

**A Sermon preached by the Bishop of Coventry,  
Christopher Cocksworth  
in Coventry Cathedral during a special Service on 16<sup>th</sup> April 2021  
at A Civic Service of Thanksgiving for the Life of  
His Royal Highness The Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh**

***Readings: Lamentations 3.22-26, 31-33; John 12.20-26***

**The Prince and Coventry**

Prince Philip's connections with Coventry, the West Midlands and Warwickshire were long and lasting.

I wish I'd been here in 1956 to listen in on this conversation between Basil Spence, the architect of the Coventry's new Cathedral and the Duke of Edinburgh at the laying of the Foundation Stone:

I was given only five minutes [said Spence] for the explanation and to answer questions – too short a time really to explain a design which had the reputation of being radical. However, I did my best; the Queen was charming and the Duke stepped in with one or two questions. I was amazed at his grasp of the design and the technical implications of modern construction.

After the Cathedral the Royal Couple headed to the Jaguar Factory in Coventry. JLR's present CEO, Thierry Bolloré, speaks of Prince Philip's 'impressive knowledge and deep interest in vehicle design, engineering and manufacturing'. Tomorrow we'll see a Land Rover – with a chassis modified into a hearse by Prince Philip's own design – carrying his body to its burial.

Coventry's identity as a city of innovation and industry, engineering and education were close to the heart of the Duke of Edinburgh. He knew that post-war Britain would depend on the sort of energy and effort for which Coventry became known.

### **The Prince's story and Coventry's story**

I'd have liked to have listened in on another conversations in 1956 as the Queen and Prince Philip saw the ruins of the old Cathedral destroyed in war-time and imagined the new Cathedral rising out of its ashes in peace-time. Though a member of the Greek Royal Family, Prince Philip's blood was more German than Greek, and it certainly wasn't British. He had been adopted by the UK, given an education and stability, a career, love, marriage and a family. He fought valiantly against Germany in the war, and yet, on the day of his death the Chancellor of modern Germany gave thanks for his 'friendship with Germany'. And the President of Germany gave this powerful tribute:

We Germans mourn a winning personality who made an important contribution to the reconciliation of our nations after the horrors of the Second World War. As a member of the Royal Navy, Prince Philip fought for the liberation of Europe from Nazi terror. His contribution to democracy and peace will remain in our memories.

Coventry Cathedral's Provost Dick Howard along with Bishop George Bell of Chichester made that same distinction between the Nazi oppression of the whole Europe, which had to be defeated, and the good people of Germany, who

needed to be befriended. It was a distinction between a regime and a people that was in the bones and blood of Prince Philip; and it is the basis of any work for peace and reconciliation.

It's fitting that Prince Philip died on 9<sup>th</sup> April, the same day as Dietrich Bonhoeffer died in 1945 at the hands of the Nazi's that he too had tried to defeat, so that peace could come and friendship between Britain and Germany could be restored.

It's fitting too that our service to mark Prince Philip's life began with the striking of the Peace Bell, given to the Cathedral in 1990 by President Weinsäcker as a gift of the German people. The Coventry story of the destruction of war being redeemed by the commitment to peace and reconciliation between the nations was embodied in the life of Prince Philip.

### **Dying to live**

Our reading from the New Testament today told of some Greeks who approached Philip in Jerusalem, and said, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus'. Like Prince Philip, Philip, the follower of Jesus, was not Greek, even though Philip is a Greek name but maybe he had Greek associations. Philip told Jesus about them and Jesus, who didn't like celebrity status, said to Philip, 'Just tell them, "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit"'.

Jesus was saying, if you want to see me, look at the pattern of my life – and of my death – then you will see who I am. I

am like a grain of wheat. I am not here for myself, for what I can get out of life. I am here for you. I am here to die to myself, so that I might live for you. And if you follow this sort of pattern in your life – if you give your life for others – you will actually find life, true life for yourself, and you will bring life to others.

We see that pattern of life in Prince Philip's life – in his war-time service, ready to lay down his life for others. And we see it in his long service to his wife, the Queen, and – in so doing – to the country, to the world. Being two steps behind the Queen didn't make him a lesser person. We've heard so many stories over the last week – and I can testify myself with some of my own – that Prince Philip was a large and dynamic person who helped to shape modern day Britain. But by being 'the strength and stay' of another person, he found himself in serving someone else a greater cause.

This pattern of life that Jesus called, 'dying to self and rising to new life', is the deep pattern of Jesus' life. It's there most powerfully in his own death that – through his rising from the grave – became the source of hope for life beyond this life for us all.

Confident that God's promises to bring life out of death are fulfilled in Jesus, we too can say to Philip, like those people in ancient Jerusalem, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus'. Perhaps the answer of our Philip would be same as the answer of the Philip of old: 'Jesus says, "Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am there my servant will be also. Whoever serves me [says Jesus], the Father will honour"'.