

PREPARING FOR DEATH

Chelmsford Word Alive 3 November 2013

"I've packed my bags and I'm ready to go", Pope John XXIII is reputed to have said. It's a quotation I've used time and again at funeral services to underline the point that all of us need to prepare for death. For, as another saying goes, death and income tax are the two great certainties of life.

Trusting in Jesus

But how do we prepare for death? When I quote Pope John at funeral services I have in mind the need for each one of us to commit our lives into the safekeeping of Jesus and in turn to know the security that Jesus alone can give us, both in this life and the next. Like most ministers I almost always begin a funeral service with the stirring words of Jesus: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live" (John 11.25). What a difference it makes to know that death is not the end. Even as I have been writing this article I have been interrupted and found myself talking to a widow with no faith. "If only", she said, "I knew that there was an after-life". Thank God there is far more than a mere "after-life" to come for those who have put their trust in the Lord Jesus. There is no more important step to prepare for death than by responding to Jesus and his offer of forgiveness of sins and life beyond the grave.

Living life to the full today

But there are other ways in which we can prepare for death. We can prepare for death by living life to the full in the here and now. By living life to the full I do not mean the traditional way of "living it up" with wine, women and song (although let us not forget that each one of them is a gift of God - misuse is no reason for no use!). Not, to live life to the full is to seek to live a full life for God - to be the person God would have us be - to fulfil the role that God would have us to play at home and at work, in the community and in the church. Scott Peck wrote with some perspicacity: "I don't think people are afraid of death itself. What they are afraid of is the incompleteness of their life". Few of us, even if we live to a ripe old age, will die with a sense of total completeness. Sadly, there will always be things we have left undone. And yet, what a difference it will make if when we die we can know that we have been reasonably faithful in the stewardship of the life that God has given us.

Reflecting on death

Another way of preparing for death is to ask ourselves the kind of questions suggested by an Anglican priest who specialises in working with the dying (Bill Kirkpatrick, **Going Forth**, DLT, London 1997).

1. Who would I like to be at my side, to embrace me as I'm dying?
2. Who do I think would really miss me?
3. What impression would I leave behind?
4. What single word would give meaning to my life?

5. What have I to put right before I die?
6. What relationships have I to put right before I die?
7. Who have I to say thanks to before I die?
8. From whom should I seek forgiveness?
9. To whom should I offer forgiveness?
10. What should I like to achieve before I die?
11. What kind of service would I like?
12. Whom would I specifically invite?
13. Whom would I not invite and why?

Some of these questions are not easy to answer. Indeed, some of us might find that in order to answer them we might need to talk them through with a small group of trusted friends or with our pastor. And yet I believe that the effort in responding to them could be intensely fruitful. Furthermore, we would then be so much better prepared for our death.

Co-creating the funeral

Yet another way of preparing for our death is by planning our own funeral arrangements. And by this I don't mean buying a funeral plan from the Co-op, although that may take a burden off our loved ones when it comes to deciding the type of coffin and the means by which the body should be disposed of, but rather planning how others will remember us on the day of our funeral.

Interestingly I found that Bill Kirkpatrick also advocates what he terms the "co-creating" of the funeral service. He tells the story of one man, who had been in the catering industry and who wished his friends to toast him with a glass of champagne. So, after the words of committal, the mourners were invited to surround the bier. Chilled champagne and glasses were wheeled in on a serving trolley, corks popped, glasses filled and passed around, and everyone drank a toast to the man's life as the coffin was lowered!

Although such a suggestion may sound a little extreme, the concept of "co-creating" a service is extremely helpful. It enables the dying person (and we are all in that category, for we are all in the process of dying) and the minister to personalise a service, which for the most part can be so impersonal

Planning my mother' funeral

The other day when I visited my 92 year-old mother we talked about one of the hymns she would like to be sung at her funeral. It's a hymn by Fanny Crosby (1820-1915) a blind American Methodist poet, who wrote some 8000 (yes, eight thousand!) hymns and songs. Most of these songs have long been forgotten – but not all. 'Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine' was written by Fanny Crosby; so also, 'To God be the glory great things he has done'; and, so too my mother's funeral hymn, 'Some day the silver cord will break'. The hymn is found in no modern hymnbook – like many other songs she wrote, it is no doubt dismissed as 'mawkish or too sentimental'. And yet, as my mother began to sing the lines, and as I later read it, I found it profoundly moving. It reads as follows:-

Some day the silver cord will break,

And I no more as now shall sing;
But, O the joy when I shall wake
Within the presence of the King!

