

FUNERALS IN A RURAL PARISH

I ministered in a rural parish for over seven years, and have kept the outlines of the 48 funerals services I conducted. The most I had in any one year was nine. This meant that I had the time to prepare each service separately, and do my best to suit it to the individual and the circumstances. The people involved were all kinds - young and old, deeply committed members and adherents, people on the fringe of the congregation, and people outside the congregation who called on the Parish Minister, like the woman I visited who said to me quite bluntly: "Of course I don't go to church - but we'll maybe be needing you: my husband has a bad heart."

To my mind, a funeral service should as far as possible be personal, relevant, honest, and compassionate.

Personal. Some funerals I have attended in the Black Isle have struck me as impersonal and anonymous. No mention was made of the name of the deceased, or any personal details, or the names of any of the mourners. Some have told me that it is not a Highland custom to mention names. But more have said that they appreciate when names are used, and personal details included. If the deceased was more or less unknown to me, I tried to get some details about his work, or the kind of person he was. It was not always easy, but it was always attempted.

Relevant. The service should be relevant to the circumstances of the death - young or old, accidental or natural, sudden or after a long illness - and to the circumstances and faith (or lack of it) in the bereaved family, not taking for granted an assurance that it is not there, or using the occasion to preach at them. I remember a mistake I made early in my parish ministry. An old man had died of whose salvation I was assured; his family were non-churchgoers, but turned out in force at the funeral. I preached on David's words in II Samuel 12: 23 "I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me". I said I was assured that the deceased was with his Saviour, but challenged the mourners to consider whether they could say "I shall go to him"! It took more than a year before things were put right with the family!

Honest. It is not honest to speak and pray as though you took for granted that someone is in glory when you are fairly sure he isn't. Of course, there are many cases when you don't know, and while you cannot speak with the same measure of assurance, you have at least to give the deceased "the benefit of the doubt" and to speak of any signs of God's grace in his life of which you have been conscious.

Compassionate. If you cannot give the mourners the comfort that their loved one is with the Lord, what comfort can you give them? In my experience, the most positive thing you can say is that Jesus, the Man of Sorrows, is with them in their sorrow, and that there is no depth of sorrow which the Saviour has not plumbed. And in the service you commit the deceased into the hands of God, who loves him and can be trusted to do what is best.

My custom was to pay a visit to the bereaved family as soon as possible after I heard of the death. I would take a Bible and a notebook with me. First of all, I would say how sorry I was. Then for a few minutes I would simply listen to the details of the last hours and the circumstances of the death, and give any encouragement and assurance necessary to any who felt guilty about anything - possibly something might have been done that wasn't done, possibly someone might have been present at the end and wasn't. Then I would go on to ask about the funeral service.

Would they like to have it in the church? This is now the normal practice in the Parish Church, though most Free Church funerals are from the homes. It is kinder, especially in the winter, to the large number of mourners, most of them older people, who come out to funerals. Usually an arrangement is made with the undertaker to bring the remains to the church hall a day or so before the funeral.

What Psalms or Hymns would they like sung - how many? Normally they ask for one singing, Psalm 23 to Crimond, at the beginning of the service. Occasionally Psalm 121 is sung also, at the close. Other hymns asked for have been rare - examples are "Abide with me", "Will your anchor hold in the storms of life?", "The old rugged Cross", "Guide me, O thou great Jehovah", and "Thine be the glory." On only one occasion has there been three singings.

Would they like to have an organist? This cannot be taken for granted, but has to be arranged. With many of the mourners coming from the Free Church, sometimes unaccompanied singing was preferred, but a congregation before a funeral service begins can be quite noisy with talking, and an organist playing quiet music helps to create a more reverent atmosphere.

Would they like me to say a few words about the deceased, or would they be happy if I put a few personal details into a prayer? (I ask this normally only when the deceased is not known to me; usually in that case they are satisfied with reference in a prayer). I ask them questions about the deceased - age, employment, how long married, how long ill, personal characteristics - which will provide details for the address/prayer. Usually I am asked to be short, because of the strain on the mourners.

Finally, before I leave, I normally read a few comforting words from the Bible, and say a prayer. In the case of agnostics, I have asked if they would like me to say a prayer, and if the answer was "No, I'd rather you didn't", I have respected their wishes.

