

CONCERNING FUNERALS

The Practice and Theology of Funeral Rites in the Church of Scotland since 1945

(The previous part of Ian Gough's consideration of the funeral rites of the Church of Scotland looked at the venue, the music, and the use of Scripture in funeral services. What follows deals with prayers and the theology which they may reflect.)

Prayers

The form of the first prayer in the 1940 book is a gentle and general petition asking for that comfort which may be received from faith and from the scriptures. It rather assumes that the mourners will quietly work their way through the bereavement process: 'In the silence of this hour, speak to us of eternal things...'¹

The 1994 book, on the other hand, has a more detailed initial prayer in the First Order, acknowledging, through Jesus, God's solidarity with us in our suffering, and assuring us that because Jesus conquered death, so likewise shall we. The rest of the prayer in the 1994 book is largely confessional in nature, and asks for forgiveness for failing one another and grieving the Almighty. It is phrased with great sensitivity and is unlike the traditional phraseology employed in the 1979 book. It is perhaps regrettable that, having clearly expressed the possible guilt, there is no absolution given, whereas the 1979 book does include this. However, having the confession is indeed probably good psychology. Confession can be extremely relevant for those who may be feeling guilt and relief that, for example, a long terminal illness may have ended. There may be many other reasons for guilt feelings. It is unfortunate, but true, that difficult times of bereavement can often bring family conflicts to the surface, thereby producing much guilt. Sometimes the bereaved feel that they are unable to grieve at what they consider to be a socially acceptable standard and feel guilt for that reason. In the hands of the skilled pastor, such confession can be constructive. Care, however, has to be taken lest Christian forgiveness serves only to reinforce any sense of false guilt, i.e. those sets of feelings which are normal in the grief

1 Book of Common Order (London, Oxford University Press, 1959) 165.

process and which require to be dissipated, rather than assume exaggerated significance.

The second prayer, in both the 1940 and 1994 books, is placed just after the Scripture readings, and both books begin with much thanksgiving for the saving work of Christ. There is a rather interesting, and possibly significant, change of wording in the 1940 book in its later editions. The first few editions have these words in the middle of this prayer: ‘... (we thank thee)... that *he* is entered into the rest that remaineth for Thy people.’² Later editions from 1952 onwards, however, have a most interesting and revealing change of wording: ‘... and we pray that *he* may enter into the rest that remaineth for Thy people.’³

In the first editions, this part of the prayer is thanksgiving for a *fait accompli*, whereas in the later editions the prayer is a petition – praying for the dead. But nowhere in these later editions is there acknowledgement of any adjustment in the wording. The reason is almost certainly something to do with the confusion emanating from the historic fear of praying for the dead. In the later editions it is implied that it is safer merely to ask God to help the faithful departed enter into heavenly bliss, which it cannot be denied is praying for them, rather than the first editions which somehow assume and thank God that their state is already decided. That this has been an ongoing source of trouble even in the twentieth century, we shall discuss later (*vide infra*).

The 1979 *Book of Common Order* has a corresponding passage: ‘We commend *him* to Thee. Rest eternal grant unto *him*, O Lord. And let light perpetual shine upon *him*.’⁴ This is definitely intercessory in tone. An alternative form of the service in modern language has the wording: ‘Help us to be content to release *him* to you, *his* Father and our Father. Assure us that in your keeping *he* will be safe, your work in *him* complete.’⁵

In the 1994 book there is much more encouragement and scope to list the particular qualities of the deceased than there is in the former book – a concept far removed from the attitude of previous centuries, for whom

2 *Book of Common Order* (1940), 176.

3 *Book of Common Order* (1953), 176.

4 *Book of Common Order* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1979), 91.

5 *Ibid.*, 100.

such praise would be *anathema*. The commendation is formalised in the later book, whereas the 1940 book, as we have just seen, has a difference of wording between the first and later editions. *Common Order* 1994 repeats the powerful words which were first seen in the 1979 book and they are worth repeating because they have had such an impact on funeral services since the latter year. They were not in the 1940 book, although they are words which are well known in the Anglican and Roman Catholic worlds:

'Rest eternal, grant unto *him*, O Lord.
And let light perpetual shine upon *him*.'⁶

Such a petition for the dead would send a shiver down the spines of our Scottish ancestors who lived in the centuries just after the Reformation, and who almost gave the impression that membership of the *ecclesia* ceased at death. However, in this matter they were surely over-cautious in fearing that it was somehow 'Roman' to pray for the dead and thus, *ipso facto*, erroneous. Nevertheless, the problem came to the fore once more, as recently as the 1930s and is very much etched in the memory of older clergy, such that it is worthwhile explaining the circumstances.

