

Jeremy Brookes, Bereavement and church

Sandra Millar

Our last speaker is Reverend Jeremy Brookes, and Jeremy is rector of Beaconsfield and he's also one of those people who's been spending a lot of time thinking and reflecting around death and funerals, reflecting theologically, developing resources around liturgy for funerals, and has been working with us nationally for the last six years now, around funerals, so, over to Jeremy to finish our formal input for the conference.

Jeremy Brookes

Juliet said to me at breakfast this morning, "If this was a conference on food all the speakers up to now would have been speaking about bananas, or apples, or vegetables, or possibly beef. My title is just "food." So, I feel like I've got to do the big, bringing everything together, just talking about everything there is to know about funerals.

Sandra

In half an hour.

Jeremy

In half an hour. I was taking the funeral recently of a young man who died after health problems which had gone back a decade and his wife and in-laws were committed members of my congregation and a number of the church family were present at the funeral. But what struck me was how many other members of the community were there who I already knew - a contemporary of the man who died, whose brother had also died in tragic circumstances about five years ago, a number of women whose husbands had died, and where I conducted the funeral. And as I waited, as we waited outside the crematorium chapel, they were all keen to acknowledge my presence and, if I can say this, recognise that they were in the hands of someone safe because I was local and was part of them.

Now, I don't say that to bring credit to myself in any way, but because all of us will recognise that scenario. As soon as we have been in any place for more than a few months, we will begin to get recognised and I often say the thing about funerals is that you pick up a lot of repeat business. And that's where I want to stress. First of all, if we're going to talk about bereavement in church, the first thing to say is the church, (and perhaps the Church of England, which has a unique place in this through our parish system), is that that very parish system gives us a gift that other people who conduct funerals don't have. I'm aware that it's a thing that's not much celebrated at the moment.

We kind of think, 'well if we're going to engage with our communities very much we've got to move on beyond the parish system'. The parish system can be a hindrance for us. Look at the big successful churches, they don't worry about the parish system very much. So, the fact that we're stuck in it feels like a barrier and I want to say it's not. It's the first vital tool that we have because, and we've talked, we've listened to lots of people saying much the same thing, because of the parish system, you are a presence in your community and your building is a presence in your community. And at times like

funerals, I mean think about issues like bereavement, that very presence is the first thing that you can have.

So, I'm not here to talk about lots of whizzy resources that you can have to help you in your bereavement ministry because the first thing that you have is what you already have. The resources that you already have, whether you're a vicar, an SSM in your parish, an LLM, whatever your role is, a funeral minister, the very presence that you have in the community, that sense of knowing other people, is the best gift that you can offer. And I know we get very anxious about the fact that a lot of funerals are now being taken very well by celebrants. The reality is very often they are not part of the community from which the family came, and that is something that we can really offer that's distinct, to say that we are part of that.

When we think about the church and bereavement support, inevitably the thing that we want to talk about is our pastoral care. And I know lots of the other speakers have engaged with that very well, helping us examine our pastoral care. But actually we have many other resources to offer as well. And I want to begin not with pastoral care, but by thinking about some of the other resources that we have as a church. We recognize the importance of liturgy of course but don't always go much beyond that. And I think one of our failings is that we have forgotten the importance of theology and doctrine as a gift that we offer, as a resource in our toolkit, as it were, which is to be very useful.

One of the things that I find very frustrating about Church of England training is that the stock answer of ministry division has always been when we've said, "Why aren't you looking at funerals? Why aren't you training curates? Why aren't you training ordinands in depth in funeral ministry?" is that ministry division does tend to have the answer at that so it's a practical subject, so you learn it once you're in your curacy. And one of the problems with that is that we failed to connect our theology, we spend all that time learning when we're at theological college or on our theological courses, with the practice of funeral ministry. And I think our theology is vital.

Tony Walter who wrote a ground breaking work in the 1990s called *Funerals and How to Improve Them*, used to teach ordinands at Trinity College Bristol. And as part of that teaching, once he asked his students to name some of the resources that they'd learned whilst they're at theological college, which will help them deal with funerals and how to engage with them. And a lot of people talked about the counselling course that they had been on, the listening skills that they had learned, some of the psychology that they had acquired whilst they were there, which give people insight into what was going on and how people are suffering. But nobody mentioned the resurrection of Jesus. Nobody made the connection that our doctrine has something to say about how we engage in funerals. If Jesus died and rose again, how does that make a difference to the way that we support those who are bereaved?

