



“A SENSE OF THE FITNESS”

[PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS - MAY 1997]

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"It was George Howe's funeral that broke the custom and closed the 'service'. When I came into the garden where the neighbours were gathered, the 'wricht' was removing the tray, and not a glass had been touched. Then I knew that Drumtochty had a sense of the fitness of things, and was stirred to its depths."

So, in Ian Maclaren's "Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush" the young scholar's funeral had such an effect upon the men of Drumtochty that their custom at burial was changed for ever.

Indeed. For it is a natural human instinct to treat a body with reverence, to recognise that the context of death is one of solemnity and that those who come within it have proper roles to play. Needless to say, belief about what has happened when a member of the community dies, will influence that nature and shape of rites and customs surrounding death. But within broad bounds those rites and customs will change according to the sense of the fitness.

Thus although there have been changes in emphases over the 2000 years of Christian history, determined by theological and cultural developments, the manner in which Christians mark the death of members of their community has always been built upon faith in the Resurrection.

That the themes of hope and assurance had replaced pagan wistfulness can be seen from inscriptions in the Roman catacombs as well as from the writings of the Fathers.



Origen: *"We do not celebrate the day of a man's birth as it is only the commencement of pains and trials but we celebrate the day of his death because it is the putting away of all pains and the escape from all temptations."*

Cyprian: *"How often has it been revealed to us that our brothers who have been released from the world by the Divine summons ought not to be mourned for since we know that they are not lost but gone before; while appearing to lose they have really gained ground as travellers and navigators are wont to do."* Cyprian says that excessive mourning may lead the heathen to think that Christians' faith is not genuine. White, not black, should be worn.

Jerome writes that Christians do not use the howling of the heathen but the comfortable words of the Psalter.

John Chrysostom speaks of torches, palm branches, incense and cries of 'Alleluia!'.

And two fourth century references, the first a prescription for funerals from the *Apostolic Constitutions* and a funeral prayer;

"Do not seek after Jewish separations, or perpetual washings, or purifications upon the touch of a dead body. But without much observances assemble in the cemeteries, reading the holy books, and signing psalms for the martyrs which are fallen asleep, and for all the saints from the beginning of the world, and for your brethren that are asleep in the Lord. Offer the acceptable Eucharist, the antitype of the Royal body of Christ, in your churches and in the cemeteries; and in the funerals of your dead lead them forth with psalms, if they were faithful in the Lord."

And the prayer from the so-called 'Prayer Book' of Serapion;

"O God, who hast authority of life and death, God of the spirits and Master of all flesh, God who killest and makest alive, who bringest down to the gates of Hades and bringest up, who createst the spirit of man within him and takest to thyself the souls of the saints and givest rest,



who alterest and changest and transformest thy creatures, as is right and expedient, being thyself alone incorruptible, unalterable and eternal, we beseech thee for the repose and rest of this thy servant; give rest with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all thy saints: and raise up his body in the day which thou hast ordained, according to thy promises which cannot lie, that thou mayest render to it also the heritage of which it is worthy in thy holy pastures. Remember not his transgressions and sins and cause his going forth to be peaceable and blessed. Heal the grief of his relatives who survive him with the spirit of consolation, and grant unto us all a good end, through thy only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, through whom to thee is the glory and the strength in the Holy Spirit, for ever and ever."

The Middle Ages saw a great change in emphasis in funeral rites from that of glad confidence in the love of God to an emphasis on God the judge. The belief in a period of purgation demanded that every liturgical effort must be employed towards the release of the soul of the departed. There was a large degree of morbid fear in all this, leading, as Percy Dearmer had it, to a 'feverish desire for innumerable masses'.

There were three important elements in the funeral procedure, elements still present in the reformed Catholic order, viz. Procession (house to church; church to burying place), Office (morning *Dirige* and evening *Placebo*) and mass.

