

Funerals Are Not Always Celebrations

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A day of grief

Recently I went to the funeral of a great friend who died far too young, with still so much to offer. I was devastated by his death, and by its suddenness - only two weeks from diagnosis of cancer to death. I arrived for the church service very much a mourner, but alas, I was given no room to mourn.

The funeral was billed as a 'Service of Celebration and Thanksgiving'. From start to finish celebration and thanksgiving were the order of the day. Apart from the guest preacher, nobody mentioned the word 'pain' or 'sorrow'. Instead, we were called to rejoice in the triumph of the risen Christ and in the hope of resurrection which is ours.

The hymns and songs were all upbeat, and were played in an upbeat fashion by the worship group accompanying the organ. It was toe-tapping, hand-raising stuff - but not for me. I felt even more miserable.

To make matters worse (for me), humour abounded. Before the service, pictures of my friend were beamed up on a screen, and people laughed at some of the amusing poses of the deceased. Humour characterised the official tributes paid by the family, as well as the unofficial tributes paid by others taking part in the service. Yes, even the minister leading the prayers had to precede the prayers with humorous reflections. I found it hard to laugh - I wanted to cry.

Nobody addressed my pain. Even the prayers were just prayers for the family. No mention was made in the prayers of others who might be grieving. I, the staunchest of Nonconformists, found myself longing for a requiem mass!

After the service there was a 'celebration party' to which we were all invited. I guess that the widow must have thought I was a real party-pooper, because as we hugged one another I was holding back tears. To cap it all, when I talked to others at the 'party', they all said what a great funeral it had been!

Reflections on my day of grief

As I reflect on my day of grief, I recognise that I may have been unfair to the widow and her family. For them the note of celebration and thanksgiving may have been appropriate. Presumably they had already expressed their grief at the private committal service in the local crematorium, which had preceded the church service.

Maybe, too, I was unusual in not having dealt with my grief before the service - after all, there had been a whole week between the death and the funeral, some might argue time enough for me to grieve.

Nonetheless there are certain principles worth stating:

1. Death can be a nasty business

Death is not to be trivialised. Job described death as “the king of terrors” (Job 18.14 - the GNB rendering of ‘King Death’ fails to do justice to the Hebrew). The Psalmist too was equally realistic: “My heart is in anguish within me, the terrors of death have fallen upon me. Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me” (Psalm 55.4-5). Even Paul, in his great chapter on the resurrection, called death “the last enemy” (1 Corinthians 15.25).

True, from a Christian perspective, death is the means of bringing us into God’s presence. In the words of the hymn *All creatures of our God and King*, death can be “most kind and gentle... leading home the child of God”. Death can be a ‘blessing’, especially when the deceased has come to the end of a long and full life. But time and again death is anything but a blessing. I think of my eighteen year old cousin, Johnny, who was sucked to death in a silo: there was nothing good about his death. And what was true of his death is true of so many others. To pretend, for instance, that God has ‘chosen’ to take a young child to himself is tantamount to blasphemy. Similarly, when a wife has died in her prime, it is nonsense to pretend that she has just ‘slipped into another room’ - death has forcibly taken her from our presence.

In the words of the Swiss psychiatrist, Carl Jung:

“Death is indeed a piece of brutality. There is no sense in pretending otherwise. It is brutal, not only as a physical event, but far more so psychically: a human being is torn a way from us, and what remains is the icy stillness of death”.

Death can often be a nasty business, and its nastiness needs to be acknowledged. Yes, we believe in resurrection, but resurrection presupposes death. If we are to be true to life, then we need to acknowledge the pain, the bleakness, and the sheer utter ‘bloodiness’ of the situation. We do people no favours if we seek to protect them from the pain.

2. People need to grieve

I find it significant that on the very occasion when Jesus spoke of his being the resurrection and the life, “Jesus wept” for his friend Lazarus (John 11.35). If Jesus could weep, then so too may we.

In *23 Days: A Story of Love, Death and God*, Francis Bridger, an Anglican minister, told the story of how his wife Renee was diagnosed with terminal cancer, and 23 days later was dead. He recounted the devastating grief he experienced.

“Grief has only one goal: to usurp your love’s place. It wants to become your new companion, your new best friend. This is what it lusts after. But - and here’s the real cruelty - it doesn’t even attempt to play the seductress, enticing you into its presence with promises of consolation. No, it waits in hiding until it

can steal up, knock you to the ground and stamp all over you as you writhe in agony. Then it delights in kicking the living hell out of you until your guts are bursting and you can take no more, leaving you a sobbing wreck, crying out in desperation for your loved one to hold you in her arms and make everything right. But, of course, she can't. How I hate that bloody cancer".

The grief of which Francis Bridger spoke was private grief; it was also grief subsequent to the funeral. However, if we are to be true to life, then at the time of the funeral we need to make space for grief to be expressed.

