it requires us to question, to go deeper, to find out more and to realise that there is always more.

Most people who have lived a Christian life through a lifetime know that there *are* periods of questioning, of doubt, and darkness, but it is through *facing* these questions that one's faith is deeper and enriched and I think that that was something that the Duke of Edinburgh knew about.

The Archbishop went on to say that everybody should question their faith because you never get a cure without a good diagnosis, although of course as a Christian, the answers are always a deep relationship with the person of Jesus, not a neat 'off the shelf answer'.

I have no doubt that Philip's concern for the environment and the natural world sprang from his belief in our Creator God and our duty to act as responsible stewards of Planet Earth.

His great friend Martin Palmer, who was his religious adviser on conservation matters, said that Prince Philip was the first world leader to understand that the religions of the world could be natural partners for the conservation movement.

Put simply, Martin Palmer said, it was Philip's absolute conviction - when it was not fashionable to have such a conviction - that religions are vital forces for a sustainable planet and that secular environmentalists needed to work with them.

We've been reminded that Philip was baptised into the Greek Orthodox faith. His mother, Princess Alice of Greece, offered refuge on the top floor of her house to four members of the prominent Jewish family, the Cohens, only yards from the Gestapo headquarters.

When the German generals came round looking for people in hiding, the princess pretended that she could not understand them because she was deaf. They left her alone.

She did this despite the sanction of execution had she been found out. The Cohen family survived the war.

At her request, Princess Alice was buried in the Russian Orthodox Church of Mary Magdalene on the Mount of Olives. In 1994, Prince Philip became the *first* member of the Royal Family to visit Israel when he accepted a special recognition of his mother for her rescue effort. He visited her burial site and planted a tree in her memory.

Archbishop Justin Welby has referred to Philip's deep sense of humility and that his service came from the same place, which was his faith.

I loved the Archbishop's comment that his sincere Christian faith was *untainted by false piety*, of which he was very intolerant, *whoever* showed it. A faith which was refined by meeting such an extraordinary variety of people around the Commonwealth and the world and learning about their lives. He understood deeply how important faith is for the vast majority of the world's population.

Prince Philip married Princess Elizabeth in 1947. This marriage wasn't arranged to cement a political alliance but on the basis of a genuine love that endured. I believe that that their example of a marriage of mutual love and respect itself has inspired the nation, certainly Christian congregations such as ours.

And so finally to Philip's grieving wife herself. I recall the words of the Queen's Christmas message last year when she said 'The teachings of Christ have always served as my inner light'. In these dark days of her own grief, may this light of Christ give her consolation, warmth and hope.

Philip's was a life well lived. Inspired by his Christian faith we give heartfelt thanks for his selfless duty to the Queen and his tireless and generous sense of duty to our nation.

Eternal rest grant to him O Lord and let perpetual light shine upon him. May his soul and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace and rise in glory. Amen.