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AUSTRALIAN JOURNAL OF LITURGY

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Editorial

In this issue, we publish the text of a paper presented in Australia earlier this year by visiting scholar, Dr Paul Sheppy. Although not written for this purpose, the paper does provide some potentially useful reading in relation to some aspects of the Academy's forthcoming conference, which will be held in Western Australia under the theme "Singing our sorrows", exploring the sometimes neglected role of lament in public worship. As Dr Sheppy's discussion of Christian funeral rites attests, lament in Christian worship is always uttered in the context of faith in the transforming power of God's grace.

It is not too late to register for the conference, which is scheduled for 17th-20th January 2005, at the Fremantle campus of the University of Notre Dame Australia. Registration forms are available from the AAL secretary, or from chapter convenors, or from the Academy's newly-developed website at www.liturgy.org.au.

As always, I look forward to receiving your contributions for future issues of *AJL*; and I wish you pleasant reading and nourishing worship through the Christmas season.

Inari Thiel
Logan City

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Christian rites of death: getting it right and getting it wrong

Paul Sheppy

Introduction

I began formal consideration of death liturgies in 1990, when I enrolled as a part-time research student at the University of Leeds. My supervisor was Dr Alistair McFadyen, who had written *The Call to Personhood* (CUP, 1990) and who was beginning his work on the doctrine of original sin that led to the book *Bound to Sin* (CUP, 2000). With our twin interests, it was not long before we were known in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies as "Sin and Death"!

What McFadyen encouraged me to do was to write my own theological and liturgical critique of contemporary Christian funeral rites, and I think it fair to say that without his encouragement my work would never have moved beyond adequate *reportage*. At the same time, colleagues in the Joint Liturgical Group of Great Britain asked me to draft a collection of texts and rites for use by the Christian Churches in our islands in ministry at and following death. To them are due thanks (though not blame!) for my published work in that field.

This paper will draw upon the drafting and the critical analysis that these two areas of work covered and upon the books that have

subsequently been published: *In Sure and Certain Hope* (SCM-Canterbury Press, 2003) and *Death Liturgy and Ritual* (Ashgate, 2003 and 2004). I shall begin by describing a contemporary pressure on funeral rites and its challenge to Christian understandings of death. I shall then reflect on how Christian faith and practice generally reacts to cultural pressure before offering some theological and liturgical proposals of my own.

Such an agenda could easily take the form of an entire semester's course; what I offer in this paper are little more than headings, examples and anecdotes. For a more complete story, you must read the books!

Contemporary Pressures: celebrating the life

The presbytery phone rings and the parish priest answers: "Holy Trinity", he says. The caller ignores the fleeting notion of so direct a line and assumes that she is speaking only to one of God's servants on earth. "Father, I'm sorry to interrupt you. It's Denise, here, from Coffins Are Us; I'm ringing to ask whether you can do a funeral for us next Wednesday. It's for John Boddy, who was a resident of the Sleeptight Rest and Care Home on Paradise Road."

Such a scenario is to be found thousands of times a day across our world. Clergy are called from preparing a sermon, feeding the cat, watching an episode of *Neighbours*, eating their lunch, or the middle

of argument with the housekeeper about why purificators should *not* be put in the same drawer as the serviettes. In the midst of life we are in death, and without warning the humdrum is interrupted by the final and dread calling card of death.

While many still turn to the Church for funerals, they are no longer unanimously content to allow the officiating minister simply to use the service book and to leave it at that. Mourners complain that traditional services are impersonal and remote. "It could have been anyone," they protest. "The vicar never even mentioned her name."

Of course, there will be cases where the officiating minister is not entirely to blame. In the British scene, for example, there is a system where a crematorium or cemetery may employ a roster of clergy to officiate where no other minister has been found. In such a case, the duty minister may have used the Church of England's 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*, in whose funeral service text the deceased is, indeed, not named, but referred to throughout simply as "this our *brother*". This anonymity was intended to express the common mortal lot of humanity. Individuality was not part of the 17th century funerary agenda – unless, of course, you were George, Duke of Basingstoke, or Anne, Countess of Wapping! As George Orwell remarked, "some are more equal than others"; and the so-called good and great somehow managed to indicate this even in death.

