

Chapter seven: *Witness to the resurrection*

This chapter has comments on the following services in the Leader's Book:

**PASTORAL
SERVICES** The Funeral Service
 The Service at the Cemetery
 or in the Crematorium
 Chapel

These do not appear in the
People's Book

PERSPECTIVES

Christian funeral services are primarily Easter liturgies: they should be characterised by the mood of deep joy of Easter Day. The death of a Christian finds its meaning in the resurrection. Because Jesus is raised from the dead, we, too, shall be raised. This does not mean that the sense of grief and loss is inappropriate; death is a mystery, but death is a reality. A Christian funeral today will hold in tension the proper expression of grief and faithful proclamation of the gospel. For believers, to be 'in Christ' is to be closely united with other Christians; so, to be parted by death brings a deep sorrow, even if our hope is that our loved ones are now 'with the Lord' (See Philippians 1:23). We participate too in the funerals of those whom we knew only slightly, and those who did not share our faith. Jesus promised blessing to those who mourn (Matthew 5:4).

People of all faiths have taken care to bury or cremate their dead with solemnity and ceremony. The early Christians continued some of the practices of their native Judaism, while adopting some new customs which contrasted with the practices of other religious communities around them. Christian funerals took place during the day; the pagans preferred the night, since to them death was about darkness. Again, Christian leaders disapproved of extravagant funeral trappings and extravagant mourning, especially loud lamentation, the weeping and wailing typical of pagan mourning practice. Thus, Christian funeral processions (an important part of the rite, since bodies were buried outside the city) contrasted with pagan ones: the Christians went to the graveside singing psalms and hymns. Early Christian leaders spoke against the wearing of black (following pagan custom) because it suggested a lack of faith in the resurrection. It would be appropriate for a Uniting Church minister to wear his/her alb and Easter stole when conducting a funeral;

In our days, among our other evils, there is one malady very prevalent among our women; they make a great show in their dirges and wailings . . . tearing their hair, making furrows down their cheeks . . . And this they do, some from grief, others from ostentation and rivalry . . . What madness is this? Will not the heathen laugh? Will they not deem our doctrines fables? They will say, 'There is no resurrection — the doctrines of the Christians are mockeries, . . . for their women lament as though there were nothing after this world; they give no heed to the words engraved in their books . . .'

'What then?', someone asks, 'Is it possible, being human, not to weep?' No, I do not forbid weeping, but I forbid the beating of yourselves, the weeping immoderately. I know that our nature asks and seeks for its friends and daily companions; it cannot but be grieved. As also Christ showed, for he wept over Lazarus. So do you; weep, but gently, with decency, with the fear of God. If you weep like this, you do so not as disbelieving the resurrection, but as finding separation hard to endure . . . we weep, yet not as if we despaired. We weep as if we were sending someone on his way to another land . . . For to honour the dead is, not wailing and lamenting, but hymns and psalms and an excellent life.

(St John Chrysostom, 347–407 AD: sermon on John 11:1–29. The point stands, of course, if it is *men* who do the mourning!)

yet there is a case for the seasonal colour, death being part of the ordinariness of human existence, or violet, death calling forth penitence and readiness, like Lent (see the suggestions on LB 142).

What we believe affects what we say and do, not only in funeral rites. In Christian history, the accent has often been on the need of deliverance from punishment for sin. Mediaeval rites were marked by a strong penitential note, arising not least from fear. This is typified by the well-known anthem *Dies Irae* (Day of Wrath) which originated in the 12th or 13th century. The joyful singing of psalms and hymns by the earliest Christians had become a formal 'office', probably rightly known as a 'dirge' after the first word, *Dirige*, of the antiphon.

At the Reformation, various attempts were made to rescue the proper character of a Christian funeral. Luther tried to shift the emphasis from the dead person to faith in the resurrection expressed in hymn, prayer and sermon; yet a century later, Lutheran sermons were extended by long eulogies of the dead. The first Congregationalists particularly voiced a strong objection to hypocritical eulogies. In Presbyterian custom, and partly as sheer reaction to mediaeval superstition, the rite was drastically simplified, the burial took place at times without ceremony and virtually in silence, the minister (if present) afterwards preaching a sermon in the nearby church on the theme of Christian hope. The fervent hymns of the early Methodists introduced a note of joy to the Anglican rites which they largely used, and memorial addresses preached after the funeral service, which included an account of the last hours and last words of the departed, were said, in a peculiar phrase, to 'improve' the death. [For a fuller account, see Graeme M. Griffin and Des Tobin, *In the Midst of Life . . . the Australian Response to Death*, Melbourne University Press, 1982.]