On Armistice Day 1931, the minister of St Giles' Cathedral, Edinburgh, C.L. Warr, offered the following prayer at the Stone of Remembrance:

'We remember before thee with reverence our fellow citizens who laid down their lives in the cause of justice and freedom; to thee we commend each one of them: evermore look upon them in the fullness of thy tender love and mercy.'⁷

The following day, the Rev. A.M. Renwick, Moderator of the Free Church of Scotland, wrote to the media enclosing a copy of the letter of protest he had sent to the Rev. T.B. Stewart Thomson, vice-president of the British Legion (Scotland). In this letter, Mr. Renwick took great exception to the words of this prayer, appealing to the British Legion that in future services words of this kind, which clearly contained prayers for the dead and thereby wounded the Protestant sentiment of many of our people, be not permitted. He contended that if such prayers were allowed, then there would be a deepening of the ecclesiastical divide in Scotland, and it would simply be impossible to participate in such ceremonies.

6 *Book of Common Order of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1994), 257.

7 C.L. Warr, *The Glimmering Landscape* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1960), 172.

Some three months later, the Church Service Society hosted a conference to discuss the attitude of the Scottish Church towards the departed. At that conference Warr stated that the Church of Scotland was sadly deficient in the provision of reasoned and enlightened eschatological teaching for its people. He maintained that there was only a minority in the Reformed Churches who today would publicly fix their assent to a doctrine of the hereafter which, at the hour of death, irrevocably relegated a soul to everlasting bliss or as irrevocably condemned it to everlasting damnation. Warr insisted that the question at issue is whether we are to confine the operation of the principle of growth and development to the material cosmos alone, or whether we are prepared to admit our belief that it operates also in what Christianity believes to be the supreme purpose of the universe, viz. the creation and perfectibility of spiritual beings destined for eternal fellowship with God. He argued that if the soul after death must still continue to be faced with the crises of personal choice and effort, then it continues also to stand in need of succour and assistance. In conclusion, he maintained that to assert that prayers for the departed committed those who offered them to the purgatorial doctrines and practices of the Church of Rome was sheer nonsense. It simply assumed that the dead, or at least some of them, as well as the living, were capable of progress and spiritual development and thus, like the living, might be aided by prayers of love and faith.

Nevertheless, it seems that this matter of prayers for the dead forever plagues Reformed theology in Scotland. As recently as 1977, the whole question of prayers for the dead came into prominence once more. A leaflet prepared by the Church of Scotland's Committee on Public Worship and Aids to Devotion as a petition to mark the Queen's semi-jubilee contained, in an appendix, these words in a prayer as preface to the benediction:

'God, grant to the living grace, to the departed rest, to the Church, the Queen the Commonwealth...' ⁸

The Presbytery of Kincardine and Deeside sent in a letter questioning the propriety of such a petition in the Church of Scotland using the words 'to the departed rest'. The Committee formulated its answer and it was sent to the Presbytery, but nothing further was heard. It is useful to give the

8 *Order of Service for Use on the 25th Anniversary of Her Majesty the Queen's Accession to the Throne* (Edinburgh: Committee on Public Worship and Aids to Devotion, Saint Andrew Press, 1977).

salient points of that reply as it reflects one of the most authoritative replies in recent years from an official committee of the Church of Scotland with regard to praying for the dead. Some of it is given *verbatim* and some of it is summarised:

‘It is acknowledged that prayer for the dead is held to be inadmissible by the Confession of Faith. Consequently, it finds no place in the Directory for Public Worship. The scriptures cited by the Confession are 2 Sam. 12:21-23 (David’s cry on the death of his child: ‘Can I bring him back again?’), Luke 16:25-6 (Abraham’s reply to the rich man who requested the sending of Lazarus), and Rev. 14:13 (‘Happy are the dead who die in the faith of Christ! Henceforth,’ says the Spirit, ‘they may rest from their labours; for they take with them the record of their deeds’). It may be thought that these do not provide a very convincing argument in favour of the attitude of the Confession. From the standpoint of the 20th century that attitude (which also forbade funeral services) may be understood to have arisen more by way of reaction to manifest medieval abuses than as the direct outcome of clear scriptural teaching.’⁹

