

Address given by The Revd Rachel Benson, High Steward of Selby Abbey at a Service of Commemoration for HRH The Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh on Saturday 24th April 2021

At the funeral of Prince Philip in the first reading from Ecclesiasticus there is the verse “By his own action he achieves his end, and by his word all things are held together.” Of course, this is a picture of God and God was very important to Prince Philip and in some ways it sums up Prince Philip’s life. He did achieve and he did hold things together.

Contained deep in Prince Philip’s DNA was debate and exploration. He loved to wrestle with questions of religion and explore faith, philosophy and science wherever it might take him. His Christian faith undergirded all his life’s work, with charities, the armed forces, certainly in D of E awards and the Commonwealth. Indeed, he was always ready to investigate and learn of other religions in the many countries he visited.

Thinking of debate, one of his achievements of which he was very proud and held dear was the concept of St George’s House. My father, Robin Woods, was Dean of Windsor in the 60s. When he went there, he had 2 jobs to fulfil. One was to bury the King, who was still in the main vault of St George’s Chapel, and the other was to develop St George’s Foundation.

For the King the small side chapel was built between two buttresses. The King and Queen Mother are there and there is room for the Queen and Prince Philip, and after she dies they will both lie there, but until then he rests in the Royal vault.

The accommodation for St George’s House was developed out of some fine houses on the north side of the Chapel. The Queen handed the development to Prince Philip and my father. They were together in all arrangements, for the architecture and the finances, with the Knights of the Garter who were very instrumental and keen on raising the necessary money.

Both my father and Prince Philip shared the vision of developing dialogue and debate to find new ways forward in Christian enterprise in the secular state. To begin with the courses were for in service training for the clergy but this very quickly led into all manner of consultations, including government, industry, trades unions and the wider society. St George’s House allows people of influence and responsibility to come together to discuss, explore and debate contemporary issues. Then it was very often under the chairmanship and leadership of Prince Philip. He was rightly pleased with the influence these courses had and have. They are very well attended. As he said, “It can make people think of issues that have otherwise been neglected; it can draw attention to weakness and deficiencies by making it possible for people to discover them for themselves; their experience at St George’s should be what they have learnt, not what they have been taught”.

He leaves a legacy, and of course a widowed Queen for whom we all pray. Her faith will sustain her, as it always has, in her service and duty to this country.

I close with what was described as his epitaph “Life’s going to go on after me. If I make life marginally more tolerable for the people who come after, I’d be delighted.”

The full service can be followed online at <https://youtu.be/mUn5ysp5ht8>