

EDITORIAL

Often it is only when ministers are themselves among the principal mourners at a funeral that they really come to appreciate the enormous value of specific personal references, in tribute or prayer, to the deceased. There are, of course, few things worse than ministerial humbug, and few worse occasions than funerals for its manifestation. But this is no excuse for going to the other extreme. What is it that makes some ministers studiously avoid all personal mention of the deceased, even to the extent of failing to mention his or her name? Is it the fear of uttering sugary platitudes which will cause those 'in the know' to laugh up their sleeves? Is it a perverted understanding of what is good 'Reformed' practice? Is it due to the genuine inability of an over-worked minister of a large parish to make meaningful prior contact with every bereaved household, so that he does not want to get the name of giving some a better-prepared funeral than others? Or is it the product, purely and simply, of laziness or incompetence?

If it is the fear of being platitudinous, perhaps the minister concerned should reflect upon the fact that he has plenty colleagues who, without attributing to the deceased qualities of faith and life which he or she may never have displayed, can nevertheless find something of a personal nature to speak about. And what matter if that 'something' seems platitudinous? The minister is called to be a pastor, not a poet. It may sound platitudinous to him, because he has said very much the same thing countless times already, but to this particular set of mourners it may mean a great deal.

If it is the minister's understanding of what it means to be 'Reformed', he should reflect upon the historical context out of which the bare Westminster Directory prescriptions arose. It is perfectly possible to say, even to imply, nothing about the ultimate end of someone who made no credible Christian profession, while at the same time acknowledging (not pleading!) before God positive attributes which he displayed in this life. This has nothing to do with prayers for the dead, and if the minister is worried that even the merest personal mention of the deceased might be construed as such, he should remember that by the really ignorant the very funeral service itself, no matter how impersonal, may be assumed to be some kind of 'mass' for the dead. People tend to hear what they want to hear, and may very well transform a funeral into what they want it to be, even if the minister's intentions, borne out by his words, are altogether different.

If it is the genuine inability of the minister to make adequate contact with the family of the deceased prior to the funeral, so that he has nothing of a personal nature which he can say, the blame must be shared by the whole Church of Scotland for masquerading as the 'national' Church, while placing ministers in situations so

overwhelming that they cannot cope on their own with their burdens of office. But this having been said, the fact remains that some ministers, set in huge parishes, do a very fine job as far as the care of the bereaved is concerned. It is all a matter of priorities, and some people's priorities seem rather peculiar. Nevertheless, the provision of ministerial assistance (or even suitably-qualified lay assistance) could help greatly. At the very least the district elder, or some other appropriate person, could (if capable of doing so) pay a preliminary visit to the home before the service, then brief the minister accordingly.

If it is sheer laziness or incompetence, the offending minister needs nothing less than a 'rocket' from Presbytery. But will he get it? The Church of Scotland is a Presbyterian church, but in the matter of ministerial supervision it is often anything but. We are often too aware of our own personal inadequacies and failures to be willing to deal effectively with our brethren - even in love. After all, our turn might come next! The awakening of a true episcopē is a crying necessity. The insistence of some other communions that episcopē is inseparable from the office of episcopos is just a red herring at this point. We already have 'bishops' in the Church of Scotland - forty-nine of them - but because they are Presbyteries rather than individuals, their capacity for decisive action is somewhat reduced. It was not always so, however, and doubtless any 'bishop' (one individual) thrust upon a reluctant Church of Scotland in an act of ecumenical appeasement would have to be so hedged-about with 'democratic' checks that his episcopē would be irreparably eroded. The episcopē of Presbytery is not eroded - it is merely dormant. Could it even be that the anti-bishops gut-reaction of many within the Kirk is, in fact, directed against episcopē itself rather than against the office of episcopos? All that people fear a bishop might do is already within the power of Presbytery to do. The re-awakening of Presbytery might be a more shattering experience for the Kirk than the imposition of bishops. The devil we know could have some nasty surprises tucked up his sleeve!