The second point which the Committee postulated was its opinion that teaching regarding the precise state of the departed does not enter into the substance of the faith. Furthermore, liturgical practice is governed by the Directory ‘as it has been or may hereafter be modified by acts of the General Assembly or by consuetude.’ The Committee was clear that the custom has long been, in a considerable number of parishes, to make prayer for the dead so long as that does not imply a doctrine of purgatory. It notes that the General Assembly of the Church has already recognised the practice by giving its authorisation to hymnaries which contain a verse from the *Dies Irae*:

‘O, on that day, that wrathful day,
When man to judgement wakes from clay,
Be Thou the trembling sinner’s stay,
Though heaven and earth shall pass away!’

It regarded the phrase under discussion (‘to the departed, rest’) as not to be thought of as asking any more than that.

The third point the Committee made was that the Confession does not teach that all is settled at the point of death. It points forward to a judgement on the Last Day, and indicates that there are benefits then to be received by the

⁹ From the private papers of the former Secretary of the Committee on Public Worship and Aids to Devotion, the Rev. James C. Stewart.

faithful. It argued that it was not more inappropriate to pray for the bestowal of these benefits, according to the will of God, than to pray for grace which, we are assured, is sufficient. Christian prayer must never be an attempt to force the hand of God, but is rather, in the words of the Shorter Catechism, 'an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his will.'

Today, most Reformed scholars would side with the views of both Warr and the Committee and would contend that it is inaccurate to brand prayer for the dead as distinctively Roman and therefore necessarily wrong:

'In the old Roman Ordo much of what later became prayer for the deceased was recited at the moment of death... The prayers celebrated God as the giver of life, the recreator and the resurrector. The dying person identified with Christ through the reading of the Passion, was fortified by communion and died within the assurance of eternity in the communion of saints. At the moment of death these words were said:

Saints of God, come to his/her aid.
Hasten to meet him/her, angels of the Lord.

Receive his/her soul and present him/her to God the Most High.
May Christ, who called you, take you to himself;
may angels lead you to the bosom of Abraham.

May the choir of angels welcome you
and lead you to the bosom of Abraham;
and where Lazarus is poor no longer
may you find eternal rest.

Here we have a confident mood expressed in gentle and vivid biblical images. If the moment of death was not precisely pinpointed, it did not matter too greatly, since many early Christians inherited the Jewish belief that the soul lingered close to the body for three days.¹⁰

Unfortunately, much of this at a later period was moved further on in the Roman rites, and was linked with a petition for deliverance from the bitter pains of hell and purgatory, and it is these which the Reformers objected to so much. However, in their original and true context it could be argued that these prayers for the dead are not just harmless, but indeed edify both the believer and the Church as a whole.

10 B.D. Spinks, *Ecclesiology and Soteriology Shaping Eschatology: The Funeral Rites in Perspective in To Glorify God* (Eds) B.D. Spinks and I.R. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 189.

It is also rather surprising that neither the 1940 nor the 1994 book employ the *Nunc Dimittis* in the commendation (although it is offered as an option in the first order of the 1994 book at the committal). The *Nunc Dimittis* would seem to be extraordinarily appropriate in the case of those who have given much of their lives in serving the church.

The 1940 *Book of Common Order* has a second and briefer order to be used in particularly difficult circumstances, and a further order for the burial of a child. The 1994 Book has a much more elaborate second order, which is far less formal than the first, and whose language seems to presuppose that the death has been unexpected, which in itself may be of great practical use when that has been the reality. It begins with words of gladness for the deceased and sympathy with the bereaved at the parting from the loved one. There are two opening prayers which employ the themes of darkness and light, emphasising Jesus as the Sun of Righteousness, risen from the dead. The second prayer after the Scripture readings and address repeats the phrase from 1979: 'help us to be content to release *her* to you'¹¹, which is presumably a petition for the mourners to be able to accept the bereavement. The pain of living without the beloved has to be experienced emotionally and intellectually in order to come to terms with the situation, and energy redirected into life once more. Both past memories and future hope are emphasised in this prayer. Such acceptance in classical clinical and bereavement training is regarded as the first step in the whole process of healing.

