

## **A Service of Remembrance for HRH The Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh**

### **An Address delivered by the Right Reverend Robert Atwell, *Bishop of Exeter*, in Exeter Cathedral on 15<sup>th</sup> April 2021**

I first met the Duke of Edinburgh when, as a young priest, I was working as a university chaplain. Prince Philip, in his role as chancellor of the university, used to pay an annual visit and one year I was among the group of university officers chosen to meet him. He shook my hand firmly, looked me in the eye and said, 'What do you do around here? I suppose you're some sort of social-spiritual lubricant?'

Whilst that just about summed up my ministry, I had never thought of myself as the Church of England's answer to WD-40, but I did thereafter.

Prince Philip was direct, unconventional and left-of-field, with a sense of humour that could be disconcerting and on occasion got him into trouble. The fact that, in an increasingly politically-correct society, he wasn't always on message enraged some, but endeared him to many. His sense of humour went hand-in-hand with a robust dislike of cant, flattery and pomposity.

When it came to religion, Prince Philip had a distinctive view on church services, as I discovered when I had to preach before the Royal Family at Sandringham a couple of years ago. He told me he didn't mind high church and he didn't mind low church. What he couldn't abide was long church. You always knew where you were with Prince Philip.

It says in the Psalms that 'the years of our life are three score and ten; or if we have strength, four score.' The fact that the Duke passed both milestones some years ago is testimony not only to his genes and good health, but to his sheer grit and zest for life. He was a warrior, who refused to chuck the towel in, and it's sad that he didn't make his century, as we had all hoped.

As we now know, Prince Philip left instructions that his funeral should be without fuss and private to the family. In an accident of history, the pandemic and the current restrictions ensure that his wishes will be fulfilled, but we cannot let his passing go unacknowledged because his contribution to our national life has been outstanding.

Documentaries about Prince Philip's life have revealed just what a disrupted and unhappy childhood he had. Born in Corfu, he ended up stateless and a refugee, following first a *coup d'etat* in Greece, and then the acrimonious break-up of his parents' marriage.

Philip's early experience must have echoed words of St Paul from our second reading: 'I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances of life, I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I can do all things through God who strengthens me.'

The series of traumas he was exposed to in childhood would have inflicted on most people a deep psychological scar, leaving them with an underlying vulnerability. In Prince Philip it forged self-reliance and he refused to indulge in self-pity.

There is no doubt that Prince Philip's outlook on life was hugely shaped for good by his naval training at Dartmouth, his wartime service in the Royal Navy and engagement with successive generations of Royal Marines at Lympstone. Devon has played a not insignificant part in his story. In words from Psalm 107 that were well known to Philip:

'They that go down to the sea in ships and occupy their business in great waters; these men have seen the works of the Lord and his wonders in the deep.'

Like the majority of the population, I cannot remember a time when Queen Elizabeth was not on the throne, with Prince Philip at her side. Their marriage has been a gift to the nation, a symbol of stability and continuity amongst the 'changes and chances of this fleeting world'. After 73 years of marriage,

the Duke's death must be a huge personal loss for the Queen and our hearts go out to her Majesty today in her bereavement.

Borrowing words from an ancient hymn of St Ambrose of Milan, she has described Prince Philip as her 'strength and stay'. He has certainly been at the Queen's side throughout her reign. I say, 'at her side', but in truth two steps behind her.

For a man who instinctively led from the front, the role of consort cannot have been easy to adjust to. Like Prince Albert in a different era, Prince Philip had to forge his own path, letting go of ambition and his naval career in order to support the Queen. He fulfilled that role with distinction and, along with millions both in this country and across the Commonwealth, we honour him. He was a citizen of the world and a faithful servant of this nation.

When contemplating such a senior citizen, it is difficult for a younger generation to grasp just what a progressive and modernising force the Prince was. He had an insatiable curiosity about life and people, about science and technology and the planet itself. He publicised the work of the World Wildlife Fund, championing efforts to protect endangered species, long before the environment was on the public radar.

Above all, he will be remembered for his determination to encourage the aspirations of young people from all backgrounds through the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme. This will be his lasting legacy and it is seen in the lives of thousands of young people whose horizons have been expanded through their participation in the scheme.

Many years ago, my late uncle was put in charge of a new textile factory in County Durham and was immensely proud when it was opened by the Queen, accompanied by the Duke of Edinburgh. As the Lord Lieutenant knows well, every royal visit is timed to the last minute. Except that, showing the Queen round, my uncle became increasingly anxious because the Duke of Edinburgh, intrigued by a piece of new machinery, had wandered off into the factory and was nowhere to be seen.

Eventually, the Queen sensing the anxiety of my uncle, said, 'Mr Langlands, if you are worried about my husband, please don't be. He can look after himself.' And that just about sums up the Duke of Edinburgh: he most certainly could look after himself.

Frank Sinatra's song, 'I did it my way' may be a favourite choice for funerals and *Desert Island Discs*, but it has its limit as a philosophy of life. Prince Philip ploughed a distinctive furrow in life, but his tenacious commitment to public service rebuked those who see life simply as doing it your own way and having a great time.

He held in contempt those who put the world to rights from the comfort of their armchairs but decline to get involved in their local communities and make a difference. Prince Philip approved of St Paul's words: 'Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence or anything worthy of praise, think on these things.'

With Paul, he upheld the view that we are not here for ourselves, but to serve the common good. And we honour his passing by recommitting ourselves to building trust and service across the length and breadth of our county.

'Then they cried unto the Lord in their trouble and he delivered them out of their distress. He made the storm to cease so that the waves thereof were still. Then were they glad because they were at rest, and he brought them to the haven they longed for.'

The storm of life for Philip is now past and the waves are still. May the Lord bring him to the haven that he longed for. May he rest in peace and rise in glory.

+Robert Exon

*Readings: Psalm 107.23-32 (trans. Coverdale); Philippians 4.8-13 (NRSV)*