*And I shall see Him face to face,
And tell the story, saved by grace:
And I shall see Him face to face,
And tell the story, saved by grace.*

Some day my earthly house will fall,
I cannot tell how soon 'twill be,
But this I know – my All in all
Has now a place with Him for me.

Or some day when my Lord will come,
And called to meet Him I'll be blest,
He then will say to me, "Well done,"
And I shall enter into rest.

Some day, till then I'll watch and wait,
My lamp all trimmed and burning bright,
That when my Saviour I will greet,
My faith will then be changed to sight

It is all the more moving when one realises that this hymn was written by a woman who was blind almost from birth. Although it is only within the last two or three years that my mother has begun to lose her sight, nonetheless this resonated strongly with her. For the hymn looks forward to the day when, in the words of the chorus, we "shall see Him face to face". Or as the last two lines of the final verse declare, on that day "when my Saviour I will greet, my faith will then be changed to sight". I am told that Fanny Crosby once said: "When I get to heaven, the first face that shall ever gladden my sight will be that of my Saviour".

Every verse of the hymn is full of Biblical allusions. The allusion which interested me in particular is found in the first line: "Some day the silver chord will break". This is a quotation from Ecclesiastes 12, where the Preacher declares: "Remember your creator in the days of your youth... before the silver chord is snapped" (Eccl 12. 1,6 NRSV). If the truth be told, the opening verses of Ecclesiastes are exceedingly gloomy, and are all about sadness of old age and the inevitability of death. Unlike older versions, the GNB gives clear expression to the complex allegory of death which is present: "Remember your Creator while you are still young, before those dismal days and years come when you will say 'I don't enjoy life'. Then your arms, that have protected you, will tremble, and your legs, now strong, will grow weak. Your teeth will be too few to chew your good, and your eyes too dim to see clearly. Your ears will be deaf to the noise of the street.... Your hair will turn white; you will hardly be able to drag yourself along, and all desire will have gone". Old age can indeed be cruel! This is the context in which the Preacher declares: then 'the silver chain will snap, and the golden lamp will fall and break; the rope at the well will break, and the water jar be shattered" (Eccl 12.6). The precise meaning of these metaphors for death is unclear. The scholarly consensus is that the Preacher begins by referring to a golden light bowl strung up by a silver chord. According to Derek Kidner,

the pictures “capture the beauty and fragility of the human frame”. Here there is no hope of life beyond the grave. Death is the end: as the Lord said to Adam and Eve after the Fall, “You are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Gen 3.19; see Eccl 12.7). The theme is ‘*memento mori*’ – remember that we will all die! To be fair, the Preacher is not revelling in the thought of old age and death; rather he is encouraging his readers to make the most of life - ‘*carpe diem*’ (seize the day)!

Thank God, however, that we who read these words today live on the other side of the resurrection of Jesus. The message of the Preacher to ‘remember that we will all die’ is transformed into a new key in the New Testament: ‘remember that we will all live’! In the stirring words of the Apostle Paul, set to wonderful music by Handel in *The Messiah*: “Behold, I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. The trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible” (1 Cor 15.51,52).

It is precisely because there is hope, that with Fanny Crosby we can sing not just of the silver cord breaking, but of the waking within the presence of the King. Or in the words of the chorus: “And I shall see Him face to face, and tell the story, saved by grace”.

Planning my own funeral

Cheapest coffin. One floral tribute (not to be left at crematorium) - if desired, money in lieu of flowers to be given to an organisation such as Ministry Today.

The committal

We shall begin with a brief service of committal at the crematorium. I have asked for my coffin to be carried in to the strains of "O Death Where Is Your Sting?" from Brahms' great German Requiem. At that brief service I shall want the text given to me at my baptism to be read out: "If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's " (Rom 14.8). In life these words of Paul are a great challenge; but in death they offer great comfort.

