

Funeral Thoughts.
Theological Considerations for Funeral Celebrants.

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“For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. Your real life is Christ and when he appears, then you too will appear with him and share his glory!”

Colossians 3:3-4.

This is the third time I have been asked to do prepare a theological reflection for a Synod education group and this is quite the most difficult one to tackle. The last two were on the Eucharist and Baptism. The reality is for many people in our society these are utterly irrelevant and even church members might not engage with them in depth in a sustained way. Death however is a universal; it comes to us whatever our faith or lack of. Whether we have achieved much or seen our dreams come to nought death comes to us. However we might choose to divide the human family we are all united by the fact of our dying.

We might successfully ignore the subject for years, pushing it to the very edge of the horizon but it will intrude in time. We lose a parent, we have a serious illness which might kill us without proper medical intervention, and then we face the reality of our ageing and ultimately our own dying. Death is the end of life and an important life event. It is in the fast of death that we are called upon to offer ministry to the bereaved and to craft appropriate ritual. These tasks call for sensitivity, they also needed to be grounded in a Christian understanding of death and what it says both of God, humanity and the purpose and significance of human life. These are huge questions I cannot begin to answer but it is my hope that this reflection will help us think about death and the ways we think about what happens beyond our dying.

I'd like to begin with a story. *What's Heaven* by Maria Shriver, who had the dubious fortune of being married to Arnold Schwarzenegger.

“Heaven is somewhere you believe in It's a beautiful place where you can sit on soft clouds and talk to other people who are there. At night you can sit next to the stars which are the brightest of anywhere in the universe. If you're good throughout your life then you go to heaven when your life is finished here on earth, God sends angels down from heaven to take you up to Heaven with him.”¹ It goes on ...

“Grandma is in the safest place. With the stars, with God and the angels, she is watching over us from up there.”

It is a best seller. Perhaps because this is more or less what many people, church goers or not, believe and how they talk about life after death. The book is meant to be a comfort for grieving children. Does it work I wonder? Children know that Space is a big cold place and

¹ Maria Shriver, *What's Heaven?* (New York: St Martin's press, 1999.)

would a 5 year old find comfort in Grandma being up there. If we tell an untruth, especially to children, it is fraught with problems.

Though the book appeals to popular imagery of heaven there is little if any correlation between it and the witness of the *Bible* and the Christian tradition. The *Bible* has little, if anything to say, about 'going to heaven when you die.' We might read *Matthew*, which talks of "the kingdom of heaven" and assume that this is the eternal reward waiting for us whereas the kingdom of heaven is a way about talking about the kingdom of God without using the G word. Pious Jewish Christians would have been uncomfortable using the G word and would use metaphor and allusion to avoid doing so. The Kingdom of God is a this-worldly thing, it is about restructuring the world. God's kingdom isn't a post-mortem destiny, it is about God's sovereign rule in this time, in this world. Even in *Revelation 4,5* where twenty-four elders cast down their crowns what is being alluded to is a this-worldly reality, a present reality, the heavenly dimension of earthly lives.

Suffice to say I hope by now I have established the point that we need to attend carefully to doing theology when we approach the subject of death and when we lead funeral liturgies.

Death, whether the prospect of our own or the reality of someone else's challenges us with some big questions. What is the purpose of my life? What's it all about? What – if anything – comes next?

This is a reflection of some theological issues around funerals; some issues we need to be aware of even if we answer the questions they pose differently. Let's continue by asking a basic question; "What is a funeral for?"

Heading as I do a committee of the Church charged with questions of liturgy I would like to begin by acknowledging the work of another liturgical commission in addressing the question; "What is a Funeral for?" According to the Liturgical Commission of the Church of England, back in 1965, a funeral has five purposes.

1. To secure the reverent disposal of the corpse.
2. To commend the deceased to the care of our heavenly Father.
3. To proclaim the glory of our risen life in Christ here and hereafter.
4. To remind us of the awful certainty of our own death and judgement.
5. To make plain the eternal unity of Christian people, living and departed, in the risen and ascended Christ.

Does this seem like a complete list for you and if not then what is missing? A glaring omission seems to be the comfort and consolation of the bereaved. Though the Liturgical Commission expressed the belief that correctly addressing the five points I mentioned will bring comfort. I wish I had such faith in the precise execution of liturgy.

I think that if any such body; Anglican, Methodist or Presbyterian were to ask the question now the answer would be less clear cut, more nuanced and would be likely to begin with the human tragedy of death and bereavement rather than assume it will be addressed by the correct application of the right process. This short and certain list just doesn't quite ring true even if we agree with each clause. The Church and society have moved on. Consider this statement.

