



RITUAL AND REMEMBRANCE

The confessions of a Church of Scotland Minister: Why I wish I was a Roman Catholic Priest

At long last the schismatics' return. Well not quite. But in one particular area it seems to me that our Roman Catholic and Orthodox brethren have got a great advantage over us.

I think the Church of Scotland parish minister has a problem with funerals. This is not the 'problem' of too many parish funerals, though it is linked. It is the problem of what we do in our funerals. Why is it that so many people, who really have very little to do with the Church of Scotland nevertheless turn to our services at times of death? I don't believe it just because we are free. Nor do I believe that we should be discouraging this turning, far from it, we should view it as an opportunity for service and for spreading the good news. The fact that people come to us at times of death tells me that there is a hunger for something. Perhaps a hunger for comfort and support, perhaps for guidance and a sense that death and God go together. There is a hunger from people for something defined and certain, and there is perhaps also a hunger from us ministers for something but we are none of us quite sure what.

And this is the problem. We do not have a tradition of ritual that speaks to people today. Clearly there are some who would not regard this as a problem and it would be interesting to hear their experiences. As so often our tradition is a rather bald one, very intellectual, very straightforward, very cut and dried – and it is a tradition increasingly at odds with our society and with at least some of our ministers.

I sense a hunger for something more. Something more visual. Something more personal. Something more meaningful and comforting. Something more ritualistic and symbolic. I find myself being envious of religious leaders who operate within a clear cut ritual system, where there is a clearly prescribed way of doing things which is still widely accepted by the followers of that religion. Hence my title for this piece. I would be interested to hear the experience of our Roman Catholic and Orthodox brethren. Do they too experience this wish to experiment and find something that 'works' for people? Or are they happy that their rituals cover the ground that I find myself trying to take account of – the need for a sure and certain framework, an expectation of timescales where a grieving family can be carried along, the chance for participation and a sense of being able to do something for the deceased, something visual and symbolic to be able to attach their feelings too. I hunger for the certainty of an accepted tradition.

Let me tell you about some typical funeral experiences from my Priority Area parish in Glasgow, and see

if they ring true for you. I visit the family to make arrangements, and am struck by the number of 'with sympathy' cards in the house. I always offer people the chance to develop their own service, usually they want me, as the 'subject matter expert', to just get on and plan it all. To tell them how to do it. When I tell folk that they do not need to sing hymns if they don't want to, they seem relieved, often they feel it is still 'right' to have one song – usually '23rd Psalm' or 'Abide with me.' Almost universally they ask for CD music to be played entering and leaving the crematorium chapel where the vast majority of my funerals take place. The CDs are usually Frank Sinatra or Country and Western. I sometimes suggest if there is no final hymn that they might want to play a CD track immediately after the curtains close after the committal. At the end of every visit I offer to say a prayer with the family, which is usually the chance for people to cry.

On the day of the funeral itself, people wear black, hire black limousines, and if they can afford it (and probably especially if they cannot) there are great arrangements of flowers. The coffin itself usually looks cheaper. I usually meet the family at the family home, and I 'page' the hearse for 50 metres or so, alongside the funeral director. Often the family will have printed a service sheet, or card, with a photo of the deceased, and often a poem. The highlight of the service for the family is me talking about the deceased, based on talking to the family. I try and make this the single biggest element of the service. People seem very appreciative of this, often able to leave smiling. Alongside the flowers, the other certainty is the funeral tea or piss up, depending on the family. At this there are often old photos passed around, sometimes a sit down meal, usually a buffet, and drinks at the bar – first drink on the family.

I try and visit the family the following week, and I offer to print them a copy of the service if they want. Again before I leave I offer to say a prayer, which is never refused, and again often there are tears shed.

And so ends the funeral ritual that we have. There are obvious influences on the family, mainly I suspect from tradition and direct experience of previous funerals, the funeral directors and TV – the cards with their poems, hiring cars even when many people have access to a car, the flowers, wearing black, the CD music, the '23rd Psalm' and 'Abide with me', the cards and poems, the funeral tea.

But there are other, more secret rituals: placing items in the coffin alongside the deceased – soft toys and teddies, photos, money for the journey. In the house there is often a little shrine, with a photograph and perhaps a candle, or incense. There are the visits to graves and the laying of flowers, the remembrance of anniversaries.

And I feel that in most of this the Church of Scotland has little to say. Call it folk religion or superstition, but I think people out there want rituals, and in the absence of ours they create their own or have them created by others, perhaps with an eye on profits as well as comfort.

Maybe I don't want to be a Roman Catholic Priest, but I would like us to develop some certainty around useful and comforting, rooted and real, theologically accurate and compassionate rituals, so that we can feed the hunger that is within people.