Dearmer in *The Story of the Prayer Book* gives due tribute to the Mediaeval order of funerals,

*"Thus in the wonderful beauty of their churches and in the churchyards
unchilled by the gleam of polished gravestones and glass flowers
did our forefathers carry out the last offices they could render
to their friends with ancient rites of comfort and cheer and help."*

A sense of the fitness. It is worth noting that our **Common Order** funeral services owe little if anything to the Roman rites. We offer a service. The Roman Order is, rather, a series of



liturgical resting places upon a journey which leads from death to committal of the body, the chief of these being the Eucharist.

With the Reformation in England, Cranmer sought, as he did with other rites, to take the elements of the old orders and adapt them for *Common Prayer*. In Scotland funeral services were purged out altogether. This drastic change came about because of a strong aversion to prayer for the dead.

Whether or not funeral services had disappeared wherever Calvin had influence is not clear to me. Pullain writes of a respectful service of committal with prayers and an exhortation. But the *Book of Discipline* plainly sets forth the state of things in Scotland following Knox's Reformation;

*"For avoiding all inconveniences we judge it best
that neither singing nor reading be at the burial -
yea without all kind of ceremony heretofore used,
other than that the dead be committed to the grave
with such gravity and sobriety as those that be present
may seem to fear the judgement of God and to hate sin
which is the cause of death."*

The earliest edition does rather grudgingly concede that if particular kirks go in for that sort of thing (i.e. prayers, readings and singing) they can get on with it as long as they remember that they shall answer to God AND the *"Assemblie of the Universall Kirk gathered within the Realme"*!

Knox's *Book of Common Order* has only this to say,

*"The corpse is reverently brought to the grave,
accompanied with the Congregation, without any further ceremonies:*



which being buried, the Minister if he be present, and required, goeth to the Church, if it be not far off, and maketh some comfortable exhortation to the people, touching death and the resurrection."

The Directory of Public Worship ratified this and sought to apply it throughout the realm;

"When any person departeth this life, let the dead body, upon the day of burial, be decently attended from the house to the place appointed for public burial, and there immediately interred, without any ceremony.

And because the custom of kneeling down, and praying by or towards the dead corpse, and other such usages, in the place where it lies before it be carried to burial, are superstitions; and for that praying, reading and singing, both in going to and at the grave, have been grossly abused, are no way beneficial to the dead, and have proved many ways hurtful to the living; therefore let all such things be laid aside."

Certainly from the time of the Covenants and for over two hundred years there was no service at the burial of Scotland's Presbyterians. Thomas Morer's ***Short Account of Scotland*** which includes interesting observations on the worship of the Kirk at the end of the seventeenth century, notes that burials took place without a minister.

That is not to say that there was no "sense of the fitness". Ministers and Kirk Sessions would be well aware of their responsibility towards the decencies of disposal of the dead to say nothing of pastoral care of the bereaved. On 15th December 1695, the Session of my own church agreed that money from the box should be used to buy a mortcloth of velvet. In the nineteenth century



some parishes provided a hearse the use of which would be free to parishioners. At the beginning of the nineteenth century Henry Duncan of Ruthwell cajoled the members of his parish friendly society to sign a pledge limiting the hospitality they would offer at a family funeral. As his son's memoir has it,

*"By this means the serious expense of these occasions,
which had frequently involved poor families in ruin,
was at once terminated, much valuable time was spared,
and many accompanying evils obviated".*

Coffins were, of course, not in general use except for the gentry, until the nineteenth century. The General Assembly of 1563 declared that

*"a bier should be made in every country parish
to carry the dead corpse of the poor to the burial place
and that those of the villages or houses next adjacent
to the house where the dead corpse lieth,
or a certain number out of every house shall convey the dead corpse
to the burial place and bury it six feet under the earth."*

Some of these biers were just rails covered with a mort cloth. Others were wooden boxes with a hinged side lid from which the body could be slid upon arrival at the grave. In Highland districts the "death hamper" was a basket of rushes with three pairs of loop handles through which iron bars were passed. It was lowered into the grave, turned over and retrieved.

