

Trinity 13 2016 What Are We Doing at a Funeral?

Isaiah 58 vv 6-14 p745, Psalm 103, Hebrews 12 vv 18-29 p1211, Luke 13 vv 10-17 p1046

I suppose the obvious answer is that we are arranging the hygienic disposal of a dead body. That is obviously important from the point of view of public health, but it hardly explains the need for a funeral service. We leave waste disposal to the council. Yet most human cultures, from as long ago as the Stone Age, have had rituals for dealing with death. Usually, these are religious rituals. I'm intrigued by the rise in popularity of non-religious funerals in our post-Christian culture. My great uncle used to say, *Just put me on the compost heap*, which seems logical enough if you believe that there is no God and that our human personality is simply a function of our bodies – the software generated by the hardware of our flesh. Once your body is dead, according to that way of thinking, you are finished. So what does it matter what happens to the body and why do your relatives and admirers need some kind of ceremony to mark your passing? I don't think that my great uncle believed that. I think and hope he did believe in an afterlife in the Hands of God, but, even if you do believe in God, if you believe that some sort of immortal soul lives on after the body has died, does it really matter what happens to the body? It does matter to most of us. The body, at the very least, is a vehicle for who we are and people who love us quite rightly want to see our dead bodies treated with respect even if they are convinced that we ourselves are in a better place. Personally, I think that reverence for dead bodies can be overdone. For example, people shouldn't get upset about autopsies which might solve a crime or further medical research. Neither should they obsess about what has happened to the body in a war zone, or in a serious accident or at sea to the extent that their obsession becomes something which prevents their ever coming to terms with their loss or simply a stick with which to beat the authorities for what bereaved families believe to be official culpability for the cause of the tragedy.

Ritual seems to matter too. Human beings are ritualistic creatures and we seem to need ceremonies to mark great occasions – birth, marriage, death, etc.. As a youngster, I was influenced both by Protestantism and by scientific humanism which have left me with a deep suspicion of empty ritual. I'm always ready to suspect ritual of being meaningless. Hence my suspicion of humanist funerals and secular naming ceremonies in lieu of christening. What do these rituals mean, if there is no God to accept our praise, to receive our thanks, to forgive our sins, to guide and sustain our lives and to Whom we can offer ourselves in an act of worship? People obviously feel the need of ritual at the significant moments in their lives, but what do the rituals mean? What is the significance of our lives if there is no God, if our existence is simply a matter of chance and if we cease to be, shortly to be forgotten, at the moment of death?

Anyway, what are we doing at a Christian funeral? The 1662 funeral service is very short, dignified and simple. It had to be short in times of plague when funerals were held swiftly one after another. It commences with those wonderful sentences of Scripture: *I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.* (St. John 11. 25, 26) *I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth. And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God: whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another.* (Job 19. 25 – 27) *We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. The Lord gave, and the*

Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord. (1 St. Timothy 6.7; Job 1.21). There is a choice of two psalms, a long reading from I Corinthians XV about the resurrection of Christians (too long and difficult to understand for some people, perhaps), a committal of the body to the ground at the graveside and a couple of prayers following the Lord's Prayer. Simple, brief and dignified, not even any provision for a eulogy or sermon. What the service sets out to do is to provide comfort for the mourners – that those who have died in the Lord shall not die eternally, but sleep in him and be raised up at the last day – and to prepare all those of us present at the service for our own deaths. We shall all die. We shall all face judgment for what we have done with our lives on earth. We can only depend on God for our salvation and God is absolutely dependable.

An interesting twist is that, whereas 1662 provides for the prayers to be said at the graveside, the 1928 prayer book and subsequent revisions allow for the prayers to be said in church before the committal. This is to avoid standing around too long in the cold and wet, which, it is sometimes claimed, has led to mourners at one funeral catching their death of cold and needing themselves to be buried at the next. It is, however, more emotionally satisfying to have prayers after the committal and it is a shame that prayers before committal have become the norm even at the crematorium and at burials even when the sun is shining. Revisions do give a wider choice of psalms and readings than 1662 and that is helpful.