Recent Roman Catholic revision has perhaps gone furthest in restoring the 'paschal' (Easter) nature of the funeral rite, but the same is also seen in most recent rites, including that of the Uniting Church. This is much to be welcomed, since sentiment and weak substitutes for the gospel are too likely to influence our services. 'The strong affirmations of scripture are far more potent than any poetry about sleep, passage, or crossing the bar' (J. F. White).

THE FUNERAL SERVICE

The funeral service has one of the most generous offerings of resources in *Uniting in Worship*.

This is chiefly because it is difficult to design a service which would suit all occasions. The notes (LB 452-455) make most other necessary explanations of the resources. Further, there has been so much published, not least in Australia, on the pastoral aspects of ministry to the dying and the bereaved, that little needs to be added here. The work of Professor G. M. Griffin on the Australian context of death, dying and mourning is especially worth study; for example, *Death and the Church, Problems and Possibilities*, Dove, Melbourne, 1978.

THE SERVICE IN THE CHURCH

Note iii indicates that this part may well be used in church, home or funeral parlour; or at the cemetery or crematorium if the whole service takes place there.

1 INTRODUCTION

The minister may well prefer to begin in the usual way, 'Let us worship God' and to read the scripture sentences before the words of Introduction, 'We are here today . . .', to strengthen the sense that this is primarily a service of worship. In that context only are the memory of the dead honoured and the needs of the mourners met.

2 PRAYERS

The first is a prayer of confidence in God and of invocation; the second is a prayer for forgiveness. The latter may initially come as a surprise, but in the case of a sudden death, or where there was no time to take leave or opportunity to resolve differences, many will be helped by this provision. The pastoral focus of Uniting Church services is on the needs of the bereaved, not on the deceased. Because it is unfamiliar, the prayer needs to be read slowly, and with a brief pause after 'forgive us if there have been times when we failed N', and after the succeeding petition. The Service of the Lord's Day provides for a Declaration of Forgiveness after a prayer of confession; this would also be appropriate here. Alternative declarations are found in LB 591-595.

5 PREACHING OF THE WORD

The Reformers (of all periods) criticised Christian funeral sermons when they said more about the dead person than of Christ. If a family has requested a service in a church, or one led by a Christian minister, there is an obligation to speak of the distinctive Christian hope. The readings will need some exposition if their message is to be heard. The sermon need not be long; but at least it should balance any eulogy given! This is not to suggest that no account of the person's life should be given. The point of that, however, is not to provide a list of personal virtues and achievements, but to recognise the grace of God in a human life. On the basis of God's work for us and in us, we entrust the dead into God's hands. Where the minister did not know the deceased, some family

An early Jewish response to extravagance

Our rabbis taught: formerly they were wont to bring out the rich (for burial) on a *dargesh* [a tall state bed, ornamented and with rich coverlets] and the poor on a plain bier [wooden bed], and the poor felt ashamed; they instituted therefore that all should be brought out on a plain bier, out of deference to the poor . . .

(from the Tractate Mo'ed Katan, first century CE, quoted in Geoffrey Rowell, *The Liturgy of Christian Burial*, Alcuin/SPCK 1977, p. 5. Many other practices were reformed on the same principle of respect for the poor.)

Placement of the coffin

The cramped space at the front of many of our churches has meant that the coffin is often placed parallel to the Lord's Table — the usual placement for a viewing. Where there is room, a more traditional placement might be restored, that is, with the coffin perpendicular to the Table, feet facing the Table (and frequently the cross on the sanctuary wall). The deceased person is then not seemingly on display. The Easter candle is placed at the head. (Other traditions place the ordained in the reverse position to the laity; we do not.)

The pall: a practice worth reviving?

The practice of covering the coffin with a pall has not entirely disappeared: at a military funeral the coffin is often draped with the national flag. The flag, however, replaced the more traditional provision of a pall — often in black or purple and with a cross or other Christian symbol embroidered or applied on it. In times past, either a church or a funeral director would supply a pall — in grades of solemnity and expense. 'Pallbearers' (as coffin-bearers are now sometimes — inaccurately — called) were chosen to hold the edges of the pall or a tassel attached to it, as they walked in procession beside the coffin. It has to be said that in the last century, the pall became part of the heavy and slightly ridiculous (to our eyes) trappings of the Victorian funeral. It may nevertheless be worth rescuing in a new form.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) recommends that a white pall be placed over the coffin during the funeral service. One benefit is that it means that comparisons cannot be made between more and less costly coffins. A church worship committee might commission a pall which in its colour, fabric and design, speaks of the Christian hope. It should be about three metres long and two wide, with a large cross on it. The use of white makes the link again with baptism and our faith in the resurrection. Placing the lighted Easter candle near the coffin makes the point in another way. Can we afford not to take every opportunity to preach the Christian faith when so many alternative and contrary messages abound?