In 1641 the Synod of Fife declared that

*"All those who superstitiously carries the dead about the kirk
before burial also those who bury unbaptised bairns apart*



be taken notice of and censured."

But if carrying had officially been divested of its character as PROCESSION we may be sure it lost none of its importance as an act of pride and reverence for family and community. In rural Ulster a funeral may well still be commended as having been a "brave carry" involving several shifts of relatives and friends shouldering the coffin.

Other old customs survived the ban upon ritual. The ringing of a bell at the time of a burial (In 1621 Dumbarton Kirk Session set fees for this). Sprott notes the use of incense for sanitary and not ritualistic reasons as in Aberdeen where in 1705 the Town Council

*"appoints that in all time coming the Master of Church Works
shall receive from each person who shall burn incense or perfume
at the burial of their friends in the church £4 Scots
and in the churchyard 40 shillings Scots".*

A final reference to the barren years. Baillie, writing from London during the sitting of the Westminster Assembly,

*"We have with much difficulty passed a proposition
for abolishing their ceremonies at burials but our difference
about funeral sermons seems irreconcilable. As it has been
here and everywhere preached it is nothing but an abuse of preaching
to serve the humours only of rich people for a reward.
Our church has expressly discharged them on many good reasons;
it is here a good part of the ministers' livelihood, therefore they will not quit it.
After three days debate we cannot yet find a way of agreeance."*



So the Scots commissioners absented themselves from the sermon preached at Pym's funeral. Baillie wrote,

*"On Wednesday Mr. Pym was carried from his house
to Westminster on the shoulders as the fashion is
of the chief men of the Lower House,
all the House going in procession before him and before them
the Assembly of Divines. Marshall had a most eloquent
and pertinent funeral sermon - which we would not hear,
for funeral sermons we must have away, with the rest."*

The story is told of one Jamie Fleeman, "The Laird of Udney's Fool" during the eighteenth century, who when wounded and dying crawled over the hills of East Aberdeenshire to Langside where he knew there to be an Episcopal church. When they found him he pleaded "Dinna bury me like a beast!"

But if there was no rite, there was custom, characterised by shortbread and whisky, reverential silence for a time followed by conversation in whispers. There might be toasts, such as "The Memory" or even "Good Health!" Both Sprott and Leishman note that this had grown out of the custom of "coffining" the body in a linen or woollen shroud, which required the presence of an elder. In course of time the minister might be invited and would ask a blessing over the refreshments. Grace developed into prayer and prayer into a short service with reading of Scripture and an address. All this at the house.

Leishman quotes the minister of Campsie from the *Statistical Account*,

*"It was customary till within these few years, when any head of a family died,
to invite the whole parish: they were served on boards in the barn,
where a prayer was pronounced before and after the service,*



which duty was most religiously observed.

The entertainment consisted of the following parts:-

*First there was a drink of ale, then a dram, then a piece of shortbread,
then another dram of some other species of liquor, then a piece of currant bread,
and a third dram, either of spirits or wine,
which was followed by loaves and cheese, pipes and tobacco.*

*This was the old funeral entertainment in the parish of Campsie,
and was styled their service; and sometimes this was repeated,
and was then styled a double service, and was sure to be repeated at the dredgie
(dirige). No person was invited by letter,
and though invited against ten of the clock,
the corpse was never interred till the evening,
time being not so much valued in those days."*

Was it the people or the clergy of the Church of Scotland who began to look for a seemly liturgical ordering of the funeral service once more? Surely by the second half of the nineteenth century some of the people were very ill at ease with the coarseness and poverty of the last offices for their relatives and friends; and some of the clergy were frustrated at the absence of a rite by which to witness to the assurances of the Gospel.