What would be lacking, in my opinion, in a prayer book funeral service without a eulogy or address would be the opportunity to put our memories of the departed into words, to share our memories with one another, and to give thanks to God for the life of this particular individual. I have conducted very few funerals where there hasn't been some sort of eulogy or address, given by the vicar or a family member or a friend and it feels as if something important is lacking if the eulogy is missing. It is also good to include hymns and other appropriate music and sometimes readings in addition to the biblical lesson.

The big difference between Catholic and Protestant funerals is that Catholics pray not only for the mourners, but also for the dead person. The Roman Catholic theory, which got out of all proportion in the Middle Ages, is that the wicked and unbelievers go to Hell when they die and their case is hopeless. Some very good Christians go straight to Heaven and, when the Catholic Church believes this to be the case, they are called *saints*. Most Christians, however, are not good enough for heaven when they die and they go to a place called Purgatory, where they spend as long as it takes for them to get fit for Heaven. Their progress through Purgatory can be assisted by the prayers of the Church on earth. Hence prayers for the departed. In the Middle Ages, this belief in Purgatory was exploited to get people to pay for what were called indulgences to lessen their own or their loved one's time in Purgatory and the money raised from the sale of indulgences helped to fund the Church. It was largely this abuse which provoked the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther and others went back to the Bible, where there is nothing to support this whole theory of Purgatory. The Bible makes clear that we all deserve Hell. None of us is good enough to deserve to spend eternity in the Presence of God. God, however, justifies us by grace through faith. None of us is fit to go to Heaven. Nothing any of us could do would make us fit for Heaven, but Jesus has done everything necessary for us. All that is required of us is that we repent and believe. When our life on earth is over, our eternal destiny is already fixed. If we're in Heaven, we don't need the prayers of the faithful. If we're in Hell, nothing, not even prayer, can help us.

So, there are no prayers for the departed in the Protestant funeral service. Two difficulties with this theological austerity are that it is emotionally difficult, if not impossible, to cease to remember our loved ones in our prayers, even when they are dead, and that we must surely hope that somehow God will get around what appear to us to be God's own rules and finally save, if not everyone, at least everyone who is willing to be saved. I Timothy 2^{3&4} *For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; who will have all men to be saved, and to come to knowledge of the truth.* At one extreme of theological opinion, we have dead jihadi fighters for ISIS sharing Heaven with murdered Syrian children. At the opposite extreme of theological opinion, we have kind old Uncle John going to Hell because he could never believe in God after he was abused by priests when he was a boy. *Common Worship* services in the Church of England probably wisely gloss over this question of praying for the dead. *Hear us as we remember those who have died in the faith of Christ; according to your promises, grant us with them a share in your eternal kingdom.* Is that praying for the faithful departed? You can read it either way. 1928 is a bit more Catholic, *And we commend to thy gracious keeping, O Lord, all thy servants departed this life in thy faith and fear, beseeching thee, according to thy promises, to grant them refreshment, light and peace,* which makes it into *Common Worship*, to the concern of some evangelicals. The modern litany remembers *both those who have confessed the faith and those whose faith is known to you alone*, raising the possibility of salvation for those who haven't self identified as Christians. The 1662 litany only mentions death in the context of the petition: *In all time of our tribulation; in all time of our wealth; in the hour of death, and in the day of judgment, Good Lord, deliver us,* and, in the great intercession, simply says of the dead, *And we also bless thy holy Name for all thy servants departed this life in thy faith and fear: beseeching thee to give us grace so to follow their good examples, that we with them may be partakers of thy heavenly kingdom:* adding, *Grant this, O Father, for Jesus Christ's sake, our only Mediator and Advocate.,* making clear that we depend on Christ alone for access to Heaven.

