

Minister's Message – October 2014

Funeral or Celebration

Every culture and every religion has its own particular way of burying their dead. Death comes to all human beings so all families and societies have to dispose of the body of a member who dies. We cannot bury ourselves, as much as we might like to in our fierce independence. I recall a woman who fell down the stairs at work. As she lay bruised and bleeding friends rushed over to help her, but she screamed, "I'm okay. I don't need your help". Not so long ago I visited her grave and reflected that we all need help when it comes to being buried.

Is it 'Christian' to have a 'no fuss' burial, a simple burial in the backyard at midnight? Should we have a private burial, or should we have a huge affair going on for days? Some think huge funerals inappropriate for Christians, while others see them as a way of paying their respect for the deceased person. We hear requests for no flowers, while also seeing huge bunches of flowers and great outpouring of emotion.

The funeral of a true Christian will of course be different to that of an unbeliever. The secular humanist has no hope beyond the grave so emotion can be great, or it can be turned into a strange celebration which almost forgets the person has died. The focus is the eulogy when there is no belief in an after-life. Have some Christian funerals become more of a celebration than a funeral? Surely this is a time to reflect not only on the reality of death but the great Christian hope. The absence of a dead body or casket tends to remove the reality of death.

The Church of Rome enters into great ceremony when a member dies. A special mass (Requiem) is held because of sins taken to purgatory. Prayers are said and candles are lit for the dead person, while the coffin is sprinkled with holy water and decorated with rosary beads and 'sacred heart' pictures of Jesus.

The Reformers reacted to all this ritual and superstition by having simple funeral services. Even so, they recognised the significance of death, no matter how old or infirm the person, and the importance of dignified, godly burials. The Directory of Public Worship, appended to the Westminster Confession of Faith, refers to the dead body as being 'decently attended from the house to the place appointed for **public burial**', and of Christian friends accompanying the body to this place of public burial. It does not appear to be a mere family affair.

This Directory also refers to the minister 'putting them in remembrance of their duty'. Being present at the graveside, or at least having a casket present is a solemn reminder to all that this life comes to an end. We all return to the dust from which we were taken (Genesis 3:19). Yes, there is a place for remembering the life of the deceased person, but not to the exclusion of remembering their death, and of mourning their departure from this world. Mourning is not inappropriate for the believer. Abraham wept and mourned for his wife Sarah (Genesis 23:2).

Believers mourn, but not without hope (I Thessalonians 4:13). We believe in the resurrection of the dead – all the dead (John 5:28-29). Those who die in Christ will be raised to meet Christ when he returns. The death of a family member or friend is a time to reflect on this truth, usually with the aid of a minister of the gospel.

'Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints' (Psalm 116:15). The Lord takes notice when a believer dies. Friends in the church also notice. They are ready to comfort those who mourn. A death should be time for the fellowship to come together, sharing in the truth of the cross and the resurrection. Great words of comfort are found in the Scriptures. These should be shared at this solemn occasion.

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