

THE VALUE OF CONFESSION IN THE FUNERAL RITE

Almost any outside observer of religion would concede that one of its functions is to help the individual or groups to cope with stressful situations. The broad assumption of life after death as a central doctrine of the Christian faith makes it very easy for the casual observer to argue that Christianity is peculiarly suited to dealing with the stress of bereavement. In general, the Judeo-Christian tradition of the west has led to an optimistic view of the individual's ability to live through and overcome bereavement. This is well illustrated in the optimistic speech given in the funeral rite of the American Ethical Culture Society. In most of the written forms of funeral rites of Christian denominations there is the same optimism and tacit assumption that people will work through bereavement, not necessarily easily, but at least successfully. Thus we have the beginning of the prayer in the Book of Common Order, p. 165, "... in the silence of this hour speak to us of eternal things . . .".

Series III of the Church of England begins with a prayer which is in essence a paraphrase of the third article of the Apostles Creed, and the beginning of the Funeral Mass of the Roman rite is not dissimilar.

There is a stoicism in the words of committal, the form of which is really a subject in itself. As I hope will become apparent later, I would not wish to take issue with Jack Kellet¹ about placing the committal at the beginning of the service, other than to say that I think in a majority of cases some preparation is probably required before the congregation can take the words of committal. That precise moment is symbolically the final transition of the deceased from his former status of living to the dead, and before the mourner can accept this I feel he has to go through the preparation which is the subject of this paper. Personally, in a church service for a very committed church worker, I always use the Nunc Dimittis as an intermediate committal and have never understood why the Ordinal should reserve this wonderful passage for the burial of clergy. Are we "first class" Christians?*

* In an area where it is safe to assume that half the congregation will be Anglican, it is appreciated when one makes concessions to the Anglican tradition. Nearly all my funerals are for families of mixed allegiance; thus I always add the Gloria to the reading of a psalm.

The Reformed Churches have on the whole taken the view that the liturgy of a funeral should concentrate on the bereaved rather than private intercessory prayers for the dead. In so doing they have adopted the natural, and indeed theologically correct, optimism and repeated this in their liturgy. What I wish to do is to question whether this as a liturgical device satisfies the needs of the individual and reflects a natural reaction to death in a relatively secular, or at least theologically illiterate, society.

To preserve both our own theological integrity and to satisfy the needs of the individual, we have to ask what frame of mind the individual may be in and also whether it is correct to assume that he simply wants a committal carried out in the only socially acceptable manner, i.e. by the church. If the church is to perform its function without being cynical, it must try to "marry" its theological position with its caring role in the liturgy of the rite and not depend on counselling before or after the funeral as a way of divorcing the two.

The liturgy of a funeral rite may be directed (a) to the deceased, (b) to the participants who are less personally involved in the bereavement, or (c) to the most affected mourners. In actual fact the liturgy should probably incorporate aspects of all three, but I wish to support the view of Yorick Spiegel that the mourner is the most important. His view is best summed up in his own words "... the griefs of the sufferer should be the centre of attention in the funeral ritual. He is the one who suffers most; he has to be helped to recognise and accept that his relationship to his loved one and to his environment has changed."²

Every parish minister has first hand experience of the grief process and ample opportunity is available to gain more technical knowledge. One's own experience of grief will lead to certain reforms in the way one structures a service. Jack Kellet's use, for instance, of the prayer of Alcoholics Anonymous is one way of tackling the aspect of grief which interests me but, with respect, I do not feel it is radical enough. What I do believe is that the harried parish minister must have some good devices ready such as those suggested by Jack Kellet, but, if he is in the more fortunate position of having a small very personal congregation or community, he can afford to be more daring in introducing a more personalised confession based on the knowledge he has gained over the years and final days of the deceased.

The correct assumption of all past liturgists is that bereavement is a matter of loss and that the preaching of the gospel is to put this loss in its theological context. The reformers

of the Roman rite and the Anglican rite have tried to minimise the "distressing" aspect of the bereavement and emphasise the hopeful and even celebratory aspect of the Easter faith, in fact the Roman rite has different prescriptions for a funeral taking place during Easter time. I suspect that the Church of Scotland rite has been modernised and updated by the freedom which an individual minister has in the execution of the rite. In so far as the minister himself is under stress, the only time I have been advised (advice which I did not in fact take) to adhere to the written words was at the burial of a child because the stress, it was argued, precluded improvisation. Spiegel argues that in fact the minimisation of the painful aspect of a funeral may not be therapeutically sound and therefore we must ask ourselves what the chief mourners are bringing emotionally to a funeral and how best we can help them in the process of readjustment by our spoken words, granted that ideally the most important work may be done either before or after in a counselling situation. The mourner arrives at the funeral suffering a loss, but a loss with a history. It may have come after a long terminal illness in which case it is quite likely that there is a degree of relief in the mourner's mind and a slight feeling of guilt that this feeling exists. Not infrequently one comes across family conflicts which may produce feelings of guilt. The numbness of shock, which in my experience is prolonged after a long terminal illness, may produce a confusing fear in the mourner's mind that he or she is unable to grieve at a socially acceptable standard.

