

18 April 2021

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

Maybe you watched the Duke of Edinburgh's funeral, as I did. It was severely 'scaled back' because of Covid restrictions. Even so, 'scaled back' for the House of Windsor is lavish by our parochial standards.

"For those in peril on the sea"

It helped that the sun was shining in a cloudless sky. But rain was falling in Her Majesty's heart, I imagine. She sat alone in St George's Chapel, Windsor, her children scattered in choir stalls throughout the vast chancel.

A military band played Elgar's *Nimrod*, a piper piped a lament, the organ gave voice to Bach, Vaughan Williams, and Britten, and although there was no choir, four choristers sang beautifully in the socially distant antechapel.

Not bad.

The congregation were not allowed to sing hymns. It reminded me of the restrictive gatherings in our own sanctuary last autumn.

If you understand the purpose of worship, and if you relish the joy of joining in song, it's torture not to be allowed to sing on occasions like this. You want to cry your lament and chant your praise to God in the face of death's terrible truth. "*The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.*" But you can't *sing* it. You may as well watch people feasting when you're famished for food. What language will you borrow, then, to thank the banquet's 'chef'?

So, while Royal mourners sat in enforced silence, the choristers offered a fitting rendition of the Royal Navy Hymn. Surely it was a nod in the direction of Prince Philip's distinguished naval service during the war.

*Eternal Father, strong to save,
Whose arm doth bind the restless wave,
Who bidd'st the mighty ocean deep
Its own appointed limits keep;
O hear us when we cry to thee
For those in peril on the sea.*

Though he'd been a naval officer, and was mentioned in dispatches, the Duke of Edinburgh was never too grand to blister his own hands by shovelling coal in the

ship's boiler when his men needed his help. It was a little test of leadership, and he passed it.

The Dean read a wonderful passage from *Ecclesiasticus* (not to be mistaken for *Ecclesiastes*). It's from the Apocrypha (Google it) and not part of our Old Testament, though I wish it were. Chapter 43 is a glorious paean to Nature, and to the Author of Nature.

Perhaps it had been chosen in recognition of Prince Philip's long patronage of the World Wildlife Fund and his work for environmental causes. But it includes a naval reference too: "*Those who sail the sea tell of its dangers, and we marvel at what we hear.*"

"Stop meaning it so much!"

The Dean of Windsor read the lessons and prayers in a style and cadence I recognise. In my private lexicon, I call it the 'English Cathedral' style of reading. I've never mastered it. If I did, you'd find me *more* boring than you already do. Some newsreaders deploy it still, though the CBC fired theirs long ago.

The playwright Alan Bennett likens it to the sound of a disembodied voice announcing a train's arrival in a cavernous railway station, circa 1950. It's not the 'conversational' voice we think we prefer now, all slack and informal. The emphasis is on clarity of diction and precise pronunciation, not the effusion of emotion and the drama of 'sincerity'.

Have you noticed how, by trying *too* hard to sound 'sincere', we actually reveal our insincerity? That's what he's against. Readers of Scripture in Church who emote excessively, hoping to excite their bored listeners into listening, annoy him. The reader's voice must serve the words, not the other way around.

I can imagine Alan Bennett berating an 'overacting' actor in a rehearsal for one of his plays. "Just say the damn line! The line doesn't need your effusive histrionics. Stop *meaning* it so much."

So, the Dean read and prayed in the 'English Cathedral style' as he presided at the Duke of Edinburgh's funeral. He meant it just the right amount, without meaning it too much. And though he may have lost the channel-flippers because of it, I say "Good for him." His prayers and readings were never meant to hook our attention in any case. They were all addressed to God. But you knew that, right?

Maybe you noticed that there was no eulogy at this funeral, no funny 'remember when' stories about the Duke of Edinburgh. The Prince of Wales did

not stand to recall “the time Father couldn’t find his glasses and they were perched on his forehead all along.”

I imagine the Dean would also get a ‘fail’ from many of us for that omission. We seem to attend funerals and memorial as we would a ‘roast’ held in honour of the deceased. Have we lost the purpose and forgotten the meaning of worship?

Afterwards, the eulogisers are quietly graded by the congregation’s Siskels and Eberts on whether and how much they really ‘captured’ the personality of the deceased. Did they overpraise, underpraise, or get it just right? Was it funny? Did we shed a wee tear? Clergy get an extra ‘thumbs up’ if they didn’t know the deceased but made it *sound* as if they did. “It was like you *knew* him!”

But I remember some stern words about funerals from a clergyman I knew many years ago. They don’t make this kind of Minister anymore, I’m afraid. He ‘spoke his mind’. People thought it was rude of him to say what he thought – sin of all sins! – yet he was beloved by those who truly knew him, including me.

I happened to be with him, once, trailing him around and trying to learn from him, when he visited a grieving widow. They were going to ‘talk about the funeral service’ he was planning for her late husband.

“Oh, you know, George didn’t have any time for *religion*. He never believed in any of this God business,” she said.

“He does now!” said the Minister.

Later, he took me aside. “Look,” he said, “when you die, the funeral is *for* you. The funeral is not *about* you. We’ve turned that on its head. I want to turn it back.” I’ve come to see that he was right.

For all his faults and foibles, the Duke of Edinburgh seemed inwardly to know that “rank is but the guinea’s stamp.” His funeral, drawn directly from *The Book of Common Prayer*, comprised the same prayers and petitions as a pauper’s funeral. It wasn’t *about* him; it was *for* him. That’s rather the point.

But the point is moot. I think the era of Church funerals is over, along with Church weddings. Covid hastened this, but it didn’t cause it.

In other News

The Covid Battle is disheartening. We know this pandemic will end, but it’s a long, long time coming. It’s wearing us out, even when we think it’s not. But we all have resilience, too, even when we think we don’t.

If you haven't yet had your first vaccination, and you need some assistance navigating the website to book an appointment, you're welcome to give the Church Office a ring (519-438-3492). Karen Russo can help you to be in touch with someone who will assist you with this.

Karen has also printed out copies of the special form you will need to take to your appointment when it comes. If you don't have access to a printer, and you wish to have this form ahead of time, you can arrange to pick up a copy from the Church Office.

I'm sorry to say that Toni Bouman had a fall recently. She's recovering well at Parkwood.

It saddens me, as well, to pass along the news that Des Ryan has died in Toronto. He was a close friend and companion of Patty Carnegie. I know you join me in offering her condolences for her loss, and sorrow for her grief. We will remember Des when All Saints Day comes.

Yours in the faith,
Andrew