In the commentary which precedes the "Service at the Burial of the Dead" in ***Euchologion***, it is noted that there had been a gradual resumption of prayer; but this was only at the house of the deceased except in the case of ministers or gentry and there was generally no reading of Scripture. In offering aids to devotion for funerals, and in particular an order for a public service, the compilers note that the Church of Scotland in recent times had extended its influence around the world and the Church at home must not be insular and reactionary.

Euchologion provides for a service at the house with Scripture readings collected and arranged by the American Orthodox Churches and two prayers, the second of which from the Dutch



Reformed Liturgy. There follows the public service. Rather gingerly the compilers point out that it would have been foolish to produce a new service when one already existed, well known throughout the English speaking world which was perfectly acceptable "*notwithstanding one or two blemishes easily removed*". And so, without naming it, there is reproduced what is essentially the 1662 **Common Prayer** service.

Similar provision was made by the Devotional Service Association of the United Presbyterian Church and by the Public Worship Association of the Free Church. A burial service is included in "*Prayers for Social and Family Worship for the use of soldiers, sailors, colonists, sojourners in India, and other persons, at home or abroad, who are deprived of the ordinary services of a Christian Ministry*" prepared for the General Assembly in 1897. And there were the contributions from individuals such as **Devotional Services for Public Worship** by Dr. John Hunter of Trinity Congregational Church Glasgow in 1886. Hunter's burial service contains prayers which are impressive in both theological and pastoral terms. Listen to these extracts,

*"Speak to each of us Thy word of peace, as we stand now in the presence of death.
It is thine own hour, and a fast of thine own appointing.
The loneliness and the silence thou hast made.
But thou canst do thy children no harm.
In sorrow as in joy, in loss as in gain, in life as in death,
we confess thee to be good."*

And again,

*"We are going whither we cannot see;
but we do not leave our Father's House;
we are the children of eternal love,
and underneath us are the everlasting arms.
O help us to realise the faith of Christ,
and then we shall have the peace of Christ,*



and the bereavements that darken our homes will not break our trust."

The flood gates had opened. Perhaps a little too far. Sprott draws attention to what he calls an objectionable practice,

"I have often heard prayers at funerals which were beautiful pieces of composition, but which should have done duty as part of a funeral sermon, or of an obituary notice in a newspaper. These eulogiums are usually introduced thus: 'We thank Thee,' or 'Thou knowest' that he was so and so; and if any excellence of which the public was not aware is to be touched upon, it is sometimes added, 'And as some of us here know very well,' he was this or that. 'Thou knowest' is a phrase always to be suspected in a prayer, as it too often indicates that what is to follow is to be addressed not to the Most High, but to those who should be presenting their supplications to Him. Compliments are also occasionally paid to the surviving members of the family thus: 'We thank Thee for,' or 'Thou knowest their faithfulness and devotion,' and so on. And there are people who can hardly help criticising, and drawing comparisons as to the ability shown by different ministers in this department of work. 'Clever man, Dr. _,' said a city lawyer to me; 'I had a good deal to do with him in connection with the funerals of old ladies - clients of mine - who were members of his flock. He used to take me aside, and ask me a few questions as to their habits and circumstances, and in the prayer a few minutes afterwards, he brought in with great skill all that I had told him about them.' Better no funeral service at all than such eulogiums, at a time when we are brought face to face with the fearful wages of sin, and where all should be humbled in the dust before God." So George

Sprott in 1882.

Each age should strive to match its practice with that sense of the fitness which is in part intuitive and in part learned. Thus the Order for Christian Funerals of the Roman Catholic Church involved a thorough revision and commentary prepared by ICEL. The Decree of the Congregation for Divine Worship authorising the work begins thus,



"By means of the funeral rites it has been the practice of the Church, as a tender mother, not simply to commend the dead to God but also to raise high the hope of its children and to give witness to its own faith in the future resurrection of the baptised with Christ."

