

Article reprinted from *Cross†Way* Issue Winter 2008 No. 107

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WHAT SHOULD WE DO WHEN SOMEONE DIES?

By David Phillips

Having looked in the previous issue of *Cross†Way* at the Biblical teaching on death it seems appropriate to consider what we should do when someone dies. The modern Church of England liturgy, *Common Worship*, provides so much material that it is complicated to use and suggests that clergy in particular find it difficult to respond to particular situations with a suitable scripture, exhortation and prayer. However, the *Book of Common Prayer* also contains prayers for private ministry and indeed sometimes a formal written prayer may be most appropriate.

Three situations will be considered here; what should we do when someone is dying, at the time of death and at a formal funeral service? The 1662 BCP will be considered not because it is perfect, nor because it is necessarily ideal for today but because it is largely written from a genuinely reformed perspective and attempt to be faithful to the testimony of Scripture.

When someone is dying.

When someone is dying the main aim is to minister to that person. Of course we may continue to pray for their recovery but knowing that the Lord has numbered all our days we should not avoid the possibility that the person may die. Sadly sometimes people have been so convinced of recovery, which proved to be false, that they have been denied the opportunity to prepare for death and the joy of what awaits.

If the dying person is not a Christian then the claims and call of Christ must be simply set before them. There is no shortage of 'death bed conversions' in Christian history and though it was not quite the same situation, the Lord Jesus' words to the thief on the cross show that even in the jaws of death and with little understanding or opportunity it is possible for someone to truly receive and believe in Christ and so gain the assurance 'today you will be with me in paradise'.

If the person is a Christian then the aim is to remind them of the promises of God and encourage them to faith and to rest in Christ. The BCP allows at this point for personal confession of sin to the minister and for the declaration of absolution using the words 'I absolve thee from all thy sins' but resting on the commission given to ministers of the gospel. This prayer does not sit comfortably with many reformed believers to the extent that some revisions of the BCP have removed it.

At the point of death.

Whether I am right or not I am not sure, but my impression is that in the past people had a clearer idea of when someone would die. Drugs and equipment allow us to prolong someone's life when they might otherwise die and although I have visited a number of people shortly before their death I was never present when they died. The BCP however provides a prayer to be used 'at the point of departure'. At this point, and this point only, the Prayer Book contains a prayer commending the soul of the departed to God. It is assumed that the dying person is a believer and would clearly not be appropriate to use in every circumstance.

Commending someone in this way is not problematic, but using it later at a funeral flies in the face of the Biblical teaching that if a person dies in faith then they go to be with Christ immediately, there is no waiting. It makes no sense to commend someone's soul at a later stage and implies that we have little hope in the promises of Christ.

At the funeral.

A funeral is a very different occasion. There are usually two purposes, to deal with the body and minister to the bereaved. Generally if there is no body, for whatever reason, the process of grieving is much harder.

As Christians we are not aiming to dispose of a body but to commit it to rest as we await the return of Christ when the dead shall be raised with resurrection bodies. This is why Christians have traditionally not cremated their dead (also because it marked them out from the pagan practices of others who did) though modern burial practices are not quite the same as those of the early Christians. Of course God can and will recreate the bodies of those whose bones have not survived but burial does express what we believe far better than cremation.

The second purpose is to minister to the bereaved. This is very different to the un-reformed liturgies of the past and present. A requiem mass, for example, is primarily for the benefit of the deceased, the idea being that the sacrificial mass and the prayers of the priest and people will aid a person in purgatory. Since such understanding is entirely unbiblical it has no place in the Church of England, unfortunately this does not stop people using it wilfully or out of ignorance.

A reformed funeral service is for the benefit of the living and it can do this in four ways.

First, it is an opportunity to rejoice because the deceased person has finished with the trials of this life and gone to be with Christ. In some cultures such outward expressions seem to be more common than others and this may be part of the reason why the feature is not prominent in the BCP. But is also possible that this is to avoid making too many statements about the deceased in a liturgy which will be used for people for whom such statements cannot otherwise be said with confidence.

Secondly, the service aims to give thanks to God for the life of the deceased. Though the Lord has taken away he did first give. Again this is present in the Prayer Book but is not a particularly strong feature. Again we can account for this by the fact that giving thanks for someone is very specific and personal, it is not something that lends itself readily to a formal liturgy. Giving thanks is an important purpose but in some cases it is very difficult. It is particularly difficult in the case of stillborn children or those who died soon after birth when all that is really left are unfulfilled dreams and hopes. There are also some occasions when the bereaved acknowledge no reason to give thanks for the life of the deceased.

Thirdly, the service should be an opportunity to weep with those who weep and mourn with those who mourn. Once again, apart from its general setting this is something which is curiously lacking in the Prayer Book. There is no prayer for those who mourn and almost everyone who uses the service presumably inserts some.

The fourth purpose is the main one in the Prayer Book and one on which it excels, that is, proclaiming the gospel in the face of death. By focussing on this point the service largely avoids problems inherent in all the others, of not knowing the spiritual state of the deceased.

Spiritual state

In some cases we will have every reason for believing that the deceased is now with Christ in glory. In other cases we have every reason for believing that they died without Christ and therefore without hope. But, in neither case can we know for certain and in most the minister at least may not have much to go on. I recall one service at least where the family gave no indication that the deceased was a Christian but at the end of the funeral someone else assured me that the deceased had a keen faith in Christ. The Prayer Book faces these problems in two ways. First, it rules out completely the service being used in certain situations. Secondly, it proceeds in other cases on the basis of charitable assumption. The latter works because actually so little reference is made to the

deceased, or indeed to the bereaved, rather, in clear language, the glorious gospel of Christ is set out. The service does not dwell on the consequence of dying without Christ though equally it does not hide it from them.

As noted the Prayer Book service is not supposed to be used for those who took their own life, were excommunicate or died unbaptized. The former two have a definite rationale to them, though I suspect that most people today are uncomfortable with this. However, when so many in evangelical churches are not convinced by infant baptism, the requirement that the service should not be used for the unbaptized is much more difficult. Nevertheless, the BCP service has a certain consistency to it precisely because it is not intended to be used in those situations when there are the strongest grounds for thinking that a person died without faith.

What should we do when someone dies?

Before they die: preach the Gospel, remind them of the promises of God, encourage the faithful to rest in Christ.

As they die: entrust them (their soul) to God.

After they have died: commit their body to the ground in the confidence of the return of Christ and the general resurrection. Rejoice that they are with Christ (if we have that confidence). Give thanks for the life of the deceased. Weep, because we are left without them. Recall the promises and purposes of God and use this as an opportunity to face people with their own mortality and eternal destiny, and, preach the gospel.

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