Incidentally, I do much prefer to begin with the committal. For the committal marks the darkest moment of the day. There is something extremely stark about the curtains being drawn or the coffin being lowered into the ground. As a Christian minister I long to do more at this point than simply say a brief prayer and then close with a benediction. How much better if after the committal we can all go back to church and receive there the comfort which God can give. (Incidentally, I gather from my local undertaker that well-to-do Anglicans are increasingly preferring to start with the committal - but my practice has no sociological undertones!).

The funeral service

From the committal we shall move on to church for the funeral service itself. On reflection, the modern Christian trend to term the funeral service a "service of thanksgiving" seems a little escapist, in the sense that the very title tends to deny the grief which is an inevitable part of the occasion - true we do not grieve as those "without hope",

but we do most certainly grieve. On the other hand, along with the grief there is joy too. In my funeral instructions I have written: "I would like a colourful printed order of service expressing something of the joy and hope we have in Christ. Let the church put up an Easter banner, if there be one around".

Some time ago I drafted the following order:

Organ prelude - How beautiful are the feet of those who proclaim good news (Handel's Messiah)

HYMN: For all the love (wedding hymn)

Prayer

Scriptures: Psalm 23? John 14; 1 Cor 15; 2 Cor 4.1-15

HYMN: Who would true valour see??

Sermon

Prayers

HYMN: I love you, O Lord, you alone

Benediction: Phil

Organ postlude - Vidor (played at wedding) ??

Tributes?

You will notice that when I drafted this order I did not include a place for tributes or eulogies. At that stage I felt very strongly that a eulogy belonged to a funeral service. Indeed, I wrote an article where I stated: "The task of a Christian minister at a funeral service is not to be confused with that of a humanist master of ceremonies; it is to articulate the grief which is present and then convey something of the grace of God into the situation. A eulogy can trivialise a funeral. This does not mean that in the funeral service a minister may not refer to the good (and maybe not so good) points of the departed it simply means that that is not the chief purpose. The wake seems to me to be the place for the sharing of memories".

I confess that I have changed my mind, and now wish – for instance – that I had given a tribute at my father's funeral. Why the change of heart? 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.

The sermon

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.

I have already planned the text for the sermon: 2 Cor 4.7 We who have this spiritual treasure are like common clay pots, in order to show that the supreme power belongs to God, and not to us)

Who will preach the sermon? Unfortunately one friend I would have loved to have preached at my funeral has died himself, while another friend is living in Australia. I have written in my instructions "At this stage it is impossible to know who I would wish to be involved in my funeral. My deepest concern is for Caroline and so her needs of comfort must be paramount".

Disposal of the ashes

No special service is required - probably Caroline would prefer to have them buried in a lawn cemetery, which she might wish to occasionally visit.

The wake

The funeral service will then be immediately followed by the wake - "bun fight", "tea-party", call it what you will - which will probably take place in the church hall and to which everybody will be invited. The wake for me is part and parcel of the commemoration of the loved one. In my instructions I have written: "Let it be characterised by something 'outrageous', which indicates that in the midst of life's pain, there can be fun too: e.g. balloons! Speeches by my four children, if they feel up to it? Their speeches at our silver wedding as at my 50th birthday party meant so much to me (otherwise let the four children give speeches at a smaller family affair - party? - later in the evening)".

Flowers

I notice too that I have asked for family flowers only. Flowers at a Christian funeral in particular seem very appropriate - just as the wearing of black at a Christian funeral seems inappropriate. Yet the spending of vast sums of money seems wrong, when such money can so easily be given in memory of a loved one to a special project in the church or to some other good cause. I did like Kirkpatrick's idea of people being asked to bring a single flower of their choice or one that symbolises the deceased person, and that being laid either on the coffin or on a table which may have on it an enlarged photograph of the person.

Of course I don't expect my wishes to tally with the wishes of others. I do not wish to

suggest this evening that people should pattern their funeral on mine, but rather that while life and health are still enjoyed we begin the task of preparing for our death. This will involve funeral arrangements. Hopefully, however, it will involve much more. Let's ensure that meaning is given to our departing as also to our living.