And for ourselves, does **Common Order** reflect a sense of the fitness? I believe it does. We now have more models and prayer together in one book than ever before. There will be material which as individuals we are never likely to use; but there is enough for us to freshen what we do, to ring the changes within a common order. The material bespeaks much thought and work in the compiling and it will reward corresponding effort in the using.

Two elements only I would mention. The first order contains a confession, so important since guilt is often keenly felt by the bereaved. The confession is sensitively phrased whereas the confession in the **BCO '79** First Order was formal and traditional. But why (unlike **BCO '79**) is there no absolution? The point of articulating the guilt is frustrated if there is no word of forgiveness.

The second matter is the formal inclusion of Commendation in the First Order (with alternative, and in my opinion, preferable wording in the Additional Prayers section). This inclusion is to be welcomed warmly. The Roman Catholic "Order for Christian Funerals" says,

*"At the conclusion of the funeral liturgy,
the rite of final commendation and farewell is celebrated,
unless it is to be celebrated later at the place of committal.
The final commendation is a final farewell by the members of the community,
an act of respect for one of their members,
whom they entrust to the tender and merciful embrace of God.
This act of farewell also acknowledges the reality of separation
and affirms that the community and the deceased, baptised into the one Body,
share the same destiny, resurrection on the last day.*



*On that day the one Shepherd will call each by name
and gather the faithful together in the new and eternal Jerusalem."*

The latest rite of the Scottish Episcopal Church has this as its commendation formula,

*"Go forth upon your journey from this world, dear child of God,
into the hands of the Father who made you,
to find life in Christ who redeemed you,
to rejoice in the Spirit who renews you.
May the heavenly host sustain you
and the company of the redeemed enfold you;
May peace be yours this day and the heavenly city your home."*

With this, of course, we see how merged have become the commendation of the dying and of those who have died. The Roman "Commendation of the Dying" (ICEL 1973) has the identical formula. Any Prayer Book which contains an office for visitation of the sick will have some form of commendation. I believe it not confusion but quite a proper thing that commendation be offered for both the dying and the dead and in a form of words not markedly different.

Indeed I endorse the statement of John Thewlis, Vicar of St. Luke's Eltham Park, London with which he begins an excellent article in "Southwark Liturgy" Michaelmas 1995, "I believe it is right to pray for the dead." This, he noted, was the single most sensitive issue in funeral liturgy in the Church of England at that time.

I believe that the bereaved want us to pray for their loved one. I believe that the Gospel assures us that in Christ this is right and natural. I believe that the Commendation is the element in our funeral service where this may properly be done.

On a personal note I may say that I was responsible for recovering the antiphon "Rest eternal And let light perpetual" when I added prayer c. to the Funeral of a Still-Born Child in



1985. The prayer had been written for the funeral of still-born twin girls. I had suggested to the parents that one day they would know their daughters with all their God-given potential fulfilled.

Change and development in funeral practice will continue. Sometimes it will be due to factors outwith the Church's control. Cremation and the modern business that is Crematorium management, for instance. Clergy would do well to borrow some of the professional journals published for crematorium and cemetery managers and learn something of the agendas to which they work.

Again, many fewer families have the coffin at home. That modern houses are of less suitable construction is only one reason for this. People are distancing themselves from the body. Economic factors also lead to change. The Do-It-Yourself funeral is already possible as is the environmentally friendly funeral.

But the church can hold to good practice and bring about change. I have been gratified by the number of parishioners choosing to hold the main service in church even where the committal is at the crematorium. And gentle suggestion had led to an increase in the number of families carrying once more, shouldering the coffin from the church to the graveside or to the hearse and thus taking back to themselves what by default has increasingly devolved upon the funeral director and his men.

Most important of all; that we should think often about what it is what we are doing, what it is that we are praying for and what it is that we intend movement and symbol to convey at the funeral. And then that we leave room for God to stir up within us for the sake of the people and for the sake of the Gospel, that great gift, a sense of the fitness.

COLIN R. WILLIAMSON

Pentecost 1997

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