So, what are those theological resources that we bring to an understanding of bereavement? And I want to focus very briefly on two statements that we make in the creeds. The first we say, "We believe in the resurrection of the body." What do we mean by that? How does that help us when we go and see a family? Because of course in some ways it raises as many questions as it answers and in the context of bereavement there will be those who say that it's not very helpful. What do we mean by, "We believe in the resurrection of the body." We can't know what sort of body that is. We cannot know how are the dead raised, or when are they raised, or where are they now. And those may well be the questions that those who are bereaved are asking us.

And if they are not the questions, there's a whole set of assumptions that arise from the answers that they've already given themselves to the questions. And they will tell you the answers that they have. They will tell you that it's lovely to think that mum and dad are now reunited in heaven and they're looking down on them. They'll tell you that the person whom they love is now on a cloud, or in a star, and every time a feather floats to the ground that's another sign that mum or dad is with them. And sometimes those answers are very unhelpful. When people say, "Jesus needed Dad more than you did." That's a very, feels like a very unhelpful thing to say. And it's the things that families will say to one another to help make sense of them. But it's very easy to ask, "Well what right has Jesus to Dad? I needed him much more than Jesus. Jesus can have somebody else. He doesn't need my Dad."

So, it seems to me that the best thing that we can do with an understanding of the resurrection of the body is to work out for ourselves what it means. We come to that encounter with our own understanding and it's important that we've spent the time. If I think we're to be effective funeral ministers, we have to be able to spend time by working out what these doctrines that are at the heart of our faith mean to us. And you might think, "Well, that's just so self-evident. Why are you wasting my time telling me?" But I do think we need to actually engage with that and say, "What do these things mean?"

When I say I believe in the resurrection of the body, what sort of thing am I holding in my mind? Where, when they say, "Where is dad now?" What am I going to say? The traditional doctrine of the church is that when we die, we sleep until the last day and at the last judgment we are raised. Is that what we believe? That image, some of you will know the painting by Stanley Spencer. That's exactly the painting I'm thinking of. Sandra's heard my talk so many times that she even knows the pictures that I refer to. Stanley Spencer, A Resurrection at Cookham Churchyard. Where there all the people are rising up out of Cookham, out of their graves in Cookham churchyard at the last day. Is that what we hold in mind?

How does cremation engage with that? When the Church of England said, "It's fine to be cremated, in the 1940s." Because they said, "God is able to raise from ashes new resurrection bodies as much as he is from burial." And of course that's true, but what's the symbolism involved there and how do we make sense of it for ourselves?

I don't think that there's a stock answer that we can give families, but I just want to encourage you, if you're serious about your funeral ministry, to engage with the question yourself and know that you've got some sense that you can make of it yourself, because I think that's part of what we need to do. For me ultimately, and I've been ordained now 22 years, ultimately what I believe I can say is I believe in the resurrection of the body, reminds me that love has won and love is stronger than death. And so, we live on in love. And ultimately I'm not sure I can say a great deal more on that than that, but maybe that's because I've become a wishy washy liberal in my middle age and older life. But actually it means that I have something to say to the family that I feel doctrinally secure about.

Love has won. Death is not the end. If love overcomes death, in some way that means that the person who has died lives on, not just in your memories but lives on as an objective reality. I feel I believe I can say that much. And that thereby informs how I engage the family. It informs how I engage with the service and in what I say in my address in a sermon, because my theology is at the heart of what I'm doing.

Now the second doctrine connects with that. We say we believe in the communion of saints and that includes all those who have lived before as well as those who are alive now. Allan Billings has written a

book called *Dying and Grieving*. A very good speaker, Alan Billings was one of our speakers at our conference two years ago for those of you who were there. He's the police commissioner for Bradford, South Yorkshire, South Yorkshire. Thank you. And has written a lot on pastoral care, has been a parish priest, and he charts how the attitude towards the dead and grieving changed through the 20th century from when it was a community event.

And so, by necessity, it wasn't possible to take much time off work and withdraw into private grief as it's become now. Now it's a very much, it's a privatised event for the family, and, but, if we say that we believe in the communion of saints, if that's part of our doctrine, then there must be a community, public community aspect to the bereavement that we need to acknowledge. That is why public health funerals are so important for the church to be part of because it's not just about the family. When a person dies we are all thereby affected and actually to say symbolically that in public health families, we who help prepare funerals, we will be the ones who stand alongside you, is absolutely vital it seems to me.