However, this explanation is unsatisfactory to our contemporaries – always assuming that they are ready or willing to listen to any explanation when emotions are raw and tempers high. What our contemporaries want is *meaning*, and meaning is found in our generation by knowing the cause (and, to be honest, sometimes by finding someone to blame). In addition to meaning, they want *celebration* in the face of mourning.

Neither the yearning for meaning nor the determination to celebrate is necessarily alien or inappropriate to the Christian funeral agenda. However, the place where *we* locate meaning and the ground of our celebration is not where our contemporaries are looking. They seek something else.

The parents whose child has been killed in road traffic accident, or who has died after some medical or surgical procedure, long for an explanation. The death of a teenager following drug abuse or an accident during a school trip demands explanation. The young mother who dies in childbirth, the stillborn child, the sudden death of an apparently fit and healthy man from an unexpected and massive heart attack – these are deaths which sharpen our hunger for explanation.

Unfortunately, sometimes there *is* no explanation; it just happened. Sometimes the explanation is that we could do nothing to prevent it; it was (it *really* was) a tragic accident. In these cases, the quest for

meaning is not susceptible of an answer. The Christian minister will share the heartache, but the balm in Gilead may not be available. In such cases, to engender further anguish by encouraging a search for meaning or blame is not helpful in the long term – however sympathetic it may appear in the initial crisis.

Of course, sometimes there *is* an explanation, there is someone to blame – those who mourn the victims of a terrorist's bomb or those who have died in a rail crash will rightly expect to hear the cry for justice at the funeral. The cry for justice, note. The Christian minister cannot call for revenge. To avoid the issue is not an option; pastoral short circuits are not a sufficient answer.

Equally challenging is the widespread request that minister should not produce anything sad. What the mourners ask is that they should be able to "celebrate the life" of the one who has died. I guess that, if ministers were to take these requests at face value, there would be even greater outrage than if they ignored them altogether. What mourners normally mean is that they want to leave feeling upbeat; and they imagine that they will be best served in this by not being reminded of the finality and awfulness of death. They do not generally expect the service to be conducted by a stand-up comic.

My suspicion is that the request to celebrate the life of the deceased frequently has as much to do with mourners' fears of their own

emotions as with anything else. We can shed a tear in the darkness of the cinema or in front of the telly at home where no one else will see us, but we funk the public expression of grief. The Christian minister will understand this fear, but may nonetheless resist flight from what has happened. To avoid a proper confrontation with our emotions in order to avoid short-term embarrassment may leave a psychological time bomb ticking – better the pain that brings healing than the untended wound that festers.

However, there is a further underlying difficulty for the conscientious pastor. The clamour for meaning and for celebration presupposes that these can be found in a return to the past, to a better time when all was yet well – or, at least, since there was life, there was hope. The approach is retrospective.

Christian theology rejects the adequacy of such a view. The golden age does not lie in the past, but in the future. To long for the past is to fly from the present and to avoid the future. Getting back to normal is not an option. With the death of any person, normality changes for those who are bereaved. The call to resurrection life is made to the living as well as to the dead.

To the continued amazement of the world we proclaim the incredible – what St Paul in Athens (and in his Corinthian correspondence) called the "standing up of corpses", the *anástasis nekrôn*. The

approach is prospective. The life we celebrate is resurrection life in Christ. It is not that we ignore those who have died, but we resist the temptation to canonize them before we inter them. For us *nil nisi bonum de mortuis* is an unsatisfactory choice. Death ushers in judgement – or, to use Norman Pittenger's word, "appraisal". Love is not love that does not long to put right what is wrong; death brings us face to face with the God who is love, not sentimentality.

This future perspective of Christian thinking about death leads us to observe another shift in the liturgical expression of funerals. When one looks, for example, at the Mozarabic rites what one notices is that the congregation is called upon to vocalise the prayers of the dead: Psalm 23 (22) is not used as a means of comforting the mourners in their bereavement; rather, the congregation sings of how the shepherd's rod and staff comfort the one who has passed through the valley of death's darkness – what the dead can no longer sing, the living sing for them. The effect is the same with Psalms 130 and 139 and so on.