The various forms of Committal in the 1940 book (for burial, cremation, and burial of ashes) are simple, with three prayers expressing the Christian hope. The first of these prayers makes reference to the person who has died, whereas the other two have no such reference. The latter prefer to employ more general terms for the church triumphant as a whole, though implying that the loved one is a member of the communion of saints in heaven. On the other hand, both orders in the 1994 book encourage the celebrant, whether at the grave or in the crematorium, to be specific and to name the deceased during the committal. The prayer following the committal in the first order explicitly stresses the believer's union now with those of the church triumphant as well as those of the church militant on earth. The prayer in

¹¹ *Book of Common Order of the Church of Scotland*, 266.

the second order, however, does not explicitly make this connection, and is happy to encourage the bereaved to adhere for the present to the faith as contained in the last few phrases of the Apostles' Creed, and to look forward in the future to a glorious day of reunion with all the saints. It is noteworthy, however, that one additional prayer under the heading 'Communion of Saints' (after the two main orders) seems to make a distinction between 'all your servants' and 'those dear to us'.¹² The former phrase arguably refers to the church invisible and not simply to the church visible, and reminds us that God alone is judge of all the earth. However, to what extent the current *Book of Common Order* points in a universalistic direction is debatable.

Funeral services as a whole and the words employed by ministers have probably encouraged the view that all are bound for heaven. There is possibly a common perception that all who undergo Christian burial are bound to enter into God's eternal presence. There is a clerical wariness of using terminology which refers to the need for repentance, probably due to the fear that the remotest inference that the deceased died without repentance would cause great offence, and most clergy would shirk from such a stance. Thus, one commentator is surely accurate when he states:

'... it (is) inappropriate to offer such blanket assurances. It is not that any minister may ever limit the grace of God. Rather it is that a form of words can be used which again makes that glorious offer of grace to the people but also sensitively warns them that God commands all to repent, and that he will judge us all on the Last Day.'¹³

The current feeling seems to be that the main objective of the worship is to console the mourners.

Many ministers would fear that they were being judgemental were they to use a completely different liturgy and approach for those who are regarded as the 'unchurched', as non-committed or non-practising. The contemporary liturgical scholar, Bryan D. Spinks, however, observes that in his opinion the 1994 *Book of Common Order* of the Church of Scotland:

'... has remained true to its Reformed heritage of accepting a distinction between the elect and those who are not, between the visible and the invisible Church, but leaving that demarcation to the Almighty God.'¹⁴

¹² *Book of Common Order of the Church of Scotland*, 300.

¹³ D.C. Searle, *Universalism in Common Order (1994) and the Book of Common Worship (1993) in To Glorify God*, 152.

¹⁴ B.D. Spinks, 'Ecclesiology and Soteriology Shaping Eschatology', 198.

It is surely self-evident that great care and flexibility has to be taken in the preparation of funerals for both worshipping believers and those who are not, and adaptations in the wording from any liturgical texts must be judiciously made.

The election of humanity in Christ as formulated by Karl Barth is surely the basis for any funeral rite. God elects not to be alone but to have human beings as his covenant partner. Jesus Christ is the electing God, and because Jesus is God for us, i.e. God showing his solidarity with us against all the forces that enslave and destroy us, then God is very much for us. Indeed, the earthly existence and death of Christ are the objective guarantees that we are elect. Barth rejects as false the subjective question about whether any one individual is elect. Rather he prefers to argue that we can only know anything about God's will as it is revealed in the one Mediator, Jesus Christ, who has been chosen for our sake and not for his own. Jesus is regarded as having suffered the rejection due to us on account of our sin. However, because of our belief in him, and our belief that the whole point of his incarnation, death, and resurrection was the carrying out of God's will, we are therefore in Christ. What he is and what he has done are ours, such that we may say that we are crucified and risen with Christ. Indeed, our rejection has been actualised in him, and in him we are elect.

Barth's doctrine always leaves open the possibility of universalism, and sensitive clergy must learn to discern each individual pastoral situation and employ and adapt the various orders from the liturgical texts. There is surely a *via media* where the whole tone of a funeral service may be neither judgemental and harsh, nor absolutely all-inclusive, but rather open to the mercy and love of God. The Almighty's grace is all that we can imagine, and, indeed, possibly very much more abundant than our greatest imaginings.

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