

The Funeral Liturgy

The origins of funeral practices, whether burial or other forms of reverent disposal of the bodies of those who have died, are lost in the furthest mists of human history. Many of the oldest remains of our most ancient ancestors are their burial sites and it is not impossible that the appearance of rites associated with mourning and the final disposal of the bodies of the dead mark the emergence of humanity as we understand that term. Funerals are universal in the human species, both historically and geographically.

Funeral practices are unlike some of the other rites and ceremonies of the Church precisely because of their universal nature. People do them first of all because they are human. Many people who do not belong to the Christian Church (or any other worshipping body or faith community) and who do not describe themselves as “religious”, are among the most assiduous in the exercise of funeral rites.

It is important for Christians to be aware of the universal dimensions of funeral practices, partly out of sensitivity to the basic needs, conscious and unconscious, which mourners bring to these rituals, and partly so they can identify clearly the particular insights and interpretations which Christian faith brings to bear on the reality of death and the experience of bereavement.

The Bible reflects many attitudes to death, ranging from belief that death is a judgement for sin (and its prolonged deferral a reward for righteousness), through resigned acceptance of the inevitable and inexplicable, to the belief in the goodness of both the Creator and the creation which eventually found expression in a theology of resurrection.

A Christian attitude to death is inseparable from the biblical accounts of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and his followers’ experience of the saving power of his renewed presence. Yet even on this central issue the biblical account is varied. The fourth Gospel sees the whole of Jesus’ ministry as an expression of glory in which death itself is an act of triumph and resurrection an inevitable conclusion. The cry of abandonment in Matthew and Mark and of resignation in Luke reflect another perception of Jesus’ experience of death. Early Christians who expected the imminent return of the Lord were particularly threatened by the death of fellow-believers who might, it was

assumed, be deprived of full participation in the realization of the new age. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews developed a theology of the death of Jesus as a "school of suffering." And so on. There is no single biblical attitude to death, not even to the death of Jesus. The biblical narratives and letters reflect a mixture of grief and hope, suffering and glory. This mixture is found in Jesus' attitude to his own death and in his followers' attitude to his death and the death of other members of their company.¹

It is entirely fitting that Christian funerals reflect these various dimensions of the experience of death. Faith is not only belief: faith embraces even its own shadow, which is doubt. Liturgical expressions of faith and hope in the face of death should consequently leave room for the radical sense of anxiety and loss which the mourners experience. They should also enable, rather than deny, the grief process about which so much has been learned in recent years. On the other hand, Christian funerals should not become unrelieved expressions of anguish and despair: there is a time for thanksgiving even in the midst of mourning.

This note of thanksgiving even in a time of tears explains, in part, the ancient association of Christian funerals with celebrations of the eucharist. Thanksgiving for the death and victory of the Christ vibrates with different and more basic tones at the time of the death of a fellow disciple. Further, the bread and wine of holy communion, that foretaste of the messianic banquet, convey an experience of the solidarity of the Christian community which is particularly appropriate to the moment. All our experience of the kingdom of God takes place between the poles of "already" and "not yet," a tension which is only temporarily resolved for us when we remember with thanks the basic Christian story, and in the case of a funeral, the story of this particular Christian as well.

Christian funerals have been shaped over the centuries by a variety of notions of what happens to those who have died. In earlier centuries the idea of solidarity was paramount: the Church was a single body moving towards an ultimate destiny which neither living nor dead had yet experienced. This view of things gradually gave way to a more individualistic preoccupation with immediate personal destiny. Pagan influences also entered the scheme and it is sometimes unclear if prayers for the rest and peace of the deceased were intended to

secure their welfare or the protection of their survivors. Certainly much Christian piety became an expression of identification with the individual soul in its ongoing purgation and development rather than with the whole redeemed humanity of which that individual is a significant but not distinguishable member.²

These nuances of piety can be helpful if they are held in some kind of balance and with a strong sense of their symbolic structure. They are less helpful, and even destructive, when they are held with conviction in their exact and literal correspondence to an unseen reality. For the truth is that we do not know the condition of the dead, and while faith may consign their well-being to the creative and redemptive remembrance of God, everything we say about them remains, as thing said, at the level of symbol. This is precisely the level at which Paul worked when he wrote the great fifteenth chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians, drawing on images of seeds and stars and bodies to communicate his belief in the ultimate transformation of mortal human nature. It is important that funeral liturgies enable people to act at this poetic and symbolic level of their being.

