

## **Easter 2 and the death of Prince Philip. 11/04/2021**

### **John 20 19-end**

“The mind cannot absorb what the backside cannot endure” : so said Prince Philip about over-long sermons, and I hope I can respect that this morning.

How appropriate it is that his death should have taken place during the Easter season. He was a man of undoubted Christian faith, for whom religious practice was important, and it was a faith primarily shown in a life of service, commitment and courage., in action not words. Bishop John Sentamu said today that his life was rooted in his faith and his family. He was baptized into the Greek Orthodox Church and later received into the Anglican Church, so reconciliation between the different Christian denominations was important to him. Thomas in today’s gospel demands evidence before he can believe, and like him Prince Philip was someone of questioning faith, and particularly interested in the relationship between theology and science, and Faith and the natural world. In 1986 he gathered leaders of the five major world religions to discuss how faith could help the natural world, and he was a committed conservationist before that became fashionable. With Robin Woods he co-founded St George’s House Windsor as place of resource for those in Christian ministry. And millions (including our children and indeed Keri herself) owe him a debt of gratitude for the Duke of Edinburgh’s award scheme.

I say it’s appropriate that he died during the Easter season. Good Friday and Easter Day are the centrepiece of our faith, and so we don’t say “Thank you Jesus you died to set me free from my sins and so I don’t have to do anything apart from thanking you for that.” Rather we say that the death and rising again of Jesus Christ has set us free to become Christ’s Easter people, to make real and present in this world the kingdom of God of love and justice in the way we lead our lives. It is Good Friday and Easter which makes that possible; and it is that dying and rising again which becomes the pattern of our living. Our focus and energy looks outwards from our own ego-centric self-interest to serving others and serving God.

That’s what Jesus means when he tells us to take up our cross and follow him. And the freedom (such a powerful word, and it’s an internal freedom) comes from knowing that it is our weaknesses, our failures, our own Good Fridays which are the means whereby God’s love and power can break into our lives to bring compassion to others. Thomas wants to see and touch the wounds of the risen Christ. It is out of our woundedness that the new life of Easter springs – a very important thought as we emerge from the pain of Lockdown and the pandemic.

Personally centering his life not on himself but upon God gave Dietrich Bonhoeffer the freedom and courage to fight against Hitler and the Nazi regime in Germany. Centering his life upon God gave Desmond Tutu the freedom and courage to oppose apartheid in South Africa, It gave Martin Luther King the freedom and courage to oppose racism in the USA. And it enabled Mother Julian to write about the mother-love of God in the midst of much worse pandemic than ours, the Black Death,, in the fourteenth century. And it was undoubtedly those inner resources upon which Prince Philip was able to draw which

enabled him to lead a life of service and loyalty to his Queen, his Country and the Commonwealth.

Of course we don't all have the opportunities that he had to be of service, but each of us, each of us can make a difference in our own spheres. One of the things that is most striking about the Easter stories, including today's, is the transformation that happens to those male and female followers of Jesus. From being frightened, confused and huddled together in that upper room, going back to where they last saw the earthly Jesus alive and well and felt safe, they become courageous and compassionate, eager to go out and show the reality of the power of the risen Christ in their own lives of service to others. So in Acts chapter three we find Peter and John healing the lame man at the beautiful gate in Jerusalem, having no silver or gold to help him but the power of the risen Christ to enable him to walk again. And Thomas, unfairly labelled as doubting, is venerated throughout India as the man who brought the Gospel there, as Keri and I found when we travelled to Kerala and saw churches and vibrant Christian communities dedicated to his name. All starting from the classic Christian confession he makes in today's gospel story "My Lord and My God".

Easter challenges each of us and sets us free to make the reality of our inner relationship with God visible and tangible in the way we lead our lives with compassion and courage. We are to be people of contemplation and action. As we celebrate Easter and as we give thanks for the Duke of Edinburgh's life, let each of us review our own living and our commitment to make the same confession as Thomas – My Lord and My God – and to show the reality of that commitment in our acting in the world. It's much too early to say how the pandemic has affected us as a society, how it's changed our values. But the message of Easter is that God is always seeking to bring new life out of brokenness, suffering and death. And so we are charged as Christ's Easter People to make that real and to live and work to bring about a more just and compassionate society. Good Friday and Easter give us the means and the freedom to do that.

*Mark Thomas*