If the bereaved are not given an opportunity to acknowledge their sense of pain and loss, then the grieving process may take so much longer. To return to the death of my cousin, instead of grieving their loss, his parents held a party for all Johnny's school-friends to celebrate his new life in heaven. In effect they repressed their grief, and as a result it took years for them to come to terms with his death. Too many Christians think it is wrong to grieve.

A fellow-minister commented: "It seems to me that we're often faced with a dilemma over funerals: a believing family of a recently deceased believer wants the service to be a celebration of the life just ended and of the Christian faith that sustains them. And in order to do this, they think that the service must be relentlessly upbeat, almost laughing in the face of death because we believe Christ has triumphed over it". He instanced a funeral where a widow, in order to win her wayward daughter back to Christ, chose upbeat pop songs (both sacred and secular) to celebrate her husband's life and faith. Sadly her repression of grief did the family no good: the widow suffered a crisis of faith, and the daughter was pushed even further away from Christian believing.

There is a place for tears. In this respect the modern custom of holding a private committal service for family members only before the main service of 'thanksgiving' has one great disadvantage: it removes something of the starkness of death from the wider circle of friends. Indeed, according to Chris Skilton, the absence of a coffin for people attending memorial services seriously diminishes the event: "To be faced with a coffin means that we have to hear the words of Scripture and the sermon with the body present - and that has a very different effect and brings a different tone. It significantly adds to the sense of the reality of pain of death at the service, in which everyone is then caught up". Skilton adds: "One might also ask how much the 'celebration' service is a triumphant response to death or the denial of pain in a society that can't cope with it and from which the church is immune".

3. People need to celebrate the Christian hope

This plea to allow people to grieve does not mean that there is no place for celebration. Although we may weep for our loss, we need not weep for those who have died in Christ. They are safe in the Father's house (John 14.1-2). Death for them indeed "gain" (Philippians 1.21).

I love John Bunyan's description of Mr Valiant-for-truth's dying:

"When the day that he must go hence was come, many accompanied him to the

river-side, into which as he went, he said, 'Death, where is thy sting?', and as he went down deeper, 'Grave, where is thy victory?'. So he passed over, and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side" (The Pilgrim's Progress)

In the light of the resurrection hope, there is a place for the sounding of trumpets on this side too. The great Catholic requiems have got it wrong - Brahms' *German Requiem* with its great celebration of resurrection has got it right. Death is a *defeated* enemy! Paul was right to declare: "Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15.56). Not to celebrate the difference that Jesus makes to living and to dying would be a denial of our faith.

We need to celebrate our joy in Christ, but if we are to be real, then we need to acknowledge that our joy is tinged by our sense of loss. Here I take issue with Fiona Castle, who after her husband's death, wrote to her friends: "*No flowers, no fuss, no mourning, just lots of joy*". As Christians, "we may not grieve as others do who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4.13), but we certainly do grieve.

4. Pastors, not families, plan the funeral service

All pastors have their own 'standard' funeral service, but it gives none of us any sense of satisfaction simply to wheel out that service. I am always delighted when families have the energy and desire to take an interest in the planning of the service. I welcome their suggestions for readings, songs, and tributes. It is important that families feel that this is 'their' service. However, I have the ultimate responsibility for the content of the service.

This does not mean that I 'dictate' the content of the service. It does mean ensuring that there is shape and substance to a service. When I meet with the bereaved family, I normally begin by describing the standard shape of the service, and then invite them to suggest how we might personalise that shape.

Not all families initially agree on what they want. One of the minister's tasks is to help them reach a conclusion to which they all can agree. A grieving wife, for instance, might want something reflective and sombre, whereas the children might want a more celebrative form of service.

Not infrequently, the person who has died has helpfully left instructions in terms of hymns and readings. Yet there are times when it may be right to ignore some of the wishes of the deceased. For instance, if the deceased has asked for a 'celebration service' as a gesture to attempt to spare further suffering for those left behind, there may be grounds for encouraging the family to re-think the proposed form of the service.

At the end of the day, however, the minister is responsible for the service. Without sounding patronising, ministers, with their store of pastoral experience, are best suited to decide on the final shape of the funeral service.

For me it is important that the Scripture are allowed to speak. I am surprised how little Scripture is sometimes read in churches whose worship is not ordered by a book of prayer. I ensure that there is a balance to the Scripture readings - with readings from the Old Testament (often a Psalm), the Gospels (normally the words of Jesus found in

John 14.1-6) and the Letters (including almost always excerpts from 1 Corinthians 15). I ensure too that there is a balance between the tributes of friends and my address - in the service we come not just to celebrate a life, but also to hear God's words of comfort and grace. At a funeral I am not just a pastor - I am also a liturgist, or rather one expression of my pastoral role is to devise an appropriate liturgy.

Where there is a printed order of service, I take responsibility for drawing up the final order of service. I give the family a draft order of service, for them to confirm that this is what we have agreed, before the order is then sent to the printer. In this way there is no room for misunderstanding.

5. Worship must express pain as well as celebration

We need to ensure that there is a balance between the celebration of a life well lived and the recognition of the wrenching pain.