People who have come from a distance are usually invited to the home of the deceased for a cup of tea and sandwiches (or something stronger) after the interment. If it is made clear that I am expected I go, possibly because there are relatives who have come from a distance that they want me to meet; but normally I don't go. It is generally more helpful to wait a few days until the excitement and strain of the funeral and the family gathering have worn off, and the loneliness of everyday living has to be faced, and then to call and pray for grace to "walk, and not faint".

Since its publication, I have followed the Second Order for a Funeral Service in the 1979 Book of Common Order, and the page references that follow are the BCO (1979). With the various options in brackets, the order is as follows:

- Preface
- Scripture Sentences
- Brief Prayer - for comfort
- (Praise)
- Scripture Passages
- (Praise)
- (Brief Address)
- Prayers - Thanksgiving for the Risen Christ
 - Thanksgiving for the deceased
 - Committal
 - Prayer for the bereaved
 - Lord's Prayer
- (Praise)
- Benediction.

I have already mentioned the praise. With one singing the service would normally take 15 to 20 minutes. Let me take the other elements of the service one by one.

Preface. To begin with, I used the Preface as given on p. 97 verbatim, except that I usually inserted the name of the deceased - for "someone we knew and loved" I would say "for, whom we knew and loved". More recently I have adapted the preface freely to make it more relevant and personal. For instance:

for an outstanding Christian:

"My friends, we are here to praise God for, and to commend her to his care; to stand by her family in their sorrow at parting with her; and above all, to seek comfort and strength from God's presence and victorious love."

for a drowned teen-ager, whose parents were agnostics:

"My friends, we are gathered here to remember and to commend him to God. At this time of deep distress and shock God is calling us to turn our eyes upon Jesus, our suffering and victorious Saviour, and to seek the consolation of his love."

in the case of a mother, who was murdered:

"My friends, we are here to remember and to commend her to God; to stand by her family in their sorrow and shock at this violent and tragic parting; but above all, to seek comfort and strength from God's presence and love, and to trust in his promises."

Scripture Sentences. I start from the selections given on pages 97-98 and 88-89, and am often content with taking three or four suitable ones. But others have suggested themselves, and others again have come as a result of search, often consulting several translations to find which one is most helpful in its wording. Here are examples:

Acceptance of God's way, looking for his presence and help - Job 1:21b, RSV; Psalm 46: 1, AV; Heb. 4: 14a, 15a, 16, GNB; Heb. 13: 5c, RSV.

God's love, compassion and comfort - II Cor. 1: 4, Phillips; Isaiah 63: 7a, 9a, RSV; Isaiah 40: 1-2a, GNB; Isaiah 51: 12a, NEB; John 11: 35, 36b with Isaiah 53: 3b, 4ab, all RSV; part of Romans 8: 38-39, NEB.

Praise for God's victory, assurance in his promises - I Cor. 15: 57 NEB; Psalm 48: 1 a with 14, GNB; Psalm 16: 11, GNB or NIV; John 10: 27-28, GNB; John 5: 24, GNB; Phil. 1: 21, 23b, RSV; I Cor. 2: 9, NIV; John 14: 1-3, NEB; and I Thess. 13b-14a adapted "We do not sorrow as those who have no hope, for we believe that Jesus died and rose again."

Someone who has lived to a ripe old age - Isaiah 46:4, RSV.

In the case of one who had had a ministry among old people, disabled and widows, I included the following verses -

Jesus said: "Anything you did for one of my brothers here, however humble, you did for me. You have my Father's blessing; come, enter and possess the kingdom that has been ready for you since the world was made. Enter into the joy of your Lord." (Matt. 25: 40b, 34b NEB with 23 AV).

"Religion that is pure and genuine in the sight of God the Father will show itself by such things as visiting orphans and widows in their distress." (James 1: 21 Phillips).

In the case of the young mother who had been murdered, I began with the following sequence of verses, followed by II Cor 1: 4 and Isaiah 63: 7a,9a.

"The Lord says: I will comfort those who mourn.

I will comfort you, as a mother comforts her child.

When you pass through deep waters, I will be with you;
your troubles will not overwhelm you.

I will hear the cries of the oppressed and orphans,

I will judge in their favour

so that mortal man may cause terror no more.

God heals the broken-hearted

and binds up their wounds." (adapted from Isaiah 61:2; 66: 13; 43: 2

and Psalm 10: 18 and 147: 3; from GNB and RSV.)

Opening Prayer. This is always short. I often read one or other of the prayers on p. 98, or the following:

"O God, you are our refuge and our strength, a very present help in time of need. Come to us now, and let your strong love comfort and uphold us. Speak to our need through your word, and grant us grace to receive the help you would bring us. Through Jesus Christ our Lord."

