

ON TAKING FUNERALS

These comments on the taking of funerals are submitted at the invitation of the Editor, with all their roughness and varying importance, in the hope that readers may be stimulated to help fumbling practitioners like the writer to be more discriminate in quarrying and more professional in polishing.

1. Probably most parish ministers, like myself, go to a bereaved house immediately they hear of the death or, if this is not possible, arrange a time to call. I wonder if they also have found that their presence has had apparently more effect when their first bereavement visit has had to take place late in the evening, when their arrival has not been expected by some or all, when the wider family have gathered and when, even, some alcohol has been shared beforehand. In such circumstances, particularly where people do not know me and perhaps no minister at all personally, and with all the inevitable cross-talk, I have found it easier to evaluate and even experience the sense of loss, while others have been enabled to express their feelings, question my or the Church's attitudes, and re-cement their own solidarity one with another. Apart from the other issues, there are not so many opportunities these days for real and mutually enriching evangelism with consenting adults!

2. A busy undertaker tells me that only a very few ministers nowadays will agree to conduct a little service in home or his chapel before a cremation. The common feeling is that such is 'unnecessary' or 'just a duplication'. (I can well believe that the second of these ill-considered views is held: when in another place, and I had never faced the request before, a neighbouring parish minister of long experience asked that he be allowed to share a funeral following a real tragedy. As he had known the family for a long time, I suggested that he conduct the 'Preparatory Service' in the undertaker's rooms, for the principal mourners. He led us through the complete service in the Book of Common Order and left me to struggle, on the short journey with the mourners to the crematorium, after something that would not be a duplicate, and an ordeal.)*

My own attitude is that I continue to be pleased to conduct an

* This is not the only piece of relevant nonsense I have come across. The Superintendent of a crematorium has told me that sometimes the 23rd Psalm is both sung and read in the one short service. Then there was the Probationer who arrived, duly licensed by a Presbytery and complete with a B.D. Honours degree from one University and a certificate in Pastoral Theology from another, but without any training at all in the conduct of funerals, without even having had to attend one of these services which are so essential a part of the minister's work.

intimate service before the public funeral whenever the mourners ask for such. The emptiness is going to be felt most in one special house or among a few particular people – some of whom may rarely be able to be close to each other, and my experience is that a brief preparatory service in which God's Peace is sought and His Word read, while *sometimes* apparently an unconsidered ritual, can *frequently* become intensely meaningful to any who are confused or embarrassed as well as to those who are scared they will not be able to cope with what is about to come. In such circumstances, J. B. Phillips' wording of the Beatitudes seems to find a response among non-kirk people – including his 'Happy are those who are real in their thoughts and feelings: in the end they will see the ultimate Reality, God.' (*Your God is too Small*, p. 87)

3. It seems to me that the function of the funeral service is in part analogous to that of an electrical transformer: highly charged and potentially destructive emotions have to be broken down into lower voltages that will be useful for warmth and light. Is it right, then, that so many mourners leave so many cremation services more overcome than when they went in? Maybe it is inevitable, but I have sometimes wished young Christians would sit at the back of a crematorium for a day and then, for us practitioners, relate what was actually experienced to the purpose of worship and our understanding of the resurrection.

For some years now I have moved the Committal to the beginning of the cremation service. Although it is meaningful and helpful that 'the big thing' in Baptism, Communion and Ordination Services should be gradually built up to, the action peculiar to the cremation service is not of this nature at all and is not, of course, the high point of the service. Furthermore, in this instance the people have been dreading and not rejoicing at the prospect before them and the longer the suspense, particularly after the weakening days of waiting beforehand, the greater the strain and the less the time left for the work of the Comforter within the service. On this reasoning, I approach the catafalque during the first singing – 'Yea, though I walk in death's dark vale, yet will I fear none ill' has thus become pointedly relevant. The mourners are already standing at the close and so do not have to be summoned to make a special effort. After the Committal, and a moment's silence, I indicate to the people to sit, moving back to the lectern as a sign that that part of the service is concluded, and immediately seek support in the reading of the Scriptures. The main body of words thereafter is thanksgiving, preparation for both the immediate and the ultimate future, and a hymn of real praise such as 'Praise my soul the King of heaven'. Knowing the difficulty chief mourners often have when the minister follows the normal practice of proceeding first from the sanctuary,

'leaving them to it', I normally invite them to accompany me down the aisle to the door.

4. Although I have not seen them included in printed orders for bereavement services, I have found the following words useful:

(a) Either at the first bereavement visit, or in the funeral service somewhere, e.g. as the first words at the graveside or at the point of committal for cremation, Reinhold Niebuhr's prayer (which I understand, incidentally, has been adopted by Alcoholics Anonymous), 'Grant us the serenity to accept the things that cannot be changed, the will to change the things that can be changed, and the wisdom to know the difference.' (I have often been asked to write this prayer down after using it.)

and (b) Such phrases as these:

'Help us (this family) to recover from the sense of shock and to use the waiting of this time to have a deeper and more sympathetic understanding one of another or to examine our ways and recommit ourselves to each other'

'May we emerge from this experience of death with a new appreciation of life, and of each other'

'Strengthen us to walk in the light we see, that more light may be revealed to us'

'By our presence here and now we indicate our concern to give continuing support to (those most deeply bereaved)'

'Help us to realize that today is the beginning of the rest of our lives'

5. At the present time I work in a team ministry which has two experienced ministers – following a recent union, a deaconess specializing in work with old people and an assistant minister on a two-year engagement specializing in work with young adults (as well as a part-time clerkess). As a firm advocate of considerable reduction, for financial reasons, in the number of over-large worship centres, and a believer in team ministries in order that a variety of suitable gifts can be made available for the contemporary urban ministry, I must acknowledge that when someone dies, small is beautiful and parish perfect. Obviously the large congregations that do exist need more than one 'minister', but, if only so as to cause minimum upset to other commitments – and in South Leith our programme has to take into account that we have no funerals one week and five the next – the policy is for one member of the team to visit on hearing of the death and to conduct the funeral, and a different person to pay the post-funeral call. Sometimes a fresh face opens new doors, of course, but it cannot build on the confidence that the first man hopes to have been able to establish. Again, a large congregation is normally scattered through a community

served by many churches, with the result that neighbours of the bereaved – living in another ‘parish’ – are probably not known: when working in a single parish/community situation, the minister can inform the (right) neighbours and give them the opportunity to exercise their invaluable ministry in the bereavement situation.

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