

Case Study: The Funeral of an 18-Year-Old Boy

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Most funerals I take are of older people. The other day, however, I had the sad task of taking the funeral of an eighteen-year-old boy. I thought it might be of interest to readers of *Ministry Today* for me to relate my experience of that occasion.

Jonathan, the boy concerned, was the son of one of our church families. His death, although a shock, was not a surprise. From a very young age he had been diagnosed as suffering from Duchenne, a wasting disease related to muscular dystrophy. Boys suffering from Duchenne do not normally live much beyond the mid to late teens. Jonathan, to the surprise of his parents, was blessed with a further four years of life.

Jonathan's final two weeks of life were traumatic. Too ill to be moved to London's Royal Brompton Hospital, he spent his final days in our local hospital, and appears to have suffered unnecessarily as a result. Too old for a children's ward, the beds around him were occupied by older men, most of whom were in the process of dying too - indeed, most days in that ward there was a death. I was with Jonathan and the family on the final morning of his life, but unfortunately was absent, fulfilling my normal Sunday duties, when he actually died. When I got back to the hospital, Jonathan was still there in his bed. As is my custom, I prayed with the family and laid my hand on Jonathan as I commended him to God's safe keeping. It was a time for tears.

In the following week we began to plan for Jonathan's funeral. On my first visit I talked through the possibilities with the family. By the time I called again the family were ready to make decisions with regard to such things as music and hymns, tributes and scriptures.

The funeral took place ten days after Jonathan's death. As is our custom, we began with the committal at the crematorium. Only the family and some close friends were there. We sang 'Thine be the glory, risen conquering Son' and listened to a few Scripture verses before the committal itself. It was a very poignant moment as Jonathan's father and his two brothers placed three roses on the coffin prior to the curtains being pulled around. This was a time for expressing grief.

Normally the committal is followed immediately by the church service. But for logistical reasons, on this occasion there was a three hour break. The family wondered how they would cope with the delay. In the end they discovered, as I had discovered two years previously when my own father died, that there is much to be said for such a break. It

allows the family time to meet one another and re-group before having to face the wider public.

The family had decided that it did not want a 'thanksgiving service'. Instead they asked for 'a celebration' of Jonathan's life. With 'celebration' in mind the church was decorated not just with colourful flowers, but with bright helium-filled balloons, some red in the shape of hearts and stars, others blue in the shape of porpoises (a reminder of an occasion when Jonathan had seen porpoises off the coast of Ireland). The music, too, was up-beat. Two of Jonathan's favourite CDs were played before and after the service. As people came into church we listened to 'The Lion King' (Jonathan had gone to London to see this on his eighteenth birthday) and as people left 'Affirmation' by Savage Garden was played. Along with the organ there was a worship-band, including drums. We sang some of Jonathan's favourite worship songs, including 'Jubilate, everybody... Jubilate Deo' and 'We want to see Jesus lifted high, a banner that flies across this land'. It was very much a young person's service, even though most of the large congregation were not young people. Many of the non-churchgoers present were stunned by the atmosphere. In planning the service I had questioned with the parents whether we were right in majoring on celebration and was concerned that we should also have an opportunity to express our grief. However, I need not have been concerned. We had already expressed our grief at the crematorium and were now ready to move on.

We began with a modern classic, 'Be still, for the presence of the Lord is here'. The prayer which immediately followed focussed on the line of that song, "Be still.... he comes to minister his grace", as we asked God to "speak words of comfort into our sad and troubled hearts; help each one of us to discover that, amidst all the uncertainties of life, we can be certain of you and of your love. So may the songs, readings, and prayers, as also the tributes and the address, minister your grace to us all".

There were four Scripture passages, the first three chosen by me. They were Psalm 23 ("God cares for us"), John 14.1-2,6 ("Jesus calls us to place our hope in him") and 1 Corinthians 15.20, 42-43, 54-57 ("Jesus alone can give us life"). The family chose the final reading, 1 Corinthians 13.4-8a ("A vision of love").

And then there were the tributes. I confess that when I was a young minister I was so concerned to ensure that my funerals were Christ-centred, that I left very little room for tributes of any kind. I have since changed my mind! There is a very real place for remembering with gratitude the life of a loved one. Thanksgiving is an eminently Christian virtue. The three tributes were given by Jonathan's eldest brother, his GP, and by one of his teachers. This was an occasion for smiles and even laughter as we fondly recalled some of the past incidents of Jonathan's life. As the tributes were being given photographs of Jonathan were beamed onto our large screen. It's amazing how useful video and PowerPoint projection can be at a funeral!

A Christian funeral service, however, cannot limit itself to reflecting on the past life of a loved one. There must also be an opportunity for declaring the Gospel of Christ. But how? Here's what I said on this occasion:

On a day like this, what is there to say? What do you say to parents when they have just lost their 18-year-old son? Or when you send a card of condolence, what do you write?