Mourners in the 21st century imagine that the words are there to soothe *them*. That they might use them to strengthen the one who has died is unimaginable. Yet, in the tributes they give of the dead, there is very often a section addressed directly to the one who has died. The implication is clear: we can speak *to* the dead, but not *for* them. Christian theology says we may do both! Clearly, the *cultus* and the

culture are in disjunction, and we need to examine this phenomenon and our response to it.

The Challenge of Prevailing Culture: three strategies

It is axiomatic that none of us grows in a vacuum – as surely as we reject the values of our society, we are shaped by them. Equally, belief-systems interact with a whole range of social stimuli as they develop. The Christian gospel is not immune to this process.

Individuals and systems have three basic modes of response to their environments: acceptance, adaptation and rejection. The gospel is in no different a case.

- it may welcome customs and practices and include them without demur;
- it may adopt customs and practices but re-interpret them and re-cast them in the light of Christian theology;
- or it may resist customs and practices it judges to be inimical to the way of Christ.

If we look for a moment at the churches of the NT era, we find that their leaders variously employed all three strategies. They continued to use many of the forms found in Jewish synagogue (the readings and prayers, for example – Acts 2.42); the ritual washings of Jewish and other faiths were given a new and different focus in the baptism early Christians practised ("all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised in to his death" – Rom 6.3); and they

rigorously denounced the orgiastic drinking parties of the mystery religions (1 Cor 11.17ff).

A little NT study has taught me not to take too rosy a view of the primitive Christian communities. I have not really understood those who imagine that if we could only get back to the days of the NT we would find ourselves in a happier world. At the same time, I do believe that the threefold strategy we find in the NT documents is suggestive for us in our contemporary cultural *milieux*.

There are things we can cheerfully accommodate: the naming of people and the acknowledgement of their individuality seem to me to affirm the dignity of persons, the old anonymity (while theologically acute) really does not suit our world and we can make the point about common mortality in other ways. Some things we need to adapt: the tributes and the expressions of personal loss have their place, but (in my view) they need to be modified by placing them before (rather than after) the reading and proclamation of the word. Some things we simply have to resist: it will not do either to ignore grief by turning funerals into "hallelujah shouts" or to suggest that God is getting a good deal by admitting this particular deceased into heaven – the Christian tradition is serious about the eschatological verities and to ignore them or to gloss over them simply will not (for me, at least) do!

The Christian funeral officiant has a task as the liturgical president to secure a ritual coherence in what occurs and a vocation to root that coherence in Christ. We have no ministry outside Christ, and we cannot (it seems to me) abandon congregations – even of mourners – to their own devices. Our task is to shape the worship so that it expresses the gospel in the situation in which we find ourselves. For this reason, I encourage funny stories about the deceased to be told at the party afterwards. When readings and tributes to the deceased are included in the funeral service itself, my own preference is to set these at the beginning of the service. After the congregation has been greeted and an opening hymn has been sung and a prayer said, here is the place to have the potted biography and the poem (often doggerel!) that the deceased is said to have loved. At all costs, these should not be allowed to obscure the liturgy of the word. The reading of scripture and the proclamation of the hope that is to be found in Christ are not to be eclipsed by candyfloss sentimentality. How we suffer in Britain from the *Dianafest!*

It ought, here, to be noted that the service at Westminster Abbey was not so much a funeral as a memorial service. The funeral service was read from the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* by the Anglican incumbent at Althorp where Diana's body was laid to rest.

A Theological and Liturgical Critique: what makes a funeral Christian?

To my mind, the service at Westminster was at root deeply flawed. Its structure resembled that of a Music Hall show, as successive stars

came on to do their turn. It is no coincidence that the abiding memory for most people is Elton John's hastily revised anthem to Marilyn Munro – and that almost says it all!

