

# REST IN PEACE

## Thoughts on Grief, Death & Funerals

**T**his Outlook special feature considers the changing role of the parish church in funeral ministry, the importance of planning one's own funeral and a study of grief and faith.

Most funerals in England are still Christian. The officially recorded number of Church of England funerals tends to be limited to those which are conducted by parish clergy and Readers; ministers at other funerals may be retired, or a hospital or military Chaplain.

But funeral ministry has changed over recent years and a growing number of funerals are conducted by civil celebrants. In his article 'Funerals Observed' the Reverend Jonathan Cruickshank argues that the parish church and Christian Community is still best placed to minister to those in grief and offers some questions for church communities to consider.

People may not realise that they have the right to the services of the Vicar even if they don't go to church. They also have the right to be interred in the churchyard if it is open for burials. Within this feature is practical information about planning your funeral, including a check list. There is also a moving case study of how planning a funeral service before illness and death was a positive experience for the Bullows family from Crundale.

Christian Counsellor Jan Griffin, considers the grieving process, acknowledging that the painful emotions of grief can make people question their faith. With examples from the Bible, Jan suggests that Jesus, more than anyone, understands mourners' distress and suggests how Christians can best accompany the bereaved.

# Funerals Observed



Vicar of St-Peter-in-Thamet, the Reverend Jonathan Cruickshank, offers his personal view about the changing trends in funeral ministry and suggests some questions parishes should be asking themselves.

“I don’t want a religious service, Vicar”, is often the opening gambit on my first home visit as parish priest to the next of kin. Thanet people where I serve seem to view the church building as very important to them where rites of passage are concerned. I have always seen requests for weddings, baptisms and funerals as being pastoral opportunities for telling the story of the gospel of good news of the love of Jesus.

Our brother and sister ministers from other denominations envy us Anglicans having such God-given openings to meet those who would not normally enter through the church door for fear of what they might be asked to do and say.

Recently I have noticed a subtle shift in the way that people wish to mourn the loss of their loved ones. Our church has a closed churchyard except for the Garden of Rest for Ashes which is rapidly becoming overcrowded and we are now looking for more space. This means that any service in church is followed by a visit to the Crematorium or Cemetery afterwards. The growing trend is to miss out the service in church and have the whole ceremony in the ‘Crem’. It is much easier

for everyone as they can meet afterwards for the reception nearby, and not have to hang around the church or at the ‘do’ afterwards while the family disappear for up to an hour at the ‘Crem’. Whether the pressure is coming from the Funeral Directors to make things simpler and cheaper, I do not know.

A funeral is a carefully planned event. Those who only have a fleeting link with the church, think that they have to book the Vicar like they book an entertainer and sometimes this takes no account of the availability of the church building or the clergy. There are a growing number of funeral celebrants who are not clergy who offer their skills as a ‘master of ceremonies’ usually conducting a non-religious ceremony, although whilst waiting my turn at the ‘Crem’ I have witnessed Christian hymns being sung and the Lord’s prayer being said. Their emphasis is offering, through music and readings, a flattering thanksgiving by going into great detail of the eventful life of the deceased with amusing and sometimes bawdy accounts of episodes in their life, before the guillotine of time allotted by the ‘Crem’ cuts off reflecting on eternal

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thoughts. While this approach may well be appropriate for some families I am concerned that the Christian funeral service that so many church people know so well is being relegated to those who specifically ask for it.

Over the past 35 years as a priest, observing and conducting funerals I have seen many changes, some for the better. Today there is greater freedom of choice of material in the liturgy and real engagement of mourners to customise much of the service. Remembrance style services on All Souls Day are proving popular and there are examples of Christians starting organisations providing bereavement counselling, bereavement visitors and befriending services as part of pastoral care after death.

I do believe we need to recapture our rightful place as a Christian community in our diverse and desperate ‘neighbourhood’ to be people who, by example, offer Jesus’ gift

of compassion, healing love, forgiveness and reconciliation to all God’s people, wherever and whenever they are in need. I suspect that many of us in church often feel overwhelmed by what we face and have to trust in the resources of God, when and where we see other institutions fail.

So, two questions particularly concern me for the church community to answer in the parish:

How do we offer the Gospel of hope and salvation to a secular world who appear to be in denial of death?

How do we show the love of Christ and help people with little or no faith who are in a place of loss and grief?

To paraphrase Archbishop Temple, I happen to believe that the parish church and its Christian community are best placed to be there for those in grief who are not its church members.

# Grief and Faith



Christian Counsellor, Jan Griffin, considers the grieving process and how this can affect one's faith. With references to the Bible she suggests how we can take Jesus' lead in supporting those who mourn.

Much has been written about grief and the ideas of stages or phases of grieving. What is common in most experiences of death is a sense of loss; the loss of the person, the loss of shared life together, the loss of hopes and expectations for the future.

It is too easy to say that grief is normal and to expect the bereaved person to behave in a particular way. But it can be helpful to consider some of the possible ways in which people respond.

