



MEANINGFUL FUNERALS

*Meeting the Theological and Pastoral
Challenge in a Postmodern Era*

EWAN KELLY

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A POSTMODERN ERA

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Preface

Since I began tentatively wrestling with existential issues raised during encounters at patients' bedsides or in parishioners' living rooms as a trainee doctor and then as a divinity student, I have increasingly believed in the need to do theology out of experience. Engaging in theological reflection based on practice involves our hearts as well as our heads. Such theology takes seriously our feelings, physicality and sexuality as well as rationality. Moreover, as a Church of Scotland minister working in parish, hospital, hospice and academic contexts over the past 15 years applying theology developed solely within the academy to particular situations of crisis or need has seemed increasingly irrelevant. As part of my journey to explore the implications of an inductive approach to doing pastoral theology I have written this book. It comes out of the desire not just to improve ritual practice as part of the church's care of the bereaved but also to reflect theologically on the experience of what it means to share in the construction and performance of funerals with those who grieve. Such theologising is important in informing the future approach to, and practice of, what I believe has become the most significant and relevant function the church is perceived to have within twenty-first century Western society – helping individuals, families and communities, both local and global, ritually mark the lives and deaths of significant others.

Engaging in pastoral theology in such a manner requires practice to reflect on. For the purposes of this book, I have utilised the bereavement experiences lived through by a small cohort of parents whose babies have died *in-utero* to inform my reflections. These parents were supported by former hospital chaplaincy colleagues who helped facilitate the co-construction

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and performance of relevant funerals for their babies. Their stories were gathered through qualitative interviewing. Furthermore, I have also utilised case studies from my own practice of helping the bereaved to co-author and share in the funeral for their loved one within the context of my work as a hospice chaplain.¹

Numerous people have helped this book to come to fruition. The Health Department of the Chief Scientist Office (CSO) of the Scottish Government and the Hope Trust enabled my research with bereaved parents to be financed.

Former colleagues within the multidisciplinary team at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh, often unknowingly, were a great source of encouragement and inspiration through their practice, expertise and humanity. I owe a great deal to the midwives, neonatal nurses and doctors with whom I worked and from whom I gained much. The management team in the Simpson as well the Research and Development Team in the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh were nothing but generous in their giving of time and support. My friends and former colleagues, Sandy Young, Iain Telfer, Anne Mulligan and Gordon Muchall, in the Department of Spiritual Care could not have been more understanding, encouraging and patient. Fiona Allan and Grace Dobie gave valuable administrative and secretarial support.

Current colleagues in St Columba's Hospice continue to offer friendship, genuine openness to collaborative holistic care, compassion and the sense of humour required to work both in palliative care and with me. Fred Benton has given me the permission to take time and space to write and Brian Hilsley,

1 All those who attend a funeral are active participants. It is important that the chief mourners have control over the extent to which they actively participate and are comfortable with the level of their involvement. This may involve choosing particular clothes to wear, choosing flowers to offer, singing hymns, carrying the coffin, standing at the crematorium door to receive condolences or making a donation to a retiring collection. In some instances, family member(s) may wish to share memories of their loved during the funeral, read from scripture or a poem, sing or play an instrument or invite friends to do so on their behalf.

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Stewart McPherson and John Tait provided chaplaincy cover when I was ensconced at a laptop.

Numerous University of Edinburgh colleagues, within and outwith the School of Divinity, have freely offered their advice, guidance and listening ears. I owe a great deal to Duncan Forrester, William Storrar and David Lyall, in particular, as mentors, colleagues and friends. David read various drafts of the text and helped the development of otherwise vague notions. It is not only the depth of his insights that are appreciated but the manner in which they were shared.

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Introduction

This book has evolved from reflection on the practice of church representatives seeking to co-create and share in funerals with the bereaved. It aims to stimulate practitioners to reflect theologically and practically on how they approach funeral construction and performance. As part of the church's care of the bereaved, it may also encourage students to engage with theological, psychological, social and practical issues relating to funerals and how they are constructed. In essence, this book is an attempt to provide a constructive response to the following:

There appears to be a general consensus in the area that the rituals of the past must be helpful to people who have been bereaved but it remains undemonstrated exactly how such rituals might be rehabilitated in order to fit contemporary, complex and secular societies. (Littlewood 1993, 78)

Moreover, it is hoped that this book will provoke some thought on the priorities of those ministering in parish settings, in an era where contact with people who are not actively involved in the church is increasingly often restricted to those seeking help with ritual marking of their life and death or that of a loved one. All too often such 'parish funerals' are seen as a burden rather than opportunity to share God's love, another chore to squeeze into an already full diary rather than a priority which requires time, creativity and attentiveness of the highest quality.

