

FIRST THINGS

The Drama of the Christian Funeral

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February 18, 2010

At a funeral today, one is more likely to hear mourners and preachers alike uttering clichés such as “Dad is with us in spirit,” or “She will live forever in our memories,” than intoning the *De Profundis* or *Dies Irae*. Occasionally, these platitudes are given added emphasis with theatrical flourishes like releasing doves to symbolize the freeing of a soul from its bodily container (a practice that is gaining increased popularity). While such devices might offer a certain superficial comfort, they are in many respects, decidedly un-Christian.

Thomas G. Long, Professor of Preaching, at Emory University, worries that the true essence of the Christian funeral is receding rapidly from the collective memory of the community of believers. One of America’s most respected Protestant pulpit voices, Long has considerable experience assisting those for whom the loss of a loved one raises all the great questions about life after death. In [Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral](#), he observes that the traditional understanding of how the living aid in bringing the deceased to the portal of paradise is being replaced by ideas and practices that reflect fundamental errors.

A large part of the problem, Long argues, is that many Christians have wrongly come to accept a sort of Platonic dualism, which views the disembodied spirit as the ideal state of being. As Long insists, however, the Christian Faith “is not about deathless souls shedding bodies; it is about embodied mortals being given new and glorified *bodies* by the grace and power of God.” Christians look forward not to liberation, but to resurrection—though the ability to grasp *when* they will achieve their ultimate destiny is hampered by the temporal human mindset. Relying heavily on the theologian Jürgen Moltmann’s eschatology, Long explains “that the raising of individuals at the hour of their deaths, which we in our world of clocks and calendars experience one by one in chronological fashion, and the general raising of all the dead in Christ on the Day of the Lord should be thought of not as events that happen one before the other in temporal sequence but as simultaneous events.” To put it simply: “When does God raise the dead and give them glorified bodies? Immediately! Death does not have one second’s worth of victory over them. All the saints rise together at the same time.”

At baptism the Christian begins his journey to God within the community of the Church—as part of the Communion of Saints, which is comprised of the saints on earth, those in purgatory, and those in heaven. (Long appreciates Pope Benedict’s understanding of purgatory as not a *place*, in the temporal sense, but as “a process of transformation . . . that happens in the twinkling of an eye.”) In the funeral, Long explains, the saints on earth accompany the deceased on their final pilgrimage to join the saints in heaven. It is “a piece of drama in which the Church reenacts the gospel. . .

singing and praying as they go.” It should, therefore, take place inside a church building. If a funeral home must be used, Christian symbols should be present to remind the mourners of the deceased’s life in Christ within the Church.

Contemporary services, Long laments, have taken on a strongly therapeutic aspect, designed to assuage the grief of those left behind. This has led to an increase in memorial services, occasions for remembering the earthly life of the deceased—in most cases without the body present. When the funeral becomes focused on the living, the deceased just get in the way. “The revised funeral story,” Long writes, “is that we are simply summarizing memories, comforting each other, involving some inspiring thoughts, doing effective ‘closure’ and managing our grief; so it is better not to have any embarrassingly dead body cluttering up our meditation.”

The presence of a coffin, however, adorned with the potent symbolism of the pall and crucifix reminds the Church Militant of the funeral’s connection with baptism. This is important, Long says, because “we have experienced the deceased as an embodied person. Commitments are made with the body, not the spirit, and the embodiment is the person we have known and loved.” While Long doesn’t reject the growing practice of cremation, he recommends waiting until after the funeral service, if possible. (An ossuary, the repository for a cremation urn during the service, can be similarly bedecked, but Long clearly regards it as less effective.)

A funeral is throughout a reenactment of the gospel and a proclamation of its promise. Accordingly, Long emphasizes the importance of the sermon at a funeral rather than a eulogy: “The sermon happens when the preacher, who has gone to the Bible for the people and on behalf of the people, now turns and goes back to the people and is a faithful witness, telling them courageously and truthfully what has been heard.” This is not to say that the details of a person’s life cannot be mentioned, but “the life of the deceased must be told in light of the gospel.”

Long calls on the Church to regain control of funeral practices and in *Accompanying Them with Singing*, Long has provided the necessary guide for doing just that. It is educational, spiritually uplifting, and pastorally practical, with a theology of Christian life and death that is embedded in sound ecclesiology. This book will remind pastors of the essence of a Christian funeral and help them to guide their parishioners accordingly. It will enable them to appreciate, as Long does, “the funeral is not just a collection of inspiring words . . . but, a dramatic event in which the Church sets out what it believes to be happening from the perspective of faith.”

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