William Worden in 'Grief Counselling and Grief Therapy' writes of four tasks of mourning, two of which are considered here. His first task is 'to acknowledge the reality of the loss'. At one level this may seem to be simple, the person is dead. However this takes some time to fully comprehend and is further complicated if the person wants but is unable to see the body. Involvement with planning the funeral can help to make the death more real, but for some that 'realness' is something to avoid at all costs. The time between this and the next task can be marked by the need the bereaved person has to talk time and again about the death. This stating and re-stating is one way the reality of the death is comprehended. It can be

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frustrating and painful for those around the bereaved person, especially if they are also grieving.

The second task is 'to work through the pain of grief', which is about the necessity of experiencing the pain of the loss. This is the time of feeling the full force of the emotions. It is painful to experience and it is often difficult to be alongside. In our own discomfort at the pain of a friend, loved one or parishioner we may be tempted to offer platitudes – sometimes, with the best of intentions, couched in religious terms.

Colin Murray-Parkes, in 'Bereavement - Studies of Grief in Adult Life', identified the first 'phase' as one of numbness which accompanies the shock of the death. This can be the case even when the death is expected. The numbness can pass quickly or it can persist for a long time.

I would suggest that this numbness is what often

gives the sense of being in 'limbo' between the death and the funeral. It is usually after the funeral that the bereaved person begins to fully experience the most painful feelings that accompany bereavement. These feelings are complex and can encompass, amongst others, abandonment, isolation, regret, yearning, desolation and anger. This can be a time when people turn to the church for consolation and for answers. For those with a faith these feelings may be attached to God and it can therefore sometimes be a time when people turn away in despair and anger at a God, a faith and a church that they feel has failed them.

Whilst it can be helpful to know about the so-called 'normal responses', it is imperative to consider the individuality of the bereaved person. John's Gospel gives two different responses to a significant death.

Martha, with her absolute faith in the Lord, was perhaps consoled by it. She came out immediately to meet Jesus and believed not only in the 'resurrection on the last day' but that He could raise Lazarus from the dead. Mary and those who accompanied her when she met Jesus were weeping. He did not admonish her for lack of faith, but 'he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved'. He saw and understood their distress and He too wept. (John 11 v 20 – 35).

There is perhaps a different consolation for Christians in this, that even when experiencing confusion, abandonment, isolation and all those other feelings that accompany bereavement, Jesus understands. He has been alongside Martha and Mary. Jesus raised Lazarus. However much it may be longed for, the person who has died will not be raised here and now. But those who are privileged to be alongside the bereaved can accompany, can listen and perhaps weep too as did Jesus.

**Jan is part of the Diocesan Counselling Service, a discreet confidential counselling service for clergy, ordinands, readers and their families in the Canterbury Diocese.**

# Planning ahead for peace of mind

The Reverend Ian Campbell of Crundale and Godmersham shares his experiences of how planning a funeral service can be a positive experience.



“A short time ago I wrote in the parish magazine encouraging people to think about the contents of their funeral service. This prompted a number of discussions resulting in me producing a blank format that can be filled in with favourite hymns, readings etc.

“I appreciate how difficult it is for us to contemplate our own death and the rituals that surround it, so understandably, we postpone doing any planning for the event. Very few people plan for their own funeral service and leave the planning of the service to the family. Nearly always the family struggle to know what to do, what music, hymns or reading to choose.

“However, when plans have been made for the funeral service, it has been very clear to me that this pre-planning has removed one major task from a family at a very difficult time. It is truly a gift to the family. All priests will be happy to talk, meet and answer questions about funerals, long before they are needed. I promise you that planning the funeral will not bring it any closer. But you could give your family a wonderful gift.”

## LOUISA'S STORY



The Bullows family from Crundale embraced their vicar's suggestion.

Louisa Bullows died last year in the Pilgrims Hospice at Ashford just three days before Christmas. She was just 46 years old and left a husband, Darren, and six children. Louisa had been diagnosed with a brain tumour nineteen years earlier and, ever the realist, had fought it with determination and composure. She continued a successful full-time career for as long as physically possible. Earlier Darren had been able to switch from working in London to operating from home. This enabled them to spend more time together looking after their family.

Spending her last few years at home meant Louisa was also able to give more support to Crundale church, organising the children's worship, Godmersham Brownies, supporting and fundraising for the local primary school and giving her time, enthusiasm and support to every village event. Louisa and Darren had never hidden the fact that her death was imminent and actively embraced it to maximise the pleasure of what days they had left as a family. Planning and preparation for the whole family was key to ensuring the mental stability and welfare of the children for what inevitably lay ahead. As part of that planning, Louisa and Darren met with their Priest, Ian, to discuss the details of her funeral.

Darren told Outlook: “Through self awareness and confidence about the future, Louisa had no fear of death and saw the chance to help plan and provide for the future after her death as a privilege. The fact that Louisa could play a part in what might happen at her own funeral gave her great peace of mind. This is something that we all should take responsibility for, rather than leaving those decisions to our cherished ones when they are in mourning.”