What is offered in these pages is the thesis that church representatives, in helping to facilitate the process of co-constructing

the ritual marking of a particular life and death, have a significant therapeutic role in helping people to deal with their grief. The therapeutic effect of enabling the bereaved to co-author meaningful funerals for a significant other which responds to their particular needs, experience, beliefs and feelings will be described with reference to qualitative research undertaken with bereaved parents. However, in our postmodern Western world, where the majority of people are unfamiliar with the Christian metanarrative and its language and symbolism, does helping to create and share in such funerals undermine the church representative's theological integrity? This and other questions which arise when practice is allowed to shape and influence theology will be addressed. Such an approach to doing pastoral theology is not new. In describing the relationship between liturgy and pastoral care, Elaine Graham, though writing about the expression of sexuality in both, says something highly pertinent about the failings of a set liturgical response to the needs of the bereaved within a funeral context. She describes – 'the dislocation between liturgy and pastoral care; the former appearing sanitised, esoteric and irrelevant, the latter dealing with the nitty-gritty of human need, the failures and triumphs' (Graham 2000, 95–6).

Hence, Graham stresses that liturgical reform develops from reflection on pastoral practice. Her thesis resonates with the central concepts proposed in this book. However, what is proposed here goes further for it will be suggested that though the resources offered to the bereaved by a Christian ritual leader during the process of the co-construction of a funeral may be informed by the liturgy of her religious tradition, they should not be imposed. It is suggested that each individual ritual marking the life and death of a particular human being should be unique. In other words, the funeral should evolve out of the specific needs, beliefs, feelings and experiences of the bereaved and their deceased loved one as they are heard and interpreted by the representative of the Christian community invited to facilitate the creation of the ritual and to share in its performance.

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This is not to deny the identity, beliefs and actions of the carer, for her story will not only inform what is co-constructed but it is also to enable ritual to be relevant, grounded and owned by those who participate in it. 'For the liturgy to be effective it needs to articulate and speak to the experience of those who take part in it, word and symbol' (Stuart 1992, 11). This requires honesty, vulnerability and a willingness by the ritual leader to begin where the bereaved are and not where they are assumed to be. It means the church representative needs to listen to the story of the bereaved and acknowledge the influence of her own story on the developing pastoral relationship and what is being co-constructed.

This book is not a liturgical treatise, nor even an exposition of how pastoral practice should shape the creation of liturgies to be utilised, even adapted, in certain circumstances. It is about doing theology following reflection on, and research into, practice and that theology informing future practice with particular individuals and families. Therefore, the intention is not to create and offer specific liturgical texts to impose from above onto particular circumstances or family cultures. What is offered are theological reflections on working with, and learning from, the bereaved while seeking to meet their needs through the co-creation of, and shared participation in, funerals. It is not only the bereaved who can benefit from interaction with a church representative but also the ritual leader and, thus, the church she represents may learn more about how to care, how to be human and in doing so learn more about God.

The approach to creating meaningful funerals proposed in the following pages takes seriously what it is to be bereaved in a postmodern context where the majority of the population derive their sense of meaning and understanding of their experience from a plethora of worldviews, beliefs and spiritual practices. Moreover, such a methodology recognises the lack of intimate knowledge of death and the ritual associated with it currently prevalent in the Western world. This book also suggests that if the ritual practice of church representatives is to

take seriously contemporary models of grieving (shaped by the research and reflections of mental health practitioners and sociologists) then it is significant for the well-being of the bereaved that they are actively involved in the authorship of funerals for their deceased loved one. There is, as the sociologist Tony Walter (1999) points out, a need for the bereaved in their vulnerability and anxiety to know that their feelings are normal and appropriate. The lack of cultural norms as to how to deal with death in an urban postmodern society has created a need for the availability of some external points of reference against which the bereaved may gauge their own experience, feelings and behaviour. Walter suggests that such regulation of grief is currently done by a value system or framework which is now outdated for many bereaved people – traditional, prescribed religious funerals which may add to, instead of lessening, their feelings of disorientation and lack of control. This book suggests that the church still has much to offer the bereaved and society in general not just in creatively enabling the bereaved to co-author and share in meaningful funerals but also in providing a more relevant way in which grief may be sensitively normalised.