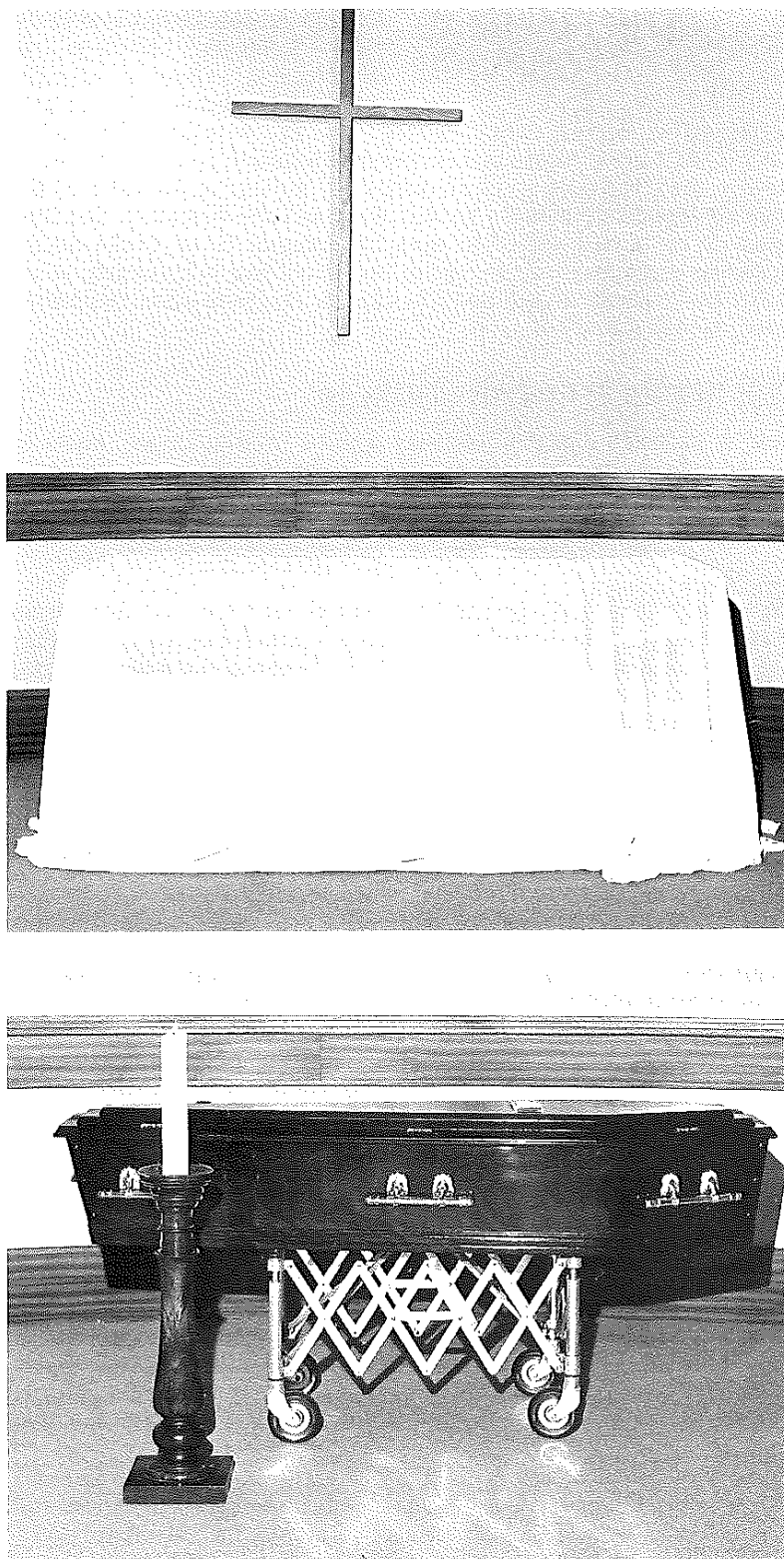


Photo: Eddy Marmur, courtesy John Allison Monkhouse, Brighton Vic.

friend may be invited to give a (brief) account of the person's life, for life itself is valued. In many ways, this releases the preacher for his/her particular responsibility as a Minister of the Word.

