TRUE RELIGION
A Pastoral Letter to the Teulu Asaph from the Bishop of St Asaph
April 2021

I still remember my school motto with affection – three words with which to inspire all of us pupils – "Learning, Tolerance, Service". Imagine my bemusement when I visited the school website recently to discover that someone had thought it fit to change it. It now reads: "Learning, Respect, Ambition."

I must confess to dismay. I suppose that I should be grateful that learning is still thought relevant to education, but "respect" is such an amorphous term, replacing the breadth of the word "tolerance", a word which is close to liberty, but less self-assertive. The real problem comes with the replacement of "service" in my mind, however. Ambition is all about my getting on in the world, while Service is not oriented towards the self, and is an older value, one which is much more rooted in Christian faith. "I am among you as one who serves" said the Lord (*Luke 22.27*), and we are commanded as followers of Jesus to displace selfish interest (and ambition) with readiness to uphold and exalt those around us.

I am writing in the week that we have lost one of the highest personages in the order of precedence in the land. I am discovering that attitudes towards the Royal Family vary greatly – from dismissiveness at their "privileged life", to affection so great, that one might be forgiven for thinking them close relatives of the speaker. However it does interest me that most people are defining – and paying tribute to - HRH The Duke of Edinburgh for his life of dedicated public service. Being a member of the Royal Family is an immensely privileged position – and there is some evidence that young Philip worked hard to win the hand of the Princess Elizabeth – but I think that there can be little doubt that having become consort to the monarch, Prince Philip has used his position of influence consistently in the service of faith, in the service of his Queen, in the service of this nation, and in the empowerment of others. Here then is a life of service, even if his tolerance wore noticeably thin from time to time, and he was not without other faults.

I suppose that it is also worth noting that the motto of his school was and remains "Plus est en vous" (There is more in you). This seems also to have been a lesson that Prince Philip took to heart, with the DofE Award Scheme as a notable consequence.

Indeed, there is a verse of Scripture that asks about the essence of true religion - what defining aspect might be chosen? Faith, worship, devotion? "True religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this: To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep ourselves unspotted from the world." (James 1.27) In other words, Religion itself is defined in the Bible as service to the humblest and unprivileged in society, an antidote to the pursuit and peril of ambition and celebrity.

What I think I am saying is this – that the concept of "Service" is something that is a value that is maybe less in vogue these days, although we lose it in our society at our peril. To begin with, "service" is the pattern of being of the incarnate God, which he literally embodied as the key to creation. Paul writes of Jesus as "Being in very nature God, he did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant" *Phil 2.6,7*). Service is taught in Scripture as the way to fullness of life, "for it is in giving that we receive" (*Louis Nizer, and later attributed to St Francis*). It is also a sort of glue, which binds the parts of society together, in which no-one ceases to be of value, but remains worthy of service by the greatest.

I personally will give thanks to God for the life of Prince Philip because he took as position of great privilege and used it to serve and promote others. I will do so in the hope that the value of Service as an ideal, and as a worthy object of our aspirations and endeavours, will be something which at the very least the Church will embody, and which is to be encouraged in society, whatever form our own particular service takes.