To ensure that the term ‘meaningful funeral’ does not just remain an abstract term, I will outline below two funerals which involved co-construction between bereaved families and myself. The actual process of how funerals may be co-constructed is described more fully in Chapter 5.

The first example is that of a stillborn baby whose young mother had a church upbringing but was now no longer affiliated with a local congregation and whose father had no knowledge of the Christian tradition whatsoever. As a hospital chaplain I first met Jonathan and Haley in labour ward when they asked for help and information regarding having a funeral for their baby (they did not want a separate blessing or naming ritual). During our first meeting I met their baby, Robert, listened to as much of their story as they felt able to share, gave them some practical information (the midwife had already given them written information) about making funeral arrangements

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and said that I would meet with them in the next few days, when they felt ready, to talk further. Haley's mother joined us at the end of our conversation and expressed grave doubts about the ability of her teenage daughter, especially in such a distressed state, to participate in a process to help create an appropriate funeral for Robert. Haley, however, was insistent that she want to help plan something special for her son. The next day, at their request, before Jonathan and Haley left the hospital, I gave them some resources, sacred and secular, which other bereaved parents had utilised during their baby's funeral and emphasised that they had as much time as they needed before we made any decisions about the ritual. The three of us met together twice in Haley's mother's house, where the couple were living, before Robert's cremation. The couple asked three friends to provide musical accompaniment for the singing during the service and had selected CD tracks to be played. Haley and Jonathan chose the funeral content in discussion with me and sought advice regarding the service's order. Jonathan's brother then created and printed out an order of service for his nephew, a copy of which was handed to every mourner by Haley's cousins at the crematorium door. What the young couple helped to construct during the week following their baby's stillbirth is as follows:

While the mourners gathered in the crematorium (over a hundred of them, including family, college and school friends, teachers and a couple of members of staff from the maternity unit) a CD of the rap artist Puff Daddy singing 'I'll Be Missing You' (Money 1997) was played.¹

Jonathan carried his son's coffin into the crematorium accompanied by Haley who carried a posy of forget-me-nots picked from her mother's garden and a framed photograph of herself and Jonathan with Robert (these were placed in front of the catafalque).

1 A rap song exploring grief, including the pain of broken physical bonds and the acute sense of loss felt when an individual can no longer pray, as before a bereavement, for the deceased's health and well-being in this life.

Meaningful Funerals

I welcomed everyone to the funeral and said that though we did not all have the opportunity to meet Robert in person we all were touched by his life and death. We had all waited expectantly for his arrival and shared hopes and dreams with his mum and dad for him and for the three of them. We also may have seen photographs of Robert or heard what a beautiful baby he was – dark haired like his dad with the button nose of his mum. We were all sad and perplexed at the death of Robert before he had the chance to enjoy life but we were also there with Jonathan and Haley to give thanks for the love, joy and hope that Robert had brought into their lives and into the lives of all who cared for them.

Together we then all sung ‘We cannot care for you the way we wanted’ (Bell 2005).

I read a short reflection written by Jonathan and Haley about Robert, their relationship with him and their thoughts and feelings surrounding his death.

Haley’s aunt read:

Can a woman forget the infant at her breast,
or a mother the child of her womb?
But should even these forget,
I shall never forget you.
I have inscribed you on the palms of
my hands.

(Isaiah 49:15–16a)

A friend of Jonathan’s read an extract from ‘To the immortal Memory and Friendship of that Noble Pair, Sir Lucius Cary and Sir Henry Morison’ by Ben Jonson (cited by Dominica 1997, 81) which contains the lines:

In small proportions we just beauty see,
And short measures life may perfect be.

Together as we stood, the whole congregation said these words of farewell:

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Child of my flesh
bone of my bone
wherever you go, I will go,
wherever you live, I will live.
As you go into the mystery of life before us
may you be at peace.
That in God's good time
we may be together in peace.
(Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Society cited
by Dominica 1997, 58)

Brahm's Lullaby was then quietly played by the instrumentalists. Prayers of lament and thanksgiving and prayers for the bereaved were said. The final hymn: 'Fleetingly known, yet ever remembered' (Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Society cited by Dominica 1997, 113) was sung to the tune 'Bunessan'.

I ended the funeral with a short benediction.

As the congregation left the chapel Bob Dylan's (1973) song 'Forever Young' was played.

Following the funeral over 50 friends and relatives gathered in Haley's mother's home where music was played and listened to and stories about Jonathan, Haley and Robert were shared over refreshments.