6 PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Note the rubric on LB 469 which explains the order intended. The first, Praise for the Work of Christ, is intended always to be used. It would be replaced by the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving if the eucharist were celebrated, and it has the same purpose, to thank God for all that has been done for us and our salvation. Thanksgiving for a particular human life takes place in that context.

The prayer of Thanksgiving for Life in the Church (LB 470) allows for an affirmation of the means of grace available to a Christian during his/her life. It is good to celebrate the ways in which God's love has been ministered to us in the life of the church, avoiding, however, a further eulogy. It is by baptism that we are linked to the Easter faith — so Paul argues in Romans 6:3–11 (one of the readings listed on LB 254). If we died with Christ, we shall be raised with him. Every time we eat the bread and drink the cup, we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes (1 Corinthians 11:26). Throughout our Christian life, we have anticipated the heavenly banquet at every Lord's Supper. Lives of love and service to Christ anticipate the life of the kingdom. This prayer celebrates the privilege of church membership.

It would be false, of course, to claim this privilege where the deceased was not involved in the life of the church. The alternative under A (LB 470–471) gives ample opportunity to record the value of the person's life in the human community.

7 COMMENDATION

The pressures of time in the city, or the general avoidance of death, means that not everyone present for the church service accompanies the coffin to the cemetery or crematorium. This commendation therefore serves an important function for them: it is the moment of taking leave, and of entrusting the dead to the Lord.

The procession then forms, the minister going to the head of the coffin and awaiting the bearers. If a pall has been used, it is removed at this point. The coffin is turned around, and carried out, the family following after. Given the excessively emotional quality of music often played at this point, it may be best to sing a hymn or psalm as the procession leaves.

THE SERVICE AT THE CEMETERY OR IN THE CREMATORIUM CHAPEL

Whether at a grave or in a crematorium chapel, this service should be simple and brief. It is in the church that the faith is best conveyed, not merely by word but by the whole environment. For this reason, a funeral service for a Christian should take place from a church, where the signs of the life of faith surround them and their friends: font, table, pulpit, the places where the means of grace, where the Christian community, are found and prayer is offered.

Occasionally, a request is made that this service take place before the

Masonic and other rites

Careful listening to the words of the burial rite of Freemasonry will reveal that its theology differs from that of the New Testament. If the above account is right, and Christian funerals are fundamentally celebrations of Easter, a ritual which does not mention the name of Christ cannot be regarded as adequate. Insofar as the commemoration of a dead comrade by his friends from the fields of war speaks of faith, or heroism, the Returned Servicemen's League rite may not express the fullness of the Christian faith. But they are 'additional rites' deeply rooted in our history and society. If what they commemorate is a part of the history of the deceased, they have a right to be observed. If the family has (without pressure) accepted these expressions of solidarity, the Christian minister should not be ungracious about them.

The church's responsibility is to see that a service which is under its care is a sufficient statement of the gospel. It is time, perhaps, for the church to give fuller consideration of what it believes and teaches at this point. One way to maintain integrity as well as respect is to complete the Christian service, pronounce the blessing, and step aside. From the church's perspective, that is to end on a less than adequate note. It is unlikely that, tradition being what it is, the other rites can be done *before* the church's. It may be better to do the committal, invite the other rites to be performed, and conclude with the church's prayers and blessing. But Christians need to have the confidence that the gospel will have been heard.

Music for funerals

Where the church has control of the music to be played — which it seldom does at a crematorium — it is important that the music supports the Christian affirmation. Organ music needs discipline, simplicity, strength. In discussions with families about hymns, prominence should not be given to the deceased's presumed favourites, but to those that express the church's faith. Certainly there is a limitation in terms of familiarity of tunes, but the problem is better resolved by singing no hymns than singing inadequate ones, badly. The organist (or other instrumentalist) may choose to play hymn tunes as voluntaries during the service which will recall the words of the faith — Easter hymns, for instance. The answer to the vexed question of what is good or bad music lies in whether it plays on human feelings or whether it lifts the heart to God. There are some congregational choirs who offer to sing at funerals during the week: a gesture of real love with considerable effect on the way in which funerals can be made to speak of the faith.

