

## CONDUCTING FUNERALS

Gordon D. Jamieson

When I first conducted funeral services, more than forty years ago, there were very different expectations from those faced by ministers today. We used the 1940 *Book of Common Order*. If the service was a burial, it was usually preceded by a short service in the living room of the family home. If it was a cremation, there was usually only one service at the crematorium, with a strict time limit of twenty minutes. Few funerals involved a church service.

The 1940 book provided a largely impersonal service. A Christian funeral service was about God – his comfort and strength for those who were suffering and his gift of eternal life in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Any references to the deceased were usually contained within one of the prayers. Some of my more senior colleagues never mentioned the deceased's name at any point in the service, confining themselves to the 1940 book's terminology "our brother (or sister) here departed". Families accepted this, looking for nothing more. In those days people were more likely to die at home, and funeral services often took place no more than three days after the death: this would have allowed very little time to prepare a considered tribute to the deceased.

The second funeral I conducted remains firmly in my memory. It was August 1973. I was the probationer in an Edinburgh housing scheme. My 'bishop' was on holiday, and I was responsible for the parish. A young child fell from the third floor of a multi-storey block of flats and was killed.

The parents had met when they were patients at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital. I was faced with a situation where the immediate family had no real connection with Christian faith. The 1940 book provided very little that was relevant to them. I remember thinking that the only scripture reading which might have any resonance was the 23rd Psalm. That funeral led me to abandon the words of the 1940 book, "Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God to take unto himself ..." I fully understood what those words meant in a theological sense, but I also realised how they would be heard by many

people. Any suggestion that God was responsible for tragedy was something I wanted to avoid. I have never used those words since that summer.

That summer was followed by twenty-six years in three different parishes. Funeral services evolved. The time between a death and a funeral got longer. More services were held in church. There came to be an expectation that the minister would say something about the deceased, but this remained one part of many within the service. When I left parish ministry for the Church Offices in the spring of 2000, most funerals were still taken by ministers and were clearly Christian in content.

During my time in the Church Offices, I conducted a few funerals. Most of these funerals were for members of my wife's family, who did not have a church connection. I knew that I was expected to pay tribute to these relatives, and the balance of the funeral service changed, with more about the deceased and less scripture reading.

Since I 'retired' in the autumn of 2012, I have provided pastoral cover or served as a locum in a number of West Lothian parishes. I am now aware of the number of funerals conducted by humanist celebrants. On one recent visit to West Lothian Crematorium, I looked at the list for the day. It was a busy day with eight services, four of which were conducted by the same humanist celebrant. My return to conducting funerals has made me aware of today's expectation that a funeral service is a celebration of a life: the main part of the service is the tribute to the deceased.

This has led me to reflect on how this new expectation works theologically and liturgically. I feel that a funeral service should not be disjointed: there should be a logical progression from beginning to end. What I now do is pay tribute to the deceased, in some detail, near the beginning of the service, after an opening hymn and a short prayer. Following the tribute, there will be one scripture reading, a longer prayer, and the committal. Some may feel that I have reduced the Christian content too much, but I feel that it is more likely to be heard by family and friends if there is not too much of it.

How do I prevent the tribute being separated from the rest of the liturgy? Either I read verses from the 8th Psalm, pointing out the importance to

people to God our creator, or I read these words from the first chapter of Genesis,

“God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. . . . God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.”

Then I go on to say,

*In a funeral service we give thanks to God for his gift of life and we celebrate a human life created in his image as it comes to an end in this world.*

I rejoice that funeral services today are more personal because I feel that the gospel is fundamentally personal. We see this in the encounters of Jesus with individual men, women and children. Christian funeral services can be celebrations of human lives and, at the same time, offer the comfort, peace and hope of our faith. In parish ministry we are often in contact with people who have little or no faith. If we fulfil their expectations that a person's life be celebrated, they may also hear something of the gospel.

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