I read in the papers just earlier this week something that the Archbishop of Canterbury had said when commenting on the slight furore about whether Harry and Meghan had got legally married in front of millions or had instead done it privately a few days before. Having cleared up what had in fact happened he then went on to comment on Royal life by saying “Being in the Royal family is a bit like serving a life sentence without any hope of parole”. I understood him to be saying something about the endless degree of expectation and lack of choice that that kind of service demands on the people who are within it. Yes, there is privilege, yes there is safety from the perils and stresses that most of us have to face in living more normal lives but there’s precious little freedom and even if you do decide to leave your life will never really be yours again. I’m quite certain that it isn’t a way of life I would ever chose for myself and I doubt I’d even wish it on my fiercest enemy.

But it is a sentence that Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh has served with dedication, devotion and duty over a long, long life beside the Queen and he is someone, I suggest, that we owe a deep debt of gratitude to and in reflecting upon his life and death perhaps we have much to learn about what it is to be human and how we might live out that humanity ourselves. It was in that recent furore that I wondered whether something might have been missed by the younger Wales’ when expressing dissatisfaction with ways that they felt their family had let them down. I wondered if the distinction that they had failed to appreciate was between the personal family and the public one. For aren’t we all, at some level or another, disappointed with our families at least to some degree. Families will always fail us - inevitably for they are human - and families *should* always fail us, for how else are we to learn that life isn’t perfect and its in that imperfect setting that we learn to discover that perfect isn’t essential for determining happiness. That there are other virtues - love for instance - which transcend the imperfections of ourselves and each other and allow us to cope with a world that is both fallen and yet beautiful at the same time. Good enough is just that.

The younger Wales’, I wondered, had used their private frustrations perhaps to gain an advantage for a public end where as Prince Philip seemed always to do just the very opposite, rarely seeming bothered about letting his public persona get in the way of who he really was. Regrettable as some of the things he may have said and done were, he never shirked from being his own person: with the smooth of duty and service and devotion to the betterment of people’s lives, came the rough of, some times, undiplomatic outspokenness. “I can’t stop being who I am”, he once said with a courage that we all might perhaps admire and even wonder about emulating.

The marking of his death might reawaken thoughts about bereavement inequality - and perhaps quite rightly so. I heard the other day about the mother of two black women who, you might remember, were murdered last year in north London while out for a picnic one warm evening, complaining about the lack of reaction to their deaths as compared to that of Sarah Everard’s. Where was the public vigil for them, she asked. Why was there no need for Policing when marking their tragedy. We seem to value some deaths more than others. This has been a year of unimaginable national grief and yet the death of Prince Philip is regarded as a death having a significance of an entirely different order. Of course on one level that’s not right at all. Husbands, Fathers, Grandfathers have all died tragically throughout this last year. None are more important than others yet I think there can be something important about what might be thought of as representative deaths. Sarah Everard, George Floyd, Diana Princess of Wales all have come to stand for something more than the individual human beings that they were. The death of Prince Philip, perhaps, enables us all to access a sadness that lies within - opening a hatchway on griefs that we have to keep hidden in order to survive the everyday - but I wonder if it also allows us to cherish and celebrate the virtues that Prince Philip so clearly stood for. It allows us to say that remaining steadfast, being devoted,

having a commitment to duty, forbearing each other (even if with a slightly grumpy - but refreshingly human - outlook) being a John the Baptist (decreasing so that she may increase) - wasn’t one of those much repeated clips of film showing him encouraging a gaggle of children to break the taped line and come forward to give the Queen some flowers just wonderful - endlessly remaining interested in other people even when it was the last thing that he was feeling. His death allows us to say that these and other things are good . That these are the things that we want for our country and for ourselves and we are grateful that someone has been such a flag bearer for them.

Heads of state are symbolic presences and when one has ruled as long as the Queen time enriches that symbolism significantly. The grace and stoicism with which she and Prince Philip have remained above the hurly burly of our national life for 70 years has provided a containing reassurance that we may only fully appreciate in retrospect. Prince Philip’s death, perhaps, begins that retrospection and so let us hope and pray that we can recognise what it is we have been given in his life so that we may learn to treasure it in our own and let us hope that our prayers for the Queen, her family, and for all who mourn, might sustain and strengthen them in the days ahead.

Rest eternal grant unto him O Lord

and may light perpetual shine upon him