Within a week of my friend's funeral, I had to take the service of a 'young' 61 year old. The daughter, who goes to a charismatic church, wanted it be a service of celebration. In particular, she wanted us to listen to some of her favourite 'Hillsong' worship tracks, and for the service conclude with a favourite piece of jazz. However, I was conscious of the wife, clearly numb with grief. So after beginning the service with the words of Jesus: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will live even though they die" (John 11.25), I led the congregation in the following prayer:

Father God, we praise you for these life-assuring words, and for the difference that Jesus can make to living and to dying. How we need to know that difference at this moment. For we come to you in pain and in grief. We are conscious of the loss of our loved one - and of his untimely death. O God, come to us in our distress, and remind us afresh that there is nothing which can separate us from your great love in Jesus. Bless our service this afternoon. Help us as we now hear your promises contained in your Word; help us to believe them, and in believing receive the comfort they offer. In Jesus' name we make our prayer. Amen.

Not so long ago I conducted the funeral of a suicide. I began the service with Romans 8.38-39: "I am certain that nothing can separate us from his love: neither life nor death - there is nothing in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord", and went on to say:

"Amidst all the uncertainties of life, here is truth for us to hold on to. Amidst the tears and grief of today, here is good news to experience. The God who made us, loves us; he loves us always; and through his Son, Jesus Christ, he has promised never to leave us nor forsake us. This truth we may know. May you also know, as others before us have found, that his strength is available for us, especially at those times when we feel we have no strength of our own' [These words were not my own, but I am not now sure where I found them].

After singing 'Praise my soul the King of heaven', I prayed:

O Lord our God, the Creator of the Universe and the Sustainer of all life, but also the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our God and Father too.

This morning we bless you for our hymn's reminder that, like a father, you tenderly care for us. Lord, may we experience that tender care today. How we thank you that, in Jesus, we have discovered that your love has no limits, and that there is nothing in this life or in the world to come which can separate us from you. As we come to you in our pain, help us to remember that you too have known the pain of loving, for you are the Father of a crucified son and know the anguish of a broken heart. As we come to you in our bewilderment, remind us that, although Richard is beyond our reach, he is not beyond your touch of care and love. As we come to you with our feelings of guilt, forgive us for those times when we failed Richard; help us to forgive him for the hurt he has inflicted upon us; and help us to forgive ourselves for any harm we may have caused him. So bless our service this morning. Help us as we now hear your promises contained in your Word; help us to believe them, and in believing, receive the comfort they offer.

It is not just the opening prayer where we need to acknowledge our sense of grief. Throughout the service there needs to be a balance between celebration and the acknowledgement of loss. Unfortunately in much contemporary evangelical worship this is not always easy. Geoff Colmer states:

"In the non-conformist part of the church to which I belong, and especially in contemporary evangelical churches, we have neither the vocabulary for our prayers, nor the repertoire for our worship music, for anything other than the default worship style at which most churches are set. Add to this a church culture which knows how to operate only in casual mode and the issue is exacerbated. It seems that we cater only for people feeling glad, and that if they feel sad, bad or mad... then church is not the place for them to express their humanity".

Churches influenced by charismatic renewal are good at celebrating the faith, but by and large they do not know how to lament. Thank God there are now a few worship songs around which do reflect the rawness of life. I think of the song by Beth and Matt Redman: "Blessed be your name", which speaks of "the road marked with suffering" and of the darkness closing in. Sadly such songs are the exception. Most contemporary worship songs are "like vinegar on a wound" to those with "a heavy heart" (Proverbs 25.20).

Another Ministry Today network member tells of how the loss of his wife's parents coincided with a time when she and he were attending a "quasi-charismatic congregation where the note was always of triumph and joy, and where there was never a mention of the sheer pain with which every day is filled for those who have lost loved ones. It wasn't that we needed the service to be miserable, but we did need some acknowledgement of our pain". The result was that for a while his wife stopped going to church altogether. Eventually they both became Anglicans, for they discovered within Anglican worship "that strange, divine and heavenly mix of joy and sorrow, rejoicing and grieving, celebrating and mourning - even more so in a service with no music such as a typical 8.00am Holy Communion".

6. Worship must allow the mourners to move on

Worship which only allows mourners to lament their loss is not truly Christian. As ministers we need to allow the mourners to move on. We need to allow the congregation to 'travel' to the place where they can also celebrate the difference that the resurrection of Jesus makes to their loved one. How we will do that will vary. Not so long ago I heard of a funeral service in our local cathedral which ended with champagne being served to all!

Precisely because I want the day to end positively, I always seek to ensure that we begin with the service of committal. For me there is nothing starker than the moment when the coffin is lowered into the grave or disappears within the crematorium. Even at its best, death is bleak. But we need to move on - and the task of the pastor taking the service after the committal is to enable the congregation to move on. This involves acknowledging the pain and grief, but also celebrating the hope that is ours in Christ.