

TRIBUTES AT A FUNERAL

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As a young minister I used to feel that tributes at a funeral were wrong. A Christian funeral was not a place for eulogies, but for preaching. I used to say, that my prime task was to speak about the grace of God, and not to speak about the departed. And in this belief I was in good company. William Carey, for instance, said as he was dying: 'Speak not of Carey, speak of Carey's Saviour'. So I never encouraged tributes from friends and relatives. Instead, I would say a few words about the loved one, before getting on with 'the real job' of speaking about Jesus.

Over the years I have changed my mind. I now believe there is a place for tributes. True, by and large I do without tributes when the funeral service is at the crematorium – for then we are normally limited to twenty minutes. But when we have a church service, we now tend to have tributes. Indeed, my custom of beginning with the committal and then going on to the church for 'a service of thanksgiving' actually encourages tributes. Sometimes we have as many as three tributes before the sermon.

Why the change of mind? Perhaps because I now see a real distinction between a eulogy and a tribute. Although technically a 'eulogy' involves only 'a speaking well' of the person concerned, in fact a 'eulogy' tends to involve an exercise in praise so unreal that it contravenes the Trades Description Act. In a Christian funeral at least, there is no place for such a glorification of the departed – for 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Rom 3.23). Along with our virtues we have all our vices. As a Christian minister I cannot afford to engage in unreal eulogising, for it then calls my own integrity into question, which in turn means that there is good reason for the congregation to be sceptical about my affirmations of the Gospel.

However, there is a place for tributes which are honest and deserved. If, as James affirms, "every perfect gift is from above" (Jas 1.17), then it is only right for us to celebrate the lives of our loved ones and to thank God for them. So, whether or not there is a formal tribute in a service, I normally encourage the mourners to allow the memories of their loved ones to surface and then be grateful to God for those memories. There is a proper place for a tribute. Indeed, tributes at a funeral service can play a role akin to testimonies at a baptismal service – the person becomes more real.

Needless to say, there also needs to be an address. The task of the pastor is indeed to speak about the difference that Jesus makes to living and to dying, and to minister the grace of God into the lives of those who mourn. At a funeral service we not only thank God for our loved one – we also praise God for the comfort of the Gospel. But the two should go hand in hand, rather than be exclusive of the other.

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