If the Dean of Westminster did nothing else, he provided an object lesson in the dangers of letting the family – rather than the gospel – take centre stage. The Earl Spencer (a trained journalist, and no fool with words) promised Diana that "we, your blood-family" would take care of her. These words, uttered in the presence of the woman to whom he had promised fealty and liege-service – viz., his sovereign, amounted to a medieval challenge. If he had said, "We have always looked after Diana; you never did", he could scarcely have made his meaning plainer. I could hardly believe my ears! At any moment I expected the Queen's Champion, fully caparisoned, to gallop on his charger down the Abbey's aisle and challenge the foresworn Earl to mortal combat. Bathos triumphed, however; the then Archbishop of Canterbury waffled his way through some prayers for the families and for the nation, and the moment of high drama passed.

What then makes a Christian funeral? Is it that the deceased held Christian faith? Or that the congregation does? While such suggestions are commonly made, they are not (on closer examination) entirely adequate explanations. What if the family and friends of the deceased have faith but the one who has died did not? Or *vice versa*?

is (and we shall return to this word) a threshold. And it is so because God raised Christ from the dead as a "first fruit". The death of Jesus re-presents ours; our dying is not without hope, for it is swallowed up by his. His resurrection is the guarantee of ours.

The synoptic gospels talk of the sky darkening, of the temple curtain torn in two, of graves giving up their dead as Jesus dies. His death is not just another execution; with his death, death loses its hold, the barrier keeping the profane from the holy is destroyed, and the heavens themselves are altered in their progress. Nothing remains the same after this death; all is changed.

Where is all this perspective in the funeral rites we conduct? And it is here, rooted in such a death and resurrection – the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ – that the funeral becomes Christian. To confine ourselves to praising the deceased as a splendid person who will make a fine addition to some heavenly tea party is - well, "inadequate" is far too inadequate a word! The Christian funeral is suffused by an act of God so enormous as to be to most people incredible. The crowds, who are elated as they leave the cinema after seeing the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, and who find themselves suspending belief as they enter the world of elves and hobbits and orcs and of journeying and battles that leave them breathless, have seen nothing! We have a greater story yet – and it is the privilege and

And what if the congregation consists of members of various religious beliefs and none?

To locate the Christian nature of the rites in the dispositions of the deceased or of the bereaved alone seems to me to be unsatisfactory. In *Death Liturgy and Ritual* I have written at greater length about this issue than is possible here. Briefly put, I argue that what makes a funeral Christian is that it offers a hermeneutic of death based on the death and resurrection of Jesus – that is, on the Paschal Mystery. Death confronts us with questions of ultimacy; and no Christian answer can be attempted that does not draw on the Paschal Mystery.

The answers that the Paschal Mystery offers fall into two distinct groups: theological and liturgical.

Theologically, the Paschal Mystery connects all death with God's purpose for creation. This is not a purpose of death but of life, and a determination to make all things new. It was the late Sir Peter Ustinov who, as Chancellor of the University of Durham, used to tell students at their graduation that you only stopped learning at death – or (depending on your point of view) some time thereafter! It is surely no surprise that the funeral services of so many Christian traditions open with the words from the Fourth Gospel: "I am the resurrection and the life, says the Lord". The whole thrust of Christian funeral rites is contained in the belief that death is both end and new beginning. It

responsibility of the Christian ministers to tell it at the funeral they conduct.

For this reason, I believe that tributes (if any) should form part of the introductory material to the funeral. There ought to be no obstruction to the proclamation of the Word (in reading and homily); nor should the tribute blunt the Word by following it. The appropriate response to the proclamation is always intercession and offering (which may include eucharist). To sell Uncle Charlie as a good lot after proclaiming that our hope is in Christ alone seems to me to undo the gospel message. However, I do recognise the desire that the funeral should relate specifically to the one who has died, and even where there is no tribute there should be a clear telling of Uncle Charlie's story within the framework of the Paschal Mystery. The one who has died had meaning and value and those who mourn want that value expressed. The Christian officiant adds to that value and meaning by illuminating them by the light of Christ.

