

Funerals

A funeral marks the close of a human life on earth. It is the opportunity for friends and family to express their grief, to give thanks for the life which has now completed its journey in this world, and to commend the person into God's keeping.

As far back into history as we can penetrate, human beings seem to have felt the need for a ceremonial leave-taking of those who have died.

The funeral service of the Church of England can be very short and quiet with only a few members of the family present or an occasion of great solemnity with music, hymns and a packed church.

Whether in a parish church or a crematorium chapel, it can be the plain funeral service from the *Prayer Book* or *Common Worship* or with the addition of hymns, favourite prayers and readings, and an address.

Whatever the pattern of service, the words and actions all speak of a loving God and the preciousness to Him of every human being.

Questions of life and death

The funeral service will reflect the personality of the one who has died and the circumstances of their death. Feelings of grief, gratitude, joy and sadness often intermingle.

Sometimes, a sense of tragedy is uppermost, especially when it is a young person who has died. When it is the end of a long and fruitful life, the feelings of thanksgiving can be strongest.

There are times when the death of a faithful Christian seems to be the consummation of all they have lived for; and the funeral service is a triumphal departure for their true home. As for Christian in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, 'all the trumpets sound for them on the other side'.

Funeral services always raise profound questions about the meaning of life and death. Jesus himself believed in a life-giving God: 'the God of the living, not of the dead.' Christians believe that Christ's resurrection is the triumph of good over evil and of life over death, and has made eternal life available to us.

The funeral service

The service begins with the priest or other minister reading aloud such reassuring sentences from the scriptures as: "I am the resurrection and the life," says the Lord; "whoever believes in me, even though he dies, yet shall he live: and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die," and: "I know that my Redeemer lives ...".

A psalm - often 'The Lord is my shepherd' - follows; and lessons are read telling of God's care and of the hope of eternal life.

At this point, there may be an address, tribute or a sermon remembering the life and work of the dead person and the great Christian beliefs about life beyond death. Such words can be a comfort and strength to the mourners; but sometimes it is felt that the service and the readings from the Bible convey all that needs to be said.

The prayers recall the promise of the resurrection, entrust the dead person to the love and mercy of God and ask for comfort and strength for those who mourn.

The Committal

The committal is a particularly solemn moment of the funeral service. It takes place either at the graveside or, in the case of a cremation, in the crematorium chapel.

In the cemetery or churchyard, the family will gather round the open grave into which the coffin is lowered, and they will hear the words: 'We therefore commit his (or her) body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in the sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life.' Handfuls of earth are then scattered on the coffin or sometimes flowers.

In a crematorium, the words of committal may be accompanied by the closing of a curtain to hide the coffin from view; or the coffin is moved slowly out of sight.

The committal can be a very emotional moment. Many who are suffering grief find that, even in their sadness, the words of prayer can lift them towards the experience of Christian rejoicing in the knowledge of life beyond death.

The offering of prayer and the trust that the person is in God's safe hands can begin the process of healing the grief of loss.

Arranging a funeral

The person who has died may have left a paragraph in their Will describing the sort of funeral arrangements they hoped for. Naturally, the family will want to keep to such arrangements as far as possible.

Not everyone knows that they have the right to a funeral in their parish church, even if they and the dead person have not been churchgoers.

We as clergy regard the taking of funerals as an important part of our work, and will do our best to help you arrange it.

If you would like one of us to take the service, please let the funeral director know as soon as possible. The funeral director plays a very important part in all these arrangements, and will want to know if the funeral is to be in the parish church or if the vicar is to take the service in the crematorium.

Funeral directors know the local clergy, the local cemeteries and the crematoria. As part of a national network of funeral directors, they can, if necessary, give advice on funerals in other parts of the country, as well as on costs and fees.

Burials and cremations

These days 6 out of 10 funerals make use of the crematorium. This leaves the question of what is to be done with the ashes. Crematoria have gardens of rest where they can be buried; and each of our churchyards have a special place set aside for burying ashes even when there is no space left for graves. When this burial takes place, usually a few days after the funeral, a further very brief service can be held if

the family wish it, and some suitable commemorative mark or record may be made. Do let the clergy know if you'd like us to help you with this.

If you live in Fulbourn the churchyard is full; and so burials take place at the Parish Cemetery in Sanders Lane, though there is room in the church for the burial of ashes.

If you live in Great or Little Wilbraham or Six Mile Bottom, there is room in these churchyards both for burials and the burial of ashes, though there are strict regulations as to what sort of headstones etc. are permitted.

After the funeral

People who have lost someone close to them are often so busy with practical details and arrangements between the death and the funeral that they do not experience the full sense of their loss until later.

Grieving is a natural and important part of coming to terms with and healing this loss and it may continue for several months. If the clergy are asked, they will try to help. We also recommend that grieving families contact CRUSE Bereavement Care. There are many trained counsellors in and around Cambridge who can help. One often finds it is those who have suffered a close bereavement themselves, clergy or lay people, who can most easily offer comfort and support to those who mourn.

Comfort is also to be found in the promises of Jesus Christ, in the hope of the Resurrection and in the belief that the beloved person is safe in the hands of God.