In situations of great distress I have sometimes used George MacLeod's prayer in Worship Now, p. 86, either in whole, or just the first paragraph.

Scriptures Passages. Here, again, I normally select from the passages on pp. 104-113, varying my selection in accordance with the circumstances. I don't usually read I Cor. 15 or the passages from Revelation 21 and 22 unless I am reasonably confident that the deceased has entered into rest: otherwise, I usually read from Psalm 103 and Romans 8. In cases of deep distress, I read Psalm 130. I usually end with John 14, NEB.

Other passages have been used:

Occupational - a shepherd, John 10: 11-18, 27-28; a gardener Gen. 2: 8, 10 and 15 with Rev. 22: 1-5; a lover of animals and birds, Psalm 104; 10-14 and 16-24, GNB; old people, Luke 2: 25-32, 36-38 GNB.

Confidence - Psalm 16, GNB; John 5: 37-40; John 6: 35-40; Psalm 121 NEB; Psalm 84: 1-7, 10-12, RSV; Isaiah 40: 27ab, 28-31 GNB; II Cor. 4: 13-14, 16-18, and 5: 1, 5-9, GNB (but I say "taken down" in 5: 1 as I feel "torn down" rather harsh). One whose example to young people was remembered - Psalm 111: 1-5, 10 and 112: 1, 4-7.

Death by accident - Luke 13: 1-5, NIV.

Jesus' sorrow and compassion - Matt. 11: 28-30; Isaiah 55: 1-6; Mark 14: 32-42; Mark 15: 25-36.

The purpose of Jesus' sorrow - John 3: 16-17; Heb. 5: 7-9 and 4: 15-16 NIV.

Address. I normally spoke for five minutes or less. I usually said something about the age and occupation, and particular characteristics of the deceased, like thankfulness, patience, sense of humour, helpfulness, and so on, and if possible included some personal reminiscence for which I could be thankful.

Prayers. These are usually extempore, following the general pattern of the prayers on pages 99-100, but varying a little according to the circumstances. I always jot down the names of the bereaved, so as not to get the names wrong.

1. Thanksgiving for the Risen Christ. This often includes a reference to the Atonement as well as to the Resurrection and Ascension, and where appropriate, to the Communion of Saints.
2. Thanksgiving for the deceased. Even if the deceased was not a Christian, there are human characteristics, often mentioned by the family in conversation, for which we can sincerely thank God; and we can remember his service to the community through the job he did. I usually include a reference to him as husband, father, brother, friend - or as the case may be.
3. Committal. This is brief, e.g. "We commit him into your hands, for we know you love him, and we can trust you", or "Help us now to trust you as we commit him into your hands."
4. Prayer for the bereaved. Here I make a point of mentioning by name at least the wife and children of the deceased, and often brothers and sisters. Usually the names given in the obituary notice are a good guide as to who should be specially remembered.
5. Lord's Prayer.

Benediction. If the benediction follows the prayers, I let the congregation remain seated. If there is a concluding praise, they remain standing.

The Service at the Grave is very short. Usually I follow the wording of pp. 101-103 without any change, but occasionally on a wet or windy day I use an extempore prayer. I follow the practice of throwing earth on the coffin at the "Dust to dust" and it may not be so easy to turn the page of the BCO to locate the final prayer! On the one occasion when I was asked to bury an Estonian Lutheran, I used the Lutheran words of committal:

"From dust you were taken.
To dust you shall return.
From dust you shall rise to life."

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A DIP IN THE ARCHIVES

George W Sprott speaking at the Annual Meeting, 30th May 1878:-

Going on to refer to the practice of holding soirees, magic-lantern exhibitions, and political meetings in churches, with the chairman possibly in the pulpit, and the candidate in the precentor's desk greeted with profane allusions by the roughs, he remarked that, however unpleasant it was to interfere with one's neighbours, the members of this Society should bring such disgraceful scenes before their Presbyteries, so that the recent Act of Assembly anent the desecration of churches might be enforced. He thought further, that the members of the Society would do well to pay more attention to ecclesiastical architecture and to the proper internal arrangements of churches. He was afraid that some of the new churches that were being built were assuming too much the form of music-halls, and, though he was glad to hear of the general introduction of organs, he did not think that a musical instrument should be the most prominent and central object in a Christian place of worship.