Liturgically, the Paschal Mystery provides a hospitable reception to – and adoption of – van Gennep's theory of rites of passage. You will recall that van Gennep described those social events that gave formed and formal recognition to significant events within the community. These he called rites of passage. He suggested that what typified these significant events was the sense of moving from one group or status to another. The move was like that from one room to another; there

was a crossing of a threshold or *limen*. Rites of passage, he maintained, displayed three stages or phases: in front of the threshold (preliminal), crossing the threshold (liminal) and past the threshold (postliminal). Each phase was marked an action and mood; in turn, separation and sorrow, transition and chaos, incorporation and hope-joy.

In van Gennep's scheme of things, funerals were archetypal rites of passage. If this be true – and, broadly speaking, I think it is – then the Paschal Mystery is a marvellous vehicle for Christianising the rite of passage that marks death and bereavement. Good Friday is the day of separation and desolation, Holy Saturday is the day of transition and chaos (the harrowing of hell) and Easter Day is the day of incorporation and hope-joy. In the context of this paper, I want only to suggest to you that, in preparing funeral rites, the Paschal Mystery is not simply a theological resource (though it is that); it is also a liturgical resource, enabling us to shape the rites so that the dead and the living may travel from the old to the new by way of this chaos as they remember that it is the work of God to bring order out of chaos. For the Spirit still broods over the face of the deep – even the depths of death and loss – and she still brings to life what is dust.

Conclusion

The observant among you will have noticed that I have not talked about staged rites. I imagine that we may well want to think about this in the time of discussion and questioning that follows. As I think that

there *should* be holes to pick, I am leaving this as a sizeable opportunity! However, be warned; I have a book of liturgical resources for funerals (*In Sure and Certain Hope,* mentioned above), so I have plenty of material for answers!

When I came to write my PhD thesis, I thought that the examiners would like to have examples of the sort of prayer that might be used at the funeral of various people. I therefore set myself to draft prayer texts specific to individual cases, but rooted in scriptural allusion. I was, by now, in the ninth chapter of ten, and I thought that a bit of humour might help! What follow are some of those texts. I hope that you may enjoy them somewhat in the manner of a fluffy desert following a heavy main course!

For an accountant
Loving God,
your Son Jesus called Levi to follow him.
Call *N* now out of death to the life of resurrection
that *her* treasure may be ever found in you.

For a schoolfriend
Loving God,
Jesus watched his schoolfriends in the streets.
They played at weddings and funerals,
but today it isn't a game for us;
we are sad and crying.
Help us to know that *N* is safe with you,
and when we remember *her*
help us to remember happy days and laughter too.

For a botanist
Gentle God,
N loved the world that you have made.
She knew the flowers and all their names -
the wild anemones that toiled not nor span.
Grant *her* delight in understanding now

all that you have made,
that in life beyond death
she may wear an eternal garland.

For a perfumer
Sweet God,
at table there was one who poured perfume
over Jesus' feet.
Accept the life of *N*
as a costly fragrance poured out for you.

By now, I was in full swing, so I decided to chance my arm and write something a little more pointed!

For a PhD examiner
Loving God,
your Son Jesus
taught us that mercy is the greatest judgement,
and that to forgive a few pence or ten thousand talents
is to share in your divine nature.
Show your mercy to *N*
as *she* herself showed mercy to others.

My examiners, thank God, had a sense of humour and challenged me to write one for a PhD candidate. So I did!

For a PhD candidate
Loving God,
Paul seems to have buried *himself.*
Bring to your new life
what no human power can raise,
that *he* may share in full degree
that inheritance which none can earn
and you alone can give.

The point of all these little texts is to show that we can make very clear links to the lives of those who have died while at the same time invoking the presence of God, who in Christ makes all things (even death!) new.

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This paper was given at a United Faculty of Theology staff and postgraduate seminar at Ormond College, University of Melbourne in May 2004. A version was also presented at the Catholic University of Australia in Ballarat.

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The Rev. Dr Paul Sheppy is pastor of the Abbey Baptist Church in Reading, U.K.. He served for many years on the Joint Liturgical Group of Great Britain, chiefly as its Secretary. He was recently elected a Fellow of the Centre for Baptist History and Heritage, Regent's Park College, in the University of Oxford. He is a member of Societas Liturgica.

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