# Where there's a will..



Archdeacon Emeritus, John Barton, looks at the practicalities of leaving one's affairs in good order, planning for a funeral and asks 'what happens next?'

The Book of Common Prayer tells us we should keep our affairs in good order when we are in health 'for the better discharging of conscience and the quietness of (our) Executors'. The language may seem quaint 350 years later, but the sentiment is just as valid.

But only three in 10 people in the UK have made a will. The Treasury receives a fortune each year from the estates of people who haven't left a will and have no close relatives. Any solicitor will draw up a will for you – usually for less than £200. Every November a number of solicitors collaborate with charities to offer a reduced rate for writing a will. You can even write one yourself if you know exactly what the law requires.

If your estate is worth more than £325,000 you may be liable for inheritance tax. By leaving some money to charity, that reduces the amount on which tax will be due. It is also possible

to pay for your funeral in advance. There are a number of pre-payment schemes to choose from, including one run by the Ecclesiastical Insurance Group. (01452 875744, [www.ecclesiastical.com/funeralexpenses](http://www.ecclesiastical.com/funeralexpenses)).

If you have made a will, do ensure that it is up to date. A clear will can avoid family rows. Have you appointed as Executor someone capable, whom you know and trust?

In addition to deciding how you want your estate divided, it is important to plan your funeral. Only one in ten bothers to do that.

Don't leave it to others to organise your funeral. If your nearest and dearest don't have a clear idea of your wishes, they will have to guess, and at just the time when they will be grieving, anxious and uncertain.

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## IT'S YOUR FUNERAL...

The trend in funerals at the moment is to make them a celebration of the life of the deceased person. Although your wish – and that of your family – may be to make your funeral a joyful occasion, it does no one any good to suppress grief. A Christian service should make room for sadness as well as gratitude. It is also an act of worship, in which reverence should be paid to God, the source and goal of life. His judgment, generosity and mercy and the Christian hope in resurrection through Jesus Christ should be central. A sensitive funeral service will also help mourners to contemplate the most fundamental issues of our existence. The Christian hope can be an unexpected encouragement, not least

when people claim to have little faith of their own.

You can talk all this over with your Vicar in confidence. You don't have to be terminally ill to do so! He or she knows you are precious to God and will be able to explain all the options and share some ideas.

Do tell your Executor and next of kin where your will is kept. Details of your funeral wishes can be kept with it or in a more accessible place. You may wish to use the checklist that is on the next page.

It is useful to maintain a list of family, friends, neighbours, acquaintances and former colleagues who should be notified of your death and the funeral arrangements.

# WHAT HAPPENS AFTER DEATH

by Archdeacon Emeritus, John Barton

Whether your body is buried or cremated, the remains degenerate and go back into the earth. That's where they belong, for our bodies are composed of the earth's elements. Your dead body expressed the real 'you' during your lifetime. But once it has done its job, that is not the finish. When Christians say, "I believe in... the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting", it means that we await the new destiny which God has opened for us, with a transformed body apposite for its new environment.

Some claim that the human soul is immortal, but that is not a Christian belief. We do not become disembodied spirits floating around the ether, but will be refashioned as recognisable human beings. This will be as momentous an event as the emergence of the human race from its primitive beginnings.

St Paul faced hard questioning on the subject. If you have a look at the whole of 1 Corinthians 15 you will

see how he couples our bodily resurrection with the Resurrection of Christ. Resurrection was central to the apostles' preaching and teaching: try to find a sermon in the New Testament which ignores it! The Christian faith would be valueless without it, for Christ demands that we live our lives sacrificially – some will be martyred as a consequence – with our hope beyond the horizon.

All this is much more than a collection of statements of faith. They could seem arid to a dying person. It is an invitation to take a conscious decision to trust Jesus the Christ. Our life before and beyond the grave belongs to Christ. He is the pioneer who charted the course through death; he accompanies us on our journey; he is our advocate at the Last Judgment; he is worshipped in heaven and he alone is the Saviour who bore the brunt of human sin and gave his life to overcome its consequences. Trust him!

## FUNERAL CHECK LIST



### LEGAL AND PAPERWORK

Who is your Executor?

Which funeral director?

If you are an organ donor, where can your consent form be found?

*Find out more from [www.organdonation.nhs.uk](http://www.organdonation.nhs.uk)*

Do you want flowers, or donations to a charity, or both?



### THE FUNERAL

Cremation or burial?

If burial, where?

If burial, will an existing grave need to be re-opened?

Do you want a headstone?

*Note: churchyard memorials must respect diocesan regulations.*

If cremation, what do you want done with your ashes?

What sort of coffin?

*Have you considered an eco-friendly coffin (eg cardboard, bamboo, wicker)?*



### THE SERVICE

Funeral Service: in church or crematorium, or both?

Who should conduct the service?

Do you want someone else to give a tribute?

What music would you like at the service?

What hymns and readings would you like?

Is there anyone who needs to know that you have forgiven them?

Do you owe an apology to anyone?

Wake/reception: any suggestions for the place and type?