In the 2nd century AD an Egyptian lady named Irene was faced with that problem. In her letter of condolence to a bereaved couple whose son had died, she said that she was very sorry for them in their loss. She went on to say had she wept over their lost son as she had recently wept over the loss of her own dear Didymas. We don't know exactly who Didymas was: he may have been her husband, but probably he was her son. She ended her letter: "But... against such things one can do nothing. Therefore comfort one another. Farewell".

Strange words! What possible comfort could there be, for there was no silver lining Irene could discern in this couple's dark cloud of sorrow? Irene, in fact, had nothing positive to say - all hope of an after-life was totally missing.

Thank God, today we have something positive say to Jonathan's family. For with Jesus there is hope.

True, we do not want to minimise the grief that rightly surrounds the death of Jonathan. At any time to lose a loved one is hard, and harder still to lose a son, let alone an 18-year-old son. But, in the words of the Apostle Paul, we do not "grieve as others do who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4.13, NRSV). It is this element of hope which enables us to call today's service a "celebration". For although the tributes have celebrated Jonathan's past, we can also celebrate Jonathan's present and the future, for Jonathan was a believer, and where there is faith there is hope.

Sadly, for those who do not believe there is no hope. When the curtains draw round the coffin in the crematorium, it is literally curtains. Death is the end, "The last act is tragic, however happy all the rest of the play is" (Pascal, Pensee 210). Death, for the non-believer, is a depressing, if not dreadful thought.

The only way to deal with death is either not to think about it, or to laugh about it. But death is no laughing matter. It is a dreadful thing to lose a loved one - forever.

The good news is that our loved ones need not be lost. As Jesus made clear in the reading which we had from John's Gospel, those who die believing are at home in their Father's house: "Do not be worried and upset... Believe in God, believe also in me. There are many rooms in my Father's house". Jonathan is in the Father's house - forever safe in the Father's love.

This is what we celebrate. This is why we have balloons. This is why, instead of singing a funeral dirge, we sing songs of hope and of joy.

True, at the time of death there is sadness. There would be something wrong in our relationship if we did not shed tears when a loved one died. I find it significant that Jesus, for instance, wept at the tomb of his friend Lazarus. I confess that I too shed a

tear when last Sunday week I stood around the hospital bed on which lay the lifeless form of Jonathan.

But there is 'crying' and 'crying', 'grieving' and 'grieving'. The apostle Paul says: we do not have to grieve as "others do who have no hope". For the Christian, death is not the end. In the words of Jesus with which we began this service: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live" (John 11.25). For those who have put their trust in the Lord Jesus there is hope.

The result is that when we mourn, as mourn we do, we do not mourn so much for our loved ones, as for ourselves. The grief we experience, the tears we shed, are over the loss that is ours. There is no need to grieve for our loved ones. In the words of the Apostle Paul: "We believe that God will take back with Jesus those who have died believing in him" (1 Thessalonians 4.14). With Jesus there is hope - hope that death is not the end, but rather the beginning of a new life free from "grief or crying or pain" (Revelation 21.4).

How do we know that this is true? How do we know that this is not wishful thinking? Because of what God has already done in Jesus. "We believe that Jesus died and rose again, AND SO we believe that God will take back with Jesus those who have died believing in him" (1 Thessalonians 4.14).

The hope of our resurrection is based on the resurrection of Jesus. Because of what God has done in the past, our future is certain. Christian hope is not whistling in the dark - it is based on a past event.

Here is the answer to the question people sometimes ask: "But how do you know there is life after death? Nobody has ever come back from the dead". Yes, they have - Jesus has come back from the dead..

What's more, the resurrection of Jesus shows not just that it is possible for a person to rise from the dead, but also that the way to life has been opened up for us all. For the Scriptures teach that, in rising from the dead, Jesus has blazed a trail through the valley of the shadow down which those who have put their trust in him may follow too. Listen again to those words Paul wrote to the church at Corinth: "Christ has been raised from death, as the guarantee that those who sleep in death will be raised" (1 Corinthians 15.20).

Jesus makes all the difference! He makes all the difference even on a day like today. Unlike Irene of Egypt, we have reason to comfort one another. Yes, even amidst our sadness we have reason to celebrate.

After prayers thanking God for the comfort of the Gospel and for the life of Jonathan, as also praying for the family, we concluded with 'Shine, Jesus, shine'.

Afterwards members of our congregation served tea and refreshments to more than 200 guests. We have always found that one of the advantages of having the committal before the service is that the family has an opportunity to greet all those who have come to the service. On this occasion especially, it was an ideal way to end Jonathan's funeral.

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