



RITUAL AND REMEMBRANCE

A discussion on the Matter of Prayers for the Dead

In our Sunday worship, perhaps like many congregations, we have a book in which people are invited and encouraged to write down names of people in need of our prayers. During our prayers for others, the member of the congregation leading the prayers reads the list of names. Every Sunday there is the name of the dead husband of a lady who attends worship. What are we to do with this name – knowing that the man in question is dead, do we change the prayer to one where we pray for the family of the man in question, or do we go with the presumed intention of his widow; that we pray for him?

I have noticed that many people following the death of a loved one want to have prayers said for the dead – it seems their natural and first response, indeed I still find myself praying for my long dead grandmother – I'm not quite sure why, I suppose I hope that she is okay and keeping open a channel of communication and love. In traditional Protestantism the funeral is said to be a comfort for the living and has no impact on the deceased, indeed the latest offerings in Minister's Forum see someone wishing to return to the original view of the Reformers in the First Book of Common Order that the body 'be reverently brought to the grave with the Congregation, without any further ceremonies.' Given that prayers for the benefit of the dead seem so natural and common a phenomenon, could it be a legitimate comfort for the living to offer them, even if we might say they are pointless? Is it a harmless heresy? I know there might be dangers – the living being held to ransom by the dead, a burden of guilt if with time comes forgetfulness: I was shocked to see at a Roman Catholic funeral a nun reeling off with such rapidity that I couldn't keep up with the words, a great succession of Hail Mary's for the benefit of the deceased. There seemed to be a desperation in it. But whilst acknowledging the dangers, might praying for the dead not be quite a natural and comforting thing to do? Have we got it wrong about prayers for the benefit of the dead?

If prayer at its most basic is just communication and a means of deepening a relationship with God, and believing in the communion of saints, why is prayer for the dead so frowned upon?

In Common Order 1994 is not the prayer:

'Rest eternal grant unto him O Lord

And let light perpetual shine upon him' a prayer for the benefit of the dead?'

I thought I'd look at the Westminster Confession of faith and see what it had to say, as this seems to be the basis on which it is not lawful to make prayers for the dead.

Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 21 Of Religious Worship, and the Sabbath Day, para 4:

'Prayer is to be made for things lawful, and for all sorts of men living, or that shall live hereafter: but not for the dead^p, nor for those of whom it may be known that they have sinned the sin unto death.'

^p 2 Sam 12: 21-23 *'Then his servant said to him, 'What is this thing that you have done? You fasted and wept for the child while it was alive; but when the child died, you arose and ate food.' He said, 'while the child was still alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, "Who knows whether the Lord will be gracious to me, that the child may live?" But now he is dead; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me.'*

Luke 16: 25, 26 *'But Abraham said, 'Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Laz'arus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.'*

Rev 14: 13 *'And I heard a voice from heaven saying, 'Write this: blessed are the dead who die in the Lord henceforth.' 'Blessed indeed,' says the Spirit, 'that they may rest from their labours, for their deeds follow them!'*

This is the justification given in the Westminster Confession of Faith that prayers may not be made for the dead.

I am not convinced that this is adequate.

One may argue that David's prayer and fasting for his child born to Uriah the Hittite's widow, Bathshe'ba the daughter of Eli'am, had as its purpose only the survival of the child. David appears quite correct in saying that there is no reason for him to continue after the child has died; however, in the light of the three stories of Jesus raising the dead, Jairus daughter¹, the son of the widow of Nain², and Lazarus³ found in the gospels, perhaps David was a little hasty.

¹ Matthew 9: 18; *'While Jesus was saying this, a Jewish official came to him, knelt down before him, and said, 'my daughter has just died; but come and place your hands on her, and she will live.'* Mark 5:35 & Luke 8: 49-50, *While Jesus was saying this, some messengers came from Jairus' house and told him, 'Your daughter has died. Why bother the teacher any longer?' Jesus paid no attention to what they said, but told him, 'Don't be afraid, only believe.'*

² Luke 7: 14; *'Then he walked over and touched the coffin, and the men carrying it stopped. Jesus said, 'Young man! Get up, I tell you!' The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.'*

³ Lazarus: John 11: 21, 43-44; *'Martha said to Jesus, 'If you had been there, Lord, my brother would not have died! But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask him for.'* After he had said this, he called out in a loud voice, *'Lazarus, come out!' He came out, his hands and feet wrapped in grave clothes, and with a cloth round his face. 'Untie him,' Jesus told them. 'and let him go.'*

But of course, most prayers for the dead that I encounter are not requests that the dead be brought to life again on earth – though perhaps given the gospel examples we should be bolder in our prayers. Most prayers for the dead are not very well defined, nor their intentions clear, but they probably share the idea that the dead person is still living somewhere, and the petitioner wants the dead person to know that they are still loved and that the petitioner wants to continue to influence the circumstances of the dead person for good. It is not a well defined matter. Most people do not seem to believe in hell, so they probably do not regard their prayers for the dead to be concerned with relieving the torment of those in hell. They probably assume that their dead loved one is actually in some sort of heaven, but they want to offer reassurance to the dead one and themselves, that there remains some sort of relationship.