An example of a co-constructed non-religious funeral is one in which I shared for Bruce, a 40-year-old Scottish civil servant, who died in the hospice where I work. Bruce was single and had a wide circle of friends, many of whom shared his passion for the outdoors and for his country's cultural and political heritage. He had been very involved in the piping and folk music world and enjoyed watching sport. Together with his two sisters and his parents, as well as respecting the wishes of Bruce, the following funeral was co-authored:

A pibroch (lament) was played on the bagpipes (by a close friend) as Bruce was carried into the crematorium by his brothers-in-law and another two friends.

Meaningful Funerals

I welcomed everyone to the funeral and acknowledged the tragedy and injustice of Bruce's death at such a comparatively young age. However, I added that Bruce had touched all of our lives in his own incorrigible way, he had left us all with a myriad of memories and stories to share of life lived with him. I invited everyone to remember Bruce in their own particular way as we listened to the tune 'Highland Cathedral' on the pipes (this tune was especially pertinent as Bruce loved to watch Scotland play rugby at Murrayfield and in recent years it has been played as the players run onto the pitch prior to the start of a game).

Bruce's closest friend then shared some of his reflections on Bruce's life.

Amazing Grace (words by Newton and tune 'New Britain' arranged by Bell 2005) was then played on the pipes while we all listened and those of us familiar with the words reflected on them.²

Verses from 1 Corinthians 13 were then read as the family felt the words reflected what Bruce was essentially about – loving and encouraging others to utilise their musical talents and administrative and political skills as best they could and the fact that their love for him had brought a disparate range of friends and family together for the funeral.

A poem entitled 'Epitaph on My Own Friend' from the pen of Scotland's national bard, Robert Burns (cited by MacGregor 2005, 39) was then read. It contains the following lines:

If there's another world, he lives in bliss:
If there is none, he made the best of this.

2 While respecting Bruce's beliefs and his request to have a non-religious funeral, his mother, who was loosely affiliated to her local church, wanted some reference to the hope that faith in a loving, merciful God can offer during the service. In discussing this with her and the rest of the family, listening to Amazing Grace played on the pipes was an acceptable compromise – Bruce's sisters felt that he would have been comfortable with what had been agreed upon (including the biblical reading from 1 Corinthians 13 that followed).

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No words were spoken as family and friends stood to acknowledge their last farewell to Bruce while the crematorium's curtains were drawn separating them from his coffin but the gentle tune 'Dream Angus' (Angus was Bruce's family name) was played on the Lowland pipes. This was the tune Bruce's mother had hummed to all her children before they fell asleep as children and Bruce had done likewise with his nieces and nephews.

We continued to stand in the quiet after the lilt of the pipes had drifted away paying our respects to Bruce and in the quiet, those gathered had the opportunity to pray or to have their own thoughts.

Finally, we sung together Burns's most famous song – 'Auld Lang Syne', people joining hands with their neighbours, as is traditional, at the appropriate point in the song.

As a way of marking of the end of the funeral, I said:

As you go from this place,
go gently,
go lightly,
and may the many memories of Bruce you carry
with you,
in time, give you comfort and hope for the
journey ahead.

A retiring collection took place for the hospice and Bruce's family invited all present to a local hotel, a favourite haunt of Bruce's, where refreshments and reminiscences were shared as the Lowland pipes, the fiddles and guitars played late into the evening.

Before outlining how the life and death of an individual (or indeed several persons) may be marked by a process of ritualisation, the context in which funerals and their allied informal rituals take place in will be described in the following three chapters.

The Postmodern Context and the Need for Ritual Following Death

Postmodern Society

Before beginning to explore how meaningful funerals may be constructed which meet the specific needs of a particular family and enable a church representative supporting them to maintain theological integrity, it is important to outline something of the wider context in which they meet. A description of predominant contemporary Western culture may help deepen our understanding of some of the worldviews and expectations that the bereaved bring to the planning and construction of the funerals of their loved ones.

As David Lyall (1999, 8) a pastoral theologian much engaged with how the church may offer relevant pastoral care in the twenty-first century admits, it is difficult to pin down what postmodernism actually is. In attempting to contextualise his theological reflections on pastoral practice he quotes Smart (1993, 12):

postmodernity as a contemporary social, cultural and political condition. Postmodernity as a form of life, a form of reflection upon and a response to the accumulating signs of the limits and limitations of modernity.

Modernity is commonly understood as an epoch in Western history which was based on the rationality of post-Newtonian