"For more than a quarter of a century there has been a sense that funerals have been ritually unsatisfactory to mourners and officiants."² So begins a thesis on the experience of funerals by British clergy and mourners. This is – fear not – a thesis but it is a short consideration of the theological considerations that we need to give attention to as we plan and carry out funeral services and other services such as memorial services or the blessing of a grave.

It has to be said that part of the difficulty we experience around funerals today is a matter of incredulity. Though our society keeps death at arms length compared to earlier generations we are acutely aware that humanity has the power to destroy itself both by environmental calamity and by military means. What is it in the face of an awareness of the possibility of our mass extinction to talk about the resurrection of the body? A nuclear blast leaves ashes and shadows and environmental catastrophes kill on a vast scale rendering any one death anonymous.

Though some Christian funeral liturgies talk about the resurrection of the body this belief has had less and less held over us over time. There is also a sense that the narrowness of concern over the survival of the individual in some way *ad infinitum* in the face of the ecological and human stresses the planet faces is a form of narcissistic egoism. Is it really all about me?³ Is salvation a redemption from the world or is it the world's redemption?

Sometimes Christianity has seemed to go very heavily with the former. The next life has sometimes loomed larger and more real than this one and compliance and obedience have been the passport to it. Whether in the sale of indulgences or in the preaching of certain televangelists this is has cropped up from time to time in western Christianity – in Catholicism and Protestantism. Jesus wouldn't have recognised this preoccupation.

My B. Th thesis, many years ago now, was about the development of ideas of the afterlife in the Hebrew Bible. They started very modestly, if there was such a thing it was but the palest shadow of this life. The dead most clearly and strongly lived on in memory, in the stories of ancestors told around the camp-fire on a desert evening. This is why childlessness is such a

² Paul Sheppy, "Liturgy and Death; An Examination of the Pastoral and Theological Issues Related to Funerals With Special Reference to Selected Funerary Rites." (Doctoral Thesis; University of Leeds), Leeds, UK, 1994. p. 14.

³ Sheppy, "Liturgy and Death," p.20.

tragedy in the Hebrew Scriptures. Who keeps my memory alive if I have no children to tell the stories of my life?

Hebrew ideas of the afterlife became more complex and more vivid as people struggled with the problem of evil. With goodness unacknowledged and evil triumphing, as people asked where is God in all this the picture of the afterlife became more vivid, more about reward and punishment. But in Judaism before Jesus, at his time and afterwards what happens next has not been as big a question as it is for Christians. *The Talmud*, an anthology of rabbinical writings says this; “*one day in this life is worth a thousand in the life to come.*” This is not so much that there is nothing, but the task of religion, its rightful preoccupation, is about living well now and this is enough. Then what will be will be.

If we can no longer assume a lively belief in life after death than divine judgement, heaven and hell are even more problematic despite reference to them in traditional funeral liturgies. Theologies which talk about judgement as God at work in history putting things right or of God in the processes of our development and maturity may have some possibilities but knowledge of these and familiarity with them is not widespread beyond what we might think of as the left wing of the church.

On a personal note I would say as someone who was an RN and is now a presbyter I find those close to death say little, often nothing, about what happens next. Their hope and aspirations are vested in those they love and the causes they believe in. Also – and I wonder if any of you have found this – it is those who have least connection to organised religion who, as mourners, say the most credulous things about the afterlife. “*She’ll be with Grandad.*” Nothing in Scripture or tradition suggests a family reunion is on the cards, instead in as much as the issue has been engaged with we are told we will be full of the vision and light of God. It could be that some of the more credulous things said are a rationalisation, a struggle to navigate a way through grief and I certainly don’t question or interrogate when I hear this.

Occasionally though clergy have made themselves unpopular by challenging some tastes around funerals. By tradition a gravestone should be simple, dignified and modest. I have seen some which are huge, immodest and tacky and some graveyards have rules about gravestones and about artificial flowers and toys. I have never been tested on it but if I am ever asked if the poem which goes “Death is nothing at all, I am in the next room” can be used I would struggle very hard because it simply isn’t true. Death is consequential and the dead are utterly removed from us.

Then again the author, Canon Henry Scott-Holland, had conflicting views on death. In a sermon in 1910 on the death of King Edward VII he said; “*So inexplicable, so ruthless, so blundering the cruel ambush into which we are snared, it makes its horrible breach in our*

*gladness with careless and inhuman disregard of us, beyond the darkness hides its impenetrable secret. Dumb as the night, that terrifying silence.*⁴

A Christian funeral has to negotiate a passage safe from both the rocks of sentimentality and the rocks of despair. Sentimentality is the enemy of truth and despair is the enemy of hope; we must try to avoid both.