It seems to me a harmless and easily understandable wish to make one's remembrance and good wishes a prayer to God.

More immediately at the time of the funeral, there is often a wish to ask for God to receive the soul of the person and to have mercy on them. In a traditional protestant and rather intellectual mindset, this activity is rather too late. The horse has bolted. The dead one is dead and the die is cast, no more evidence will be considered, no pleas for mercy heard.

I think there is a world of difference between a general wish to keep in touch and the fervent rattling off of Hail Mary's which are presumably calculated to reduce time in Purgatory, or the burden of guilt that can be placed on people if they do not pray for their dead relatives.

The second reference chosen by the Westminster Divines was that of Dives and Lazarus. The great divide referred to, which cannot be crossed, is the divide between the bosom of Abraham and Hades, rather than between living and dead. Dives was requesting the very particular favour that Lazarus be sent down from heaven to Hades to bring water to cool him. I don't know that it is particularly relevant to the matter of prayers by the living for the dead.

The final reference seems the strangest in support of not making prayer for the dead: 'Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord henceforth.' 'Blessed indeed,' says the Spirit, 'that they may rest from their labours, for their deeds follow them!'

What are the deeds that follow them? How do they follow them? Surely the prayers of loved ones could be seen to be the deeds that follow them? If you have laid down positive relationships in life to the extent that the love between you is expressed beyond death, is that not an example of a deed following you into death?

If God is beyond time, then presumably a prayer offered in love at anytime in someone's life, including after their death, is never wasted.

As far as what happens to us after death⁴, the references in the Westminster Confession are hardly conclusive in terms of the immediate timescale they boldly proclaim.

Luke 23: 43; *'Jesus said to him, 'I promise you that today you will be in Paradise with me.'*

Ecc 12: 7; *'Our bodies will return to the dust of the earth, and the breath of life will go back to God, who gave it to us.'*

So without disagreeing with the Confession's statement that there are only two places for a soul separated from its body, there remains scope for the idea that the soul takes a few days to get to its destination.

Old traditions suggest that the soul remains with the body for three days, and this remains the position of Orthodox Christianity.

Here's an excerpt from an article online called *The Church's Prayer for the Dead* (http://www.orthodoxinfo.com/death/prayer_dead.aspx):

"When St. Macarius of Alexandria besought the angel who accompanied him in the desert to explain to him the meaning of the Church's commemoration on the third day, the angel replied to him: "When an offering is made in church on the third day, the soul of the departed receives from its guardian angel relief from the sorrow it feels as a result of the separation from the body. This it receives because glorification and offering is made in the Church of God which gives rise in it to blessed hope, for in the course of the two days the soul is permitted to roam the earth, wherever it wills, in the company of the angels that are with it. Therefore, the soul, loving the body, sometimes wanders about the house in which his body had been laid out, and thus spends two days like a bird seeking its nest. But the virtuous soul goes about those places in which it was wont to do good deeds. On the third day, He Who Himself rose from the dead on the third day commands the Christian soul, in imitation of His resurrection, to ascend to the Heavens to worship the God of all."

In Judaism there is the same belief. The idea that the soul remains near the body for three days after a person dies is mentioned in the Talmud Yerushalmi (Moed Katan 3:5):

"For three days the soul hovers over the body, thinking it may go back into it, but when it sees that the appearance of the face has changed, it departs".

⁴ Chapter 32; *'Of the State of Men after Death, and of the Resurrection of the Dead. Para 1 The bodies of men, after death, return to dust and see corruption: but their souls (which neither die nor sleep) having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them: the souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God, in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies. And the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgement of the great day. Besides these two places, for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledgeth none.'*

If the soul remains with the body then there may be more justification for immediate prayers for it in terms of its final destination, asking that God would guide the soul to its home before it gets there.

So perhaps we are hasty in saying that there may be no prayers for the dead? Perhaps there is truth in the surprisingly precise correlation between Occult ideas about the body and soul and the time they take to separate and the old Christian and Judaic traditions?