A form of commendation and committal

In some cases, the church/chapel service is the only service, the hearse leaving directly for the crematorium without accompanying mourners. If there is to be no service at the crematorium, some form of committal should be used at this point in the church. One suggestion is that after a commendation (as in LB 479, #7), appropriate words may be inserted in words of committal (LB 486), for example,

We now commit his/her body
to be taken from here
to be cremated,
ashes to ashes, dust to dust,
in sure and certain hope, etc.

church service. The reasons need to be carefully tested. Is the family in fact hiding from the reality of death? In city and suburban churches, there can indeed be a long gap between the committal and the gathering, and the argument will be put that a memorial service allows people to go straight to a gathering afterwards. Yet the disadvantage is that many mourners will not be present for the committal, with consequent loss of their own opportunity to console and be consoled.

11 SCRIPTURE SENTENCES

The rubric suggests that these or a psalm be read as the coffin is lowered into a grave or while it is withdrawn from sight at a crematorium. The idea is not to distract the congregation from this final parting, but to surround it with the words of the faith.

12 COMMITTAL

There is no doubt that a burial has a sense of reality about it that few crematorium services allow. Some Australian crematoria, however, now allow the possibility of viewing the actual cremation. At a burial, a few vestigial rituals remain also, which help people express their grief: throwing earth into the grave, or coming to the graveside for a last glimpse, being supported by family and friends at this painful moment. These rituals should be encouraged. Where it is possible, imitation grass carpet notwithstanding, it is better to take a handful of the earth of the gravesite to cast on the coffin, rather than the phial of sand and dust provided by the funeral director. The old custom of the family and friends literally filling in the grave can have great therapeutic value, and where appropriate to the family involved, might be raised as a possibility.

At this point, a crematorium service gives less help. The visible signs of the faith are minimised in the 'chapel' architecture. The music provided is electronic and distant. All that remains to be done is the hygienic disposal of a body. That is what society builds crematoria for, yet their design removes us as far as possible from direct reminders of death.

A cremation allows one further rite, however, and that is the disposal of the ashes. Prayers for this are found on LB 492–494. The first, LB 492, is appropriate for use in a memorial garden; the second, on LB 493, would suit the placement of ashes in a columbarium. A third prayer (LB 494) is for scattering ashes on water. The traditional form for burial at sea includes the phrase 'we commit his/her body to the deep'.

Three forms of committal are provided on LB 486. It is difficult to know why one would be used rather than another, since the purpose is the same, and universal. It is certainly not intended that any is a soft option for use when the dead person was not a Christian! Each expresses the Christian hope: our confidence in the resurrection of Christ, and in the power of God to raise us and all the dead.

Whatever is made of the biblical teaching about the fate of the dead — and it is important to observe that the Bible leaves death a mystery — the church teaches that all shall be raised, and are raised whatever their final destiny. There is no room for a note of uncertainty at this point in Christian funerals, for the 'sure and certain hope' is a statement about Christ's victory. (Read 1 Corinthians 15, one of the set readings, LB 464, with a good commentary.) There should be more preaching on this

theme — at worship, on Sundays, whenever the lectionary gives opportunity, or by deliberate choice. Pastoral care at a time of death begins in the church's regular teaching ministry long before a bereavement occurs. Congregations need reminding of the old Advent themes, the 'Last Things' interpreted in the language of today: death, judgment, heaven and hell, or to put them in the form of the church's creed, 'the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting' (Apostles' Creed). This is the faith into which we were baptised (so the Baptism service, LB 21–22).

Praying for the dead

Much Protestant ink has been spilled on this issue, but at a certain distance from the controversies of the 16th century, something more positive might be said. The main fear then was the residual belief in purgatory; that is not likely to mislead our people now. On the other hand, it is clear that our affection for someone, which has led us to pray with them and for them for years during their lifetime, does not cease when they die. One of the purposes of a funeral service is to commend the dead person to God, and this we may do, knowing that God's love continues after death.

The funeral service in *Uniting in Worship* at no point makes any petition for the dead. The prayers imply that the deceased is in God's care, and that there we hope to join them in due time. The good examples of the saints, including those whom we have known, are recalled and set forth. But more direct petitions will be found in the section Ministry at the Time of Death, LB 446–451. Others will be found in the Treasury of Prayers in PB (for example, #40 on PB 231). Certainly care must be taken in the wording of such prayers, but no scripture denies our need to speak to God of those who have gone from us.
