**SERVICE OF PRAYER AND THANKSGIVING FOR THE LIFE OF**

**HRH PRINCE PHILIP**

**Sermon by the Bishop of Portsmouth**

**Newport Minster and Portsmouth Cathedral, 11th April 2021**

Every death prompts us to reflect on a person’s contributions, accomplishments and qualities. We do just the same as we remember His Royal Highness, giving thanks both to him for his gifts to Her Majesty the Queen and their family, to this country and the Commonwealth, and to the wider world, and also giving thanks for him to God who is the source of all life and all goodness. The Queen described Prince Philip as her strength and stay, using words as she would clearly have known, drawn from a hymn that describes God as our ‘strength and stay, upholding all creation.’ We meet, both a limited number here in church and many more virtually, to thank Prince Philip with our affection and to worship God; both strengths and stays.

For more than two days now our broadcast, newspaper and social media have rightly reported in detail the very significant achievements of the Prince in many areas of life. What they have done so admirably with video, photographs, interviews and commentary I cannot emulate today. Anything I might say would be partial and inevitably selective and so less than representative of a very long and wonderfully full life.

What I can do is to reflect with you on the Duke of Edinburgh’s qualities and gifts. He was an exemplar of devoted service with a clear sense of responsibility, and as a naval officer and as consort for over seven decades lived graciously a committed vocation of support and service. Though it could and might have been different, and there is no doubt that a vocation to leadership would have otherwise beckoned he chose to step back from that in a greater cause. Gathering here in church we always link that self-effacing choice of dedication to the service and good of others to the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. It is reflected too, of course, in the reign of Her Majesty and, together, she and Prince Philip are beacons for us of what it is to embrace a vocation and to look not for our own self-interest but for the greater good. It is a Christian calling.

In that life of duty and service Prince Philip was no cypher or functionary but a person. I’ve been struck by the vox pop interview snippets with people in the street on Friday and Saturday, and how many times people who had never met the Duke spoke as if they had. He was like that, one said; another that he’d have wanted it this way, or that he had a real interest in others’ wellbeing. A vocation or a decision to give yourself to a cause or calling does not mean losing individuality. You remain yourself, indeed you find your true self in serving the common good. We smile, perhaps, when we remark that Prince Philip always walked a couple of paces behind the Queen, but to allow others to have priority and precedence does not imply denial of yourself as a person. Modesty, generosity and self-understanding are marks of stature and quality which we have seen and recognised in Prince Philip.

It can sound institutional and dull to speak about service of the monarchy, country and Commonwealth, as if to give yourself to a noble or high calling is to obliterate your individuality and personality. Clearly it is not so. Prince Philip’s keen interest in others, especially young people, his eager engagement in conversations and with issues, his willingness to promote unfashionable causes, are not only reasons for our gratitude and esteem but also should be an inspiration for each of us who, though not perhaps reaching the dizzy heights of leadership or influence, are able to embrace a vocation to play our part, from a step or two behind, in contributing for the good of other people. We are reminded today not only that this is an honourable calling but that it can be an effective vocation of vast importance.

For Christians, every Sunday is a mini-Easter Day. A week on, and in this joyful Easter season, we celebrate today the Duke’s gifts and qualities that were so life-giving for many people, especially those in this service who knew him or met him, and as they contributed to the peace and life of our country during the reign of the Queen. We celebrate too the Easter good news that service and sacrifice of self overcomes death through the victory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

St Paul, in our reading, was speaking to each of us but his words might have been directly about the one described by Her Majesty as her strength and stay. ‘My beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.’