

HRH Philip, Duke of Edinburgh

Whenever Prince Philip visited Westminster Abbey he passed under the stony gaze of his great-aunt, Elizabeth, who was as pan-European a royal as could be - a granddaughter of Queen Victoria, born into the German House of Hesse-Darmstadt and who married into the Russian royal family, along with her sister who was the last Empress. Such was the bloodline of the Duke of Edinburgh – no wonder he dismissed being solely British and owned a European identity.

The statue of Elizabeth is not on the West front of Westminster Abbey because she is a royal though. Even in that most royal of churches, royal blood does not earn you a statue that you look up to. What's required is not royalty but sanctity – and on the West front it is saints – and, in particular, martyrs, of the 20th century that are depicted.

Elizabeth was always a religious woman, and embraced the Russian Orthodox tradition she married into, as was her husband, the Czar's brother Alexei, who was assassinated in 1905 by the Socialist Revolutionary Party. She wrote on his tombstone 'Father, forgive them; they know not what they do', the words of Christ on the cross. She visited her husband's killer in prison, calling him to repent but offering in return to plead with the Czar for his life. But he would not repent, wishing to die as a martyr for his cause.

Elizabeth turned deeper into her faith. She founded a new order of nuns, the Convent of Martha and Mary – with the dual intent of leading a life of deep prayer on the one hand (the Mary part) and of service to the poor on the other (the Martha part). She sold off all her valuable possessions, built a convent complete with chapel, hospital, pharmacy and orphanage and spent much time also visiting the very poorest people in Moscow.

In 1918 Lenin ordered her arrest and exile. On the night of 17 July she and her fellow prisoners were woken up and driven in carts to an abandoned mine where they were first beaten and then thrown down one of the shafts, hand grenades were thrown in and then fire. It was said that the prisoners were singing an Orthodox hymn. They still weren't all killed as it appears that Elizabeth removed her wimple and used it as a bandage on one of her companions. They died of their injuries and of starvation.

Her remains were recovered by the White Army and were first taken to Beijing before finally coming to rest at the Orthodox convent on the Mount of Olives just outside Jerusalem – which she and her husband had helped to build. The monastery is a very special place and was a highlight of my visit to the Holy Land a couple of years ago. It is very distinctively Russian, adorned as it is with onion domes. But it wasn't just what it looked like; it was for me just about the most spiritual place I visited. There was a great sanctity about it, a female sanctity. I bought this icon there – it is of Mary Magdalene bringing myrrh to the tomb that first Easter morning. This Mary along with Mary of Bethany and her sister Martha were amongst the greatest friends of Jesus. The two Marys poured out the oil of their love upon him for his burial – one before, the other after. A religious community of women still pray there and thus show their love for and devotion to Jesus as the Marys did. It is largely hidden from view – from the world's point of view unnoticed but I believe of deep and lasting spiritual significance.

The Duke of Edinburgh's mother, Princess Alice, was a niece of Elizabeth, part of the same German-British royal line. She married Prince Andrew of Greece and visited her aunt when attending a wedding in Russia in 1908, just as Elizabeth was selling off all her possessions and founding her religious order. This made a great impression on the 23 year Alice who twenty years later converted to Orthodoxy and during WW2 worked for the Red Cross in war-afflicted Athens where she

organised soup kitchens, medical supplies, nursing, and shelters for orphans. She also took in Jews who were being hunted down by the Gestapo. By the end of the war she was living in squalor with barely anything to eat.

In April 1947 she came to England to attend the marriage of her son, Philip, to the then Princess Elizabeth. Because her daughters were all married to Germans they were not invited for obvious political reasons.

In January 1949 she founded an order of Orthodox nuns after the pattern of her aunt, the Christian Sisterhood of Martha And Mary, based in a village near Athens. Following the Colonels' coup of 1967 she came to live in Buckingham Place for the last two years of her life. She was laid to rest at first at St George's Chapel in Windsor Castle but it was her wish to be buried near to her aunt at the Convent of Mary Magdalene on the Mount of Olives and her remains were transferred there nearly 20 years later. In 1994 the Duke of Edinburgh and his sister, Princess George of Hanover, attended a ceremony at the Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem where his mother was honoured by the Jewish nation for her wartime sheltering of persecuted Jews.

Why do I tell all of that story?

Well, it seems to me that what the Duke of Edinburgh received from his forebears wasn't just royal blood but sacred purpose. I don't think anyone will be championing Philip as a saint but he was a man of faith who sought to live out the deepest insights of that faith in a quiet but deeply committed way. Let me highlight two things:

First, his commitment to forgiveness and reconciliation. His great-aunt knew that forgiveness lies at the heart of Christian faith and was on the lips of our Lord himself for those who crucified him. She wanted to forgive the killer of her husband. Philip of course had his own challenge in this regard when the IRA killed his beloved uncle, Lord Mountbatten. It seems too that despite his bluff and sometimes prickly exterior he often served a reconciling role in the royal family. And his own pan-European ancestry meant that he was never a little Englander but had a global vision. The forgiveness of sins is too often reduced in our minds to small issues of personal morality. The gift that Jesus gave to his apostles as he breathed on them was a fundamental tool for the healing of the nations – rejected by the atheist Bolsheviks and the pagan Nazis alike as well perhaps as our own nation and its allies in the aftermath of the First World War. The failure to forgive and to receive forgiveness led to the dreadful world conflicts of the 20th century.

Secondly, and leading from that, Philip's Christian commitment was never in conflict with his deep respect and friendship for those of other faiths. His two female forebears are buried on the Mount of Olives alongside generations of Jews who were laid there in the hope of the final resurrection of the dead. Jerusalem has become a universal symbol of a new heaven and earth where every tear will be wiped away and there will be no more sorrow and pain and death, for all things will be made new.

As Prince Philip is laid to rest in six days time he will take his place alongside his royal ancestors in Windsor, but in spirit he will also be alongside his mother and great aunt in Jerusalem, awaiting with them the final trumpet and the summons to that bringing together of all things in Christ when the former things have passed away.

May he rest in peace and rise in glory.