“The Christian has, according to the New Testament, ‘already passed from death to life,’ so that the further transition of actual death ought not to be as terrifying as it appears.”

Intellectually yes, emotionally well that is another matter.

Traditionally funeral liturgies rightly treat death as very consequential; this is most clear in the words of committal; which are generally rather stark but say absolutely the time has come to hand this person over into the providence of God. A funeral has to deal with the enormous impact of a death.

There is both within and outside the churches a problem with some of the specialist words we Christians use. Let’s take salvation;

What do you think salvation means?

What do you think the average person thinks it means?

It has come to mean I think for many people both inside and outside church the guarantee of my salvation. My rescue from this world. It is in fact originally about the world’s redemption.

*“The Christian idea of salvation is about how to get life fixed at its most basic level ... all religions take the position that however good life may be, still something is “out of joint” and needs to be repaired. This they offer ways of correcting or transforming what has gone wrong.”*⁵

A Christian apprehension of the mystery we call God is grounded in an understanding of Jesus and salvation is about the “*reign of God*,” the kingdom Jesus talked about, lived and died for. Salvation isn’t a private matter, it is a re-ordering of the world.

John Wesley himself complained about preachers who talked of salvation as only about “*going to heaven*.” Salvation begins here and now, in this world and in its wholeness in Wesley’s thought, though he recognised it continued beyond the span of our lives.

Q. How is Jesus shown in art at his resurrection?

⁴ Tom Wright, **Surprised by Hope**. (London: SPCK, 2007), 21.

⁵ Delwin Brown, **What Does a Progressive Christian Believe? A Guide for the Searching, the Open and the Curious**. (New York: Seabury Books, 2008), 83.

Differently in the West from the East.

Jesus in Byzantine art rises from the grave, with Adam and Eve, then the patriarchs and prophets, then the whole of creation.

If we are talking about this person experiencing salvation how does this relate to the salvation of the whole world?

The funeral celebrant needs to articulate the darkness, the loss, the harrowing of death and to articulate some sense of Christian hope. This I think is a courageous task.

We have talked a little about salvation, now let's move on a little. What is eternal life? Again there are multiple meanings. Is it about the continuation of you or me as distinct persons *ad infinitum* in some sense? Is it about a fullness of life in this present moment? Maybe both? There will be a range of understandings amongst lay people, mourners, clergy and officiants. To take the funeral of someone who avidly read John Spong or Lloyd Geering may be quite a different experience from someone whose favourite hymn is "*When the Roll is Called up Yonder.*"

I found this recently which has been helpful in elaborating an understanding for me.

"People and cultures come and go, mountains and seas appear and disappear, perhaps even worlds go in and out of existence. God is the creative good – person, principle or process ... that pervades the creation, seeking to move it towards more wholesome forms of order. What we do somehow makes a difference to God, contributes to the divine aims, adds to the divine life, enriches the divine experience. This is the eternity of our lives. Our lives have an everlasting meaning or worth as they find a place in the God who assumes them and all of life.⁶"

Part of the courage needed can be asking mourners to take account of their feelings. I have lost count of the times I have been told that a family wants to celebrate the deceased person's life and they don't want any sadness, well, wishing doesn't make it so. Celebrating the life of someone who has died is important, but so is acknowledging the reality of their death, the impact it leaves on those left behind and the grief it invokes. I always make a point of saying to families that I will leave boxes of tissues on the reserved seats and I encourage people coming up to pay tribute to have a support person stand with them.

At the heart of the insistence on celebration as the dominant tone I sometimes get a sense of an increasing cultural unease with death and dying. At one time we didn't talk about sex, now it seems we never shut up about it. Yet our Victorian ancestors did funerals well and had a rich and socially supported process of mourning. How things have changed!

⁶ Brown, **Progressive Christian**, 90.

The first funeral I went to as a student was perhaps the worst I have ever been to. The celebrant managed to avoid using the words died or dead completely, we did have “promoted to glory” however, which is the Salvation Army expression for death. When I talked about this with other students it was suggested that the celebrant was trying not to upset the mourners. However I think they were perfectly aware someone had died, the elephant in the room needed to be named.

I would argue that one of the pitfalls we can fall into as funeral celebrants today is a deep subjectivity. It is right that funeral rites are personalised, to some degree, but we can run the risk of disconnection between this funeral and the narrative that all Christian funerals are traditionally embedded in; namely the dying and resurrection of Jesus.