

433 Complete in Him

As the period of official mourning for the late Duke of Edinburgh comes to an end, it is timely for us to consider his recent funeral service. This was a highly significant occasion, not least because of its spiritual content and underlying assumptions which were duly presented to the nation and wider world.

At this point it is helpful to quote briefly from an article of Saturday 17th April 2021 by Gordon Rayner of the Daily Telegraph, concerning the Duke and his funeral, which he had been carefully planning for many years: “The Duke, a deep and devout religious thinker, believed his funeral should glorify God, rather than himself, insisting there should be no eulogy, or even a sermon ... He had more than 1000 books on religion in his personal library ... he wanted to make sure that he remained in control of every element off the service and the ceremony surrounding it ... ”.

Thanks be to God, there was much to commend about the occasion, including the impressive involvement of the armed forces and the dignity of St George’s Chapel and of those who were present. Indeed, “all was done decently and in order” (from I Corinthians 14.40, KJV).

The content of the occasion is best understood in the light of the Duke being described as above as “a deep and devout religious thinker”. For a start, he was deeply patriotic, and, like many men of the sea, he clearly had a profound understanding of the reality of Almighty God as our powerful Creator. Hence we see his choice beforehand of the hymn tunes “I vow to thee my country” and “The Supreme Sacrifice”, then “Isle of Beauty” and “Nimrod”.

In the service itself, amid conventional funeral prayers, he included the sailor’s hymn “Eternal Father strong to save”; a reading from Ecclesiasticus in the Apocrypha and an abridged choral version of Psalm 104, both concerning God as the Creator in authority over His creation; Psalm 100, “O be joyful in the Lord”; the resurrection reading from St John 11.21-27; a Piper’s Lament, and the sounding of the Last Post, Action Stations and Reveille. The Garter Principal King of Arms then listed the Duke’s titles, military ranks and orders of chivalry.

The omissions are significant. No eulogy – fair enough, but no sermon? – no brief, clear explanation, to those present in the Chapel and to the millions watching on television, of the Christian Gospel with its unique

certainities of forgiveness of sins, peace, hope and eternal life that are received by simple faith in the Person and Work of Jesus Christ, certainties that are available by no other route. Thankfully the John 11 reading was included, but surely its great resurrection truths needed to be succinctly spelt out here? It is fair to ask, Why not?

There are several clues as to the answer. The Duke was a man of his times and elevated social set, and a lifelong Freemason, (as are other senior members of the Royal Family). He was genuinely aware of God's existence; a man of action and gusto, "a religious thinker", a "man of the Enlightenment", curious, seeking, and wanting to find the answers about God, life and human existence. In Freemasonry he would have been taught "the brotherhood of Man and the fatherhood of God", but that masonic "God" derives from pantheism, agnosticism and unitarianism, thus being utterly incompatible with the God who has made Himself known to us all in the Holy Bible as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and who clearly states - "I am the Lord and there is no other" (eg., Isaiah 45.5,6,14,18,21,22, KJV).

This mix of factors goes some way to explaining the Duke's overall spiritual outlook and the funeral service he planned. He clearly had head-knowledge of Jesus Christ, yet it seems unlikely that he acknowledged Jesus as his own Lord and Saviour. We know from God's Word that in Christ "are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge"; that in Him "dwelleth all the fulness of the godhead bodily, and ye (that is, we), are complete in Him" (from Colossians 2.3,9-10; also 1.12-20 / also egs., John 10.30,38; 14.9-11 / Revelation 1.4-8); and that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge ... the beginning of wisdom" (Proverbs 1.7; 9.10). As such, once anyone has personally confessed Jesus Christ as Lord (as in Romans 10.9-13), any shelves of general religious books to guide in the search for truth lose their purpose, (and should be replaced by some sound Christian books to aid spiritual growth in Christ!), for by God's grace Christ, The Truth, has then been gratefully found by the seeker and received by faith.

As we now all move on, we can thank God for the Duke's long, fine life of achievement and service, and we learn afresh, from the strengths and weaknesses of his funeral service, the ongoing truth of God's Word, that in Christ alone, we are "complete in Him" (Colossians 2.10a).

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