Let me quote one recent case. A middle aged widow living immediately downstairs from her sister-in-law lost that sister-in-law and claimed that she could not grieve for her. They had not spoken to each other for twenty years yet their lives were intertwined by matters such as rent and wills. In counselling the widow I warned her that although she denied grief she would feel it eventually and that it would manifest itself in regret for the past antagonism between the two. In my opening prayer I deliberately included the words "we confess our differences but we know that all things work together for good" in an attempt to reinforce in liturgy my counselling. She initially felt it hypocritical to go to the funeral but I believe the wording of my prayer took the "hypocrisy" out of it.

In the "unchurched" funeral it may well be that the appearance of the minister and the rite itself may represent death to the mourner in a rather unpleasant way. As Spiegel puts it, there may be antagonism towards "God's representative", the God who has allowed this terrible tragedy to

occur. All these feelings can be taken under the single heading of "ambivalence".

Ambivalence occurs where there is psychic conflict. The individual is searching for "mechanisms" which are universally acceptable, i.e. the church provides the answer to death. Society assumes that one is going to overcome one's grief yet there may be very deep and socially unacceptable feelings in the mourner's mind which are building up a frustration of psychic conflict. Nottingham, in discussing some of the inabilities of the west to cope with death, draws our attention to the fact that primitive tribes have "dramatised their internal conflict and, as they served to drain off ambivalent emotions, acted as a catharsis for feelings of guilt as well as of grief.³ She then goes on to quote an example of an aborigine's tribal ritual and she draws parallels with an Irish wake. We must try to restore as gently as we can a recognition of this ambivalence into our liturgy. There is, however, one final obstacle in the setting of our funeral which may either hamper or put severe limitations in our endeavours.

Depending on several factors such as post mortems, availability of crematoria and family circumstances, the funeral will probably come somewhere in between the transition from the "shocked phase" of grief and the "adaptive phase". However, in normal circumstances, the mourner will have entered a "controlled" phase by the time of the funeral. In the controlled phase there may be an attempt by the mourner to "please" the minister by proving how good a Christian both he and the deceased have been. I have long taken this as a sign of primitive untapped belief throughout the land, but Spiegel more correctly shows it to be an attempt to idealise the dead and, in part, "please" the minister and show a socially acceptable attitude to the funeral rite with a sincerity which, although genuine at the time, may turn out to be short-lived. Again, confession allows the individual to cope with his accentuated beliefs and renewed resolve to which he is very unlikely to adhere later. Have any of us not received promises of a "return to church", "complete change of character" etc., and how many of us have cynically dismissed them as empty promises? Empty promises they may be, but Spiegel would argue that they are very sincere at the time.

In this section I want to gather together more thoughts about Confession and link them with the guilty feelings we have just been discussing. Most liturgies mention distress, most suggest the redeeming power of Christ. Confession as such appears at the end of the new Anglican rite. I should like to suggest that the very opening prayer should consist of an affirmation of

God's constant love, followed by some kind of Confession suited to the life history of the mourner. I feel it should be put in the form of a statement, and have personally never used any form of Absolution but have moved straight on to Invocation. If one knows that there are doubts about the love of God, I believe it is right to say so in the prayer "Lord, we doubt your ways at times". If the death has been the result of illness we can express the natural feeling of regret that modern medicine did not answer this particular need. We must also recognise that the mourner is apprehensive about the transition; this is particularly so in the case of a young widow for instance. Why not say that we do not know where the strength is going to come from? There are tactful words for almost every situation and I find this honesty something that maintains my integrity and has to date not caused offence to anyone. The mourner has the legitimate right to work through his or her grief and it is the duty of the liturgist to include every part of the grief process in the liturgy. Obviously, of course, there are instances where it is better to speak of illness in the prayer of thanksgiving and it goes without saying that it would be foolish to formalise the type of liturgy I am suggesting. A close reading of the passages in the Book of Common Order suggests that some are complacent peaceful passages, others rebellious against the nature of our present society and I feel that this should be borne in mind especially when words are going to be difficult to choose.

Why are devices dealing with ambivalence so important? Spiegel points out that almost every minister has experienced the temptation to become cynical. Of course clergy need to release tensions and there is also a justified feeling that many funerals are simply a matter of routine and in many cases it would seem dubious whether the church should be involved at all. I echo the argument of most writers on the subject and say that death is too serious a matter to be left to the secular amateur, to put it purely pragmatically. If this is the case we have to learn to accept two things, the fact that mourners are likely to have accentuated and primitive doctrinal beliefs and, secondly, that a great many of them are going to be in a very confused state and only able to derive a little comfort from the funeral, in which case we must gauge the liturgy to their frame of mind.

To do this totally would involve a betrayal of our own integrity, but the very act of Confession is an acceptance of faults and failings and, if there are going to be faults in our doctrinal thinking and recognisable faults in the grieving of the mourner, the only honest place to bring them out openly is in

Confession and in so doing we may bring in the long run additional words of comfort to the bereaved.

So many "occasional" services today can lead to cynicism. There is too much talk of people using the church for births, deaths and marriages. I believe that the churches must grasp hold of the frames of mind of the chief participants in these occasional services, make the service compatible both to the church's stance and to the needs of the individual, and do their utmost to bless and sanctify whatever phase of life we are talking about.

NOTES

1. Kellet, Jack, 1975, "On Taking a Funeral". Liturgical Review. Vol. V No. 2.
2. Spiegel, Yorick, 1978, "The Grief Process". London S.C.M. Press. p. 164.
3. Nottingham, Elizabeth K. 1971 "Religion: a Sociological View". New York, Random House. p. 85.

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