The original ministers of funeral liturgies were the family or tribe of the dead person, and this is still true in many parts of the world today. Comparatively little is known about the development of Christian funerals, but it is clear that Christian families, from an early date, chose to celebrate their funeral liturgies within the larger family of the Christian community. Christian cemeteries became places of great importance for the Christian community, especially in times of persecution. The cleric in charge of the burying-place was an important leader of the Church.

An effect of this consignment of the rites of the family to the care of the larger Christian community was the gradual withdrawal of responsibility from the immediate family and friends of the dead person. The Church gradually took on roles which once had been the inalienable responsibility of the family or tribe and the secularization of this process in more recent times has led to the development of a profession which relieves bereaved families of many burdens but also sometimes functions as a barrier between families and their funeral rites.

It is important to note that funerals are the property of neither undertakers nor clergy. They belong to the circle of family and friends

of the person who has died and, when that circle is Christian, they find an appropriate setting in the larger Christian fellowship. Both undertakers and clergy may provide valued support and resources, and clergy have a particular responsibility to make sure that the rituals observed (at least those which take place in church) are appropriate expressions of Christian faith and hope. The family and friends who come to bury their dead should be encouraged to take an active role in the liturgy.

Funeral rites, unlike most other liturgical observances, normally consist of a number of distinct liturgical events spread over a period of time, usually several days. They may include such elements as prayers in the home, prayers in the presence of the body (whether in the home or in church or in an undertaker's premises), the reception of the body at the church, a liturgy of the word in an undertaker's chapel, a liturgy of the word (and possibly of the sacrament) in church, the committal of the body to the grave, the flames, or the sea, and the disposal of ashes at a later date.

Obviously not all of these elements will be observed in each case. The resources which follow are, however, intended to provide for these various events and aspects of a funeral, with such adaptation as may be necessary. The family and friends of the dead person are encouraged to consult as early as possible with the priest or other person responsible in their parish, as well as with the undertaker who may be involved, to plan the various events which will constitute the funeral. Particular sensitivity is required in planning the funerals of suicides, whose deaths are often to be regarded as more tragic than sinful.

This material provides for three forms of funeral:

- a A funeral composed of three events separated by two processions. Prayers are provided for use in the home or in an undertaker's premises; a liturgy is provided for use in church; a committal is provided for use at the grave or other appropriate place.
- b A funeral composed of two events: a liturgy in a chapel and a committal at the grave;
- c A funeral which takes place entirely in a home or other suitable place. (This form would usually be observed in special

circumstances, e.g., when a committal must be deferred because of inclement weather or the distance of the grave.)

These various forms of services are provided as broad outlines for different kinds of circumstances and not as rigid alternatives. For instance, although Form I is intended for use in a church ceremony (whether the eucharist is celebrated or not), sometimes Form II may be better suited to a funeral in church. Similarly, prayers and readings with the family and friends some time before the principal funeral service are not forbidden when Form II is used, although it may be decided not to read all the opening sentences on each occasion and to substitute one of the additional prayers for the opening prayer at one of the services.

- 1 Cf. Schuyler Brown, "Bereavement in New Testament Perspective," *Worship*, Vol. 48, No. 2, 1974, pp. 93–98.
- 2 Cf. John P. Meier, "Catholic Funerals in the Light of Scripture," *Worship*, Vol. 48, No. 4, 1974, pp. 206–216.