

## Column

“O death, where is thy sting? O grave where is thy victory?” asks St. Paul. Where indeed? With the death and resurrection of Jesus, death, that dark specter that has haunted mankind since the dawn of time, has been conquered. This affirmation of hope and faith was sounded out confidently and without compromise at Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth’s funeral. As with her life, her final rites witnessed to her strong Christian faith.

In recent days, funerals have fallen on hard times. Many today depart this life without the benefit of a formal gathering of friends, hymns, prayers and a solemn committal. The body is sent off to the funeral home or crematory, and ‘no service is planned’ reads the funeral notice in the newspaper.

Covid, of course, has been one factor in this decline. Others include the cost of funerals, the distance family members must travel, increased secularization and loss of religious faith, and a culture that is uncomfortable with death and prefers to avoid the subject altogether.

While honoring each family’s customs and choices, I wonder if this trend is healthy? Perhaps the ancients knew best. Grief needs to be openly acknowledged and expressed. Those who have suffered loss need the support of flesh-and-blood people standing beside them. Rites in which family and friends participate provide this opportunity.

At the same time, a service settles the matter. The one departed has not just gone into another room. From here on, life will be different. A means of marking this transition is therefore healthy and needed. “The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away,” needs to be acknowledged and assimilated.

Finally, going back to what we saw at Queen Elizabeth’s several services, funerals provide an opportunity for Gospel witness. There may well be those present for whom death is either a full stop – a period – or a question mark. Without Christ and without hope is where they are in their lives.

Some years ago I officiated at a the funeral at which the hymns were especially triumphant and joyful. Only later did I hear what happened at the close of the service. A woman seated in the rear of the church asked the woman beside her: “How can you sing “Joyful, joyful we adore thee” when someone has died. The woman she asked was a convinced Christian. Using an economy of words, she answered: “Because Christ lives, we shall live also.”

The enquiring woman confessed that she had no hope. I wish I knew what happened to her after that. By the time the conversation was reported to me, she had gone. I can only hope that the seed planted in that service sprouted and grew into full Christian faith.

Witness is an important part of a Christian funeral. The burial office with its psalms, readings and prayers speak of man's need: "In Adam, we all die"; but also of Christ's action, "Even so in Christ shall all be made alive." The call to faith goes forth.

Funerals, we really don't need them, or do we?

*O MERCIFUL God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Resurrection and the Life; in whom whosoever believeth, shall live, though he die; and whoso-ever liveth, and believeth in him, shall not die eternally; who also hath taught us, by his holy Apostle Saint Paul, not to be sorry, as men without hope, for those who sleep in him; We humbly beseech thee, O Father, to raise us from the death of sin unto the life of righteousness; that, when we shall depart this life, we may rest in him; and that, at the general Resurrection in the last day, we may be found acceptable in thy sight; and receive that blessing, which thy well-beloved Son shall then pronounce to all who love and fear thee, saying, Come, ye blessed children of my Father, receive the kingdom prepared for you from the beginning of the world. Grant this, we beseech thee, O merciful Father, through Jesus Christ, our Mediator and Redeemer. Amen. (Burial Office from the Book of Common Prayer)*

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