And I think another aspect that's changed over the last 100 years has been psychological understandings of grief and how bereavement should be managed. In the second half of the 20th century the importance of letting go was stressed. The idea was the person has died and over a course of time you let go of the person and thereby released and you're free, as it were, from the person. Good grief was managed when the bereaved was able to let go of the one who died. But this was very much challenged towards the end of the 20th century. It's not a way that they ever had much purchase in traditional society, where the role of the ancestors continued to be important. And the dead were seen very much as being amongst the living and the bereaved saw no merits of letting go of the ones who died and wanted to keep them with them.

And one of the hard things about the way that psychological insights took people towards the end in that period, when people were encouraged to let go, is that it ran very counter to how bereaved people actually felt. They didn't want to let go of their loved ones. They didn't want to be told they were sick because they couldn't let go of their loved ones. It ran counter to their human instincts to say, "This person has been a part of my life for 60 years. I can't let go of them. I want them with me for the rest of our time."

And I think here an understanding of the communion of saints is profoundly helpful. The dead are not just gone. They are still with us. The church father Hippolytus painted the picture of the church as a ship on stormy waters traveling towards its destination but the dead are still in some way on the ship with us even though we don't see them and they're still travelling towards their destination in certainty as we travel on in hope. We don't believe that the dead have already arrived, though of course images of time when it comes to eternity become very unhelpful. They're still travelling, even though they travel in certainty whilst we travel in hope. Of course language always breaks down when we're talking about things that we cannot know.

Tom Wright in his book *For All the Saints* picks up on that imagery of sleeping in Christ and he speaks of those who've died as being asleep in a state of restful happiness, but they're not yet awake because that is what will happen at the last day. I think both these doctrines need to be starting points for our sitting with the bereaved. Because of the resurrection of the dead, death is not the end. I'm sure I don't need to tell anybody in this room that, but it's worth just dwelling with it and being aware of it as part of our ministry. Because of the communion of saints, we still have fellowship with those who have died.

So, what does the church offer here? I think this thing about the need for ritual is tremendously important. Sometimes when we think about what are we doing in terms of bereavement support, we can feel very guilty because we think we don't have the resources to offer ongoing pastoral support. If you're doing 40 or 50 funerals a year, yes you're going to have the big tragedies that Josie was talking about, or the children's funerals that Dorothy was talking about. But you think, "Well if I'm doing, but all my other funerals, what about them? I don't have the resources in my church to offer a bereavement support group or wonderful pastoral care for everybody who's died given that every week another funeral is coming, another funeral, another funeral."

But here's where our liturgical resources really offer something powerful. Part of what we offer is doing the same thing over and over again. Tom Long, again one of our speakers from two years ago says, "The body needs to find its way home and it does that by doing the familiar." And I think that sense of liturgy is about doing the same thing over and over again can be tremendously helpful. And that's when you're in the disordered land of grief and bereavement, that becomes important but it goes beyond that.

Douglas Davis, who's the director of The Centre of Death and Life Studies at Durham University, carried out some interesting research in the 1990s and so people's awareness of loved ones who had died during the Eucharist. And what he found that there was a much more heightened awareness of their loved ones in that eucharistic context than there were other times in their lives. And he asked people, "How often were you aware as you came to receive communion of people who had died?" And he broke it down into age groups. I don't know if can see this but he said 50% of the people that he asked, these were of church goers age between 18 and 34, became aware of a loved one who died. And that was probably given the age of that you're probably talking about a grandparent there. And you'll see that the next highest is amongst those who are aged over 65 probably then of course looking at the death of a partner there and how when people came up to receive the Eucharist they became aware of their loved one.

I will not be alone I know in having people in your congregation who will say, "I just don't feel I can come up to get communion because I get so upset because that's when I'm reminded of my husband or my wife." For whatever reason there seems to be that heightened awareness. And part of what we need to do pastorally is to encourage people in that and say, "I know that's all part of the grieving experience, but it's a grieving experience where you're surrounded by the love of your church community and to help you along that journey." To say, "Actually your loved one is still with you in some way and therefore you don't need to be frightened that you become aware of their presence at that point."

The Eucharist, our week by week worship service, is a tool that we have liturgically to assist people in bereavement. But of course that's the other thing that we talk about all the time is our services of remembrance. An extraordinary example I thought about the church that Sandra was talking about, to be able to offer that as a liturgy to say, "This is part of how we support you in remembering." Annual memorial services, whether you hold All Souls Day. We moved ours to January. I find November such a grim time of the year. And I thought it tends to be in the afternoon when it's already getting dark. The people who come are often older, they don't want to go out in the dark. All Souls doesn't necessarily mean anything to people who don't have any church connection, so why are we holding onto it as a time of remembrance? Of course the reason why we do hold onto it is more connected with Remembrance Sunday the following week and it becomes a season of Remembrance.