I haven't much space for the *Common Worship* funeral service, which I dislike intensely. It is too bitty and fussy. The prayers are sentimental and didactic. The Common Worship funeral service provides for a general confession. While mourners often do feel guilt about the way they have treated the departed, the funeral is seldom the appropriate occasion on which to deal with it. It suggests naming the nearest and dearest in the prayers. This is mawkish and would be inviting trouble in some families which are not at all united. I once took the funeral of a homosexual who had died of AIDS. His grieving parents who thought homosexuality was a sin blamed his boyfriend for infecting him but the boyfriend was of course grieving deeply too. Better to name nobody than to try to sort out who is worthy of having his or her grief officially singled out by the minister. What I really dislike about the Common Worship funeral service, however, is the commendation. The committal commits the body to the ground or to be cremated, *in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life.* The commendation commends the person to God. The time to do that of course is while the person is still alive and, especially, at the moment of death. If we still think it necessary at the funeral to commend the person to God, days or even weeks after the death, where do we suppose the person has been in the mean time? The commendation at the funeral is illogical sentimentality. The three dangers I see in many funerals these days are: the danger of conducting a celebration of someone's life which glosses over the fact that the person is dead and that his or her loved ones have sustained a genuine and significant loss; the danger of treating the congregation as an audience (listeners and viewers rather than

participants in a common purpose); and the danger of treating the people arranging the funeral as customers rather than as fellow Christians sharing in a common act of worship. The second two are risks at weddings and christenings as well.

I've been thinking about funerals lately because I was much moved at a recent service by the number of parishioners who attended, many of them people I know quite well, but most of whom seldom if ever come to Church. An extremely important part of the service is praying for the minister and the whole congregation there present that, at the end of time, *we, with all those that are departed in the truth faith of thy holy Name, may have our perfect consummation and bliss, both in body and soul, in thy eternal and everlasting glory*; and that God will raise us from the death of sin unto the life of righteousness; that when we shall depart in this life, we may rest in him, as our hope is that this our brother doth; and that, at the general Resurrection in the last day, we may be found acceptable in thy sight; and receive that blessing, which thy well-beloved Son shall pronounce to all that love and fear thee, saying, *Come, ye blessed children of my Father, receive the kingdom prepared for you from the beginning of the world*. The prayer I am saying on my own behalf and on behalf of the whole congregation is that we shall all meet again in the Kingdom of God and reign with Him forever – me and my parishioners. Amazing and daunting! Traditionally, people are buried facing east towards the Mount of Olives where some traditions expect Jesus to return, and, in some places, the clergy are buried facing west with the thought of meeting their flock on that last day, the Day of Resurrection. The prayer is that God will bring us and all our parishioners home. We clergy have an important role in getting us all there. It's so hard to get people to listen to the Word of God. It's so hard to get them to come to Church. It is so hard to get people to commit themselves 100% to Christ. In fact it is very hard to make that 100% commitment ourselves. *For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; who will have all men to be saved, and to come to knowledge of the truth*. God wants us all to be saved, but what about those of us who are indifferent to the Christian religion, those who seldom come to Church, those who only pray when they're in trouble, those who live their lives in their own way with no thought for the commandments of God? What about those who are actually hostile to religion? Will they all make it safely to Heaven anyway? Wouldn't it make a mockery of God to think that we could treat Him with indifference or even oppose Him and that He would then reward us with all the blessings of everlasting life, sweeping our sins under the carpet? If Jesus purchased our redemption by shedding His Blood on the Cross, should we expect to receive the fruits of that redemption if we can hardly be bothered with Him? I'm not sorry when non-Christian parishioners opt for a humanist funeral. It saves me having to say things about them which I'm not sure are true. On the other hand, I am sorry if people opt for a humanist funeral because they struggle with faith or because they don't think they are good enough or because they think God couldn't possibly love them or even that He won't accept eleventh hour repentance. We sometimes use Psalm 103 for the committal at funeral services. It speaks of the wideness of God's mercy, mercy which encompasses the whole human race. But, in today's other readings, Isaiah warns us not to be complacent and think we can live self-centred lives and still expect God's favour, Jesus warns us of the danger of abusing religion for own selfish ends. Hebrews warns us that being a Christian is tough and demands nothing less than absolute devotion. I'm not quite sure how to balance these two concepts – that God is infinitely merciful and that He requires absolute commitment from us. What do you think?