But think for your own church, when's the best time to hold that memorial service and know what an impact it makes? Lighting of candles, it always, that seems to be the thing that people hold onto in

memorial services isn't it? When people have the opportunity to come forward and light a candle and read their loved one's name out, maybe then to use a litany of remembrance like this one, originally a Jewish litany of remembrance but again it has the echoes of Remembrance Sunday. "At the going down of the sun. We will remember them. We will remember them. In the blowing of the wind and the chill of winter, all the various seasons of our lives, when we remember them. As long as we live they too shall live, for they are part of us and we will remember them. We will remember them." And of course as Christians we want to say, "And they will live beyond whilst we remember them. They don't just live on in our memories." We believe in the communion of saints which says they live on beyond that.

So, don't forget liturgy as a resource for bereavement. But I think it's at that point I think we then can talk about pastoral care, the thing that we've learned so much about. And maybe I've just chickened out because I know there are a lot of people who are much better at talking to you about pastoral care than I am. But that of course is a resource for us. And really, all I really want to talk about in pastoral care is about listening to stories.

I don't know how many of you have seen this book called Grief is The Thing With Feathers. It is a quite extraordinary book. A memoir of a man, I thought I brought a copy with me and I don't, so I apologise. I wanted to read some out but I haven't got the book with me so I'm not going to do that. About a man, a young dad, whose wife dies and he has two children. And the story is of the dad and the two sons and grief which is represented by a crow. And so, the chapters are the dad speaking, and then the sons, and then the crow and they go through the story of how that, and I found it a mesmerising book, but interestingly the crow leaves at the end of the story as the dad scatters his wife's ashes. The ritual, it is that liturgy, the ritual that has enabled the family to engage with the next part of the process and the crow representing the agonising grief moves on to its next household.

I only use that as a story to say, actually, what we need to do more than anything is listen to stories, to observe, to make those reflections that we've heard about it through the day, to help people make sense of them. Maybe that's why bereavement support groups, for those of you who have them, are so helpful because what you traditionally, what you typically do in a bereavement support group is go around the group and tell your story over and over again month by month, "Where have you been this month?" And in the sharing of the stories, almost sometimes without comment, people are helped in the pastoral care that we can offer them. And of course we listen to the stories people tell informed by our theology.

Allen Billings tells the story of a woman whose young daughter died in a road accident and after the road accident and after this girl had died, she would still every night, the woman would go into the girl's bedroom, which she had left exactly as it was and made sure, and sit down, and have a little moment in the bedroom thinking about the girl. And her husband became very uncomfortable with this and got really angry with his wife saying, "Look, you're not moving on. You've got to let go of her. You've got to accept our daughter has died. You're just in denial." And so, the wife eventually conceded to her husband's request and cleared her daughter's room. And she said afterwards, "I wasn't in denial. I knew my daughter has died but I needed somewhere where I could be with her and that was the space I could be with her." And Allen Billings makes the comment that he wonders who was really in denial in that story.

Listen to people's stories informed by what we know of our theology and our understanding of humanity to help people through their, in their situations. And of course there are times when healthy grief slips over into something more pathological and we need to recognise where more expert

psychological help is needed. But we also need to exercise patience, listening to the stories. And that's why I come back to what I said about our presence because we're there. It's not rocket science. We're there. We have a space. We have a parish system which asks us to be there. For those of us who are stipendiary clergy I think sometimes we're very tempted to move on, and to move on, and to move on thinking, "Oh, I'm stale in this place now. I need to move on to the next place."

But the Ministry of life events I think is a slow process, because we only see people occasionally at baptisms, at weddings, at funerals. So, if we've gone so quickly between the baptism and the wedding or between one funeral and the next funeral, we don't have those opportunities. And so, for those of us who are parish priests we can say, "I will commit to this community even if it takes a long time." Because in the taking of the long time, the slow things happen and we have the chance to listen to people's stories.

I thought Dorothy's exercise this morning about sculpting gave us an extraordinary insight into what's going on. And I thought to take that as a tool as we think about it, for me was a really profoundly helpful thing. Because it's about observing, it's about listening and seeing and saying, "Where am I? Where are these various people?" Because it seems to me that the task of the church is to live those stories with the bereaved and then walk the journey with them. Thank you.