

“The Good Funeral” an address given by Kerry Enright at the evening service at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on the Second Sunday of Epiphany 17 January, 2016.

If you want to empty a church, choose a title like the one I have chosen for tonight. I sense many people might imagine this topic depressing and therefore to be avoided.

Some funerals can be depressing, especially where death has been tragic or where life has been tragic.

The overwhelming number, and even sometimes the most tragic funerals, mix sadness with some quantity, some quality of joy.

Even in the tragic, people find in the life of the person some aspect of joy or hope or light.

Christians are people who live in the presence of death.

We are communal beings, part of a community, so always people are being born and baptised, and people who have been baptised into the death of Christ, die.

Because churches are cross-generational, from an early age, we are faced with death.

It is inescapable for us.

More so, we make much of the death of the one we follow. So churches have crosses. The Christian year has Good Friday. We spend time attending to death and we call the day of his death, good.

So it does make sense to talk about what we do with people when they die.

More so because what we do with people when they die is changing.

Some changes ...

- Today, fewer funerals are taken by ministers and fewer in churches.
- They are longer now. What used to be less than 30 minutes has now become an hour or more.
- Fewer families choose to go to the crematorium.
- When I began, cars followed the hearse to the cemetery or the crematorium – cars coming the other way pulled over and stopped; people walking, stopped and turned, and men with hats took them off;
- For increasing numbers of people, there is no ritual.
- For others the ritual is private. Before I came here, I do not think I was ever involved in a private service, and that despite there being every reason to do so on occasion. Over the past year I have had four.
- Perhaps there is greater variety, although I am not sure. Over my ministry I have led a service that included Buddhist ritual where food was offered and joss-sticks were burnt.

- On a marae, there has been the tangi and surrounding ritual, the calling on, and the following of the casket down to the cemetery, the return to the house and the blessing of the house, and a year after, the unveiling;
- In Irish families, the open casket sat in the front room;
- In Pacifica families there is a service every night.
- In Fiji I joined in shovelling soil on the casket of a friend;
- I have seen caskets painted by family.

It's also good to talk about these things because how we attend to people who have died says a lot about how we view life.

For me there are few more sacred moments than standing in front of a casket or a grave or a cremator.

It's an important subject.

I think it is good to step back and to wonder what is happening.

In what I am about to say, I don't want there to be should and oughts. You should do this or that.

I will be referring to a book from Tom Long a minister and Tom Lynch a funeral director, called, the Good Funeral.

1. Part of our valuing life involves valuing bodies. When someone dies, the heart stops pumping and the body changes and the person no longer generates life and memories, no longer engages. We may say that the body no longer represents the person. But that body represents so much. The look, the touch, the hold, the smile, the gait of a walk, the physical characteristics all speak. So when we say farewell to a body, we are saying farewell to more than a shell, in my view. We are body people; we are not disembodied spirits. So it makes sense that we treat bodies with the greatest respect, and that the presence of the body is so valuable. That is evident when bodies are not found or for good reason are not present.
2. The story is told of Atsushi Chiba, a retired undertaker who attended to the bodies of more than 1000 tsunami victims in Japanⁱⁱ. He was a Buddhist, a religion which has a tradition of caring for the dead. He removed the bodies from plastic sheeting, and he would speak to each of them. "You must be so cold and lonely, but your family is going to come for you soon so you'd better think of what you are going to say to them when they arrive." He would get on his knees and gently massage the body to relax it into a posture of peacefulness. Workers were inspired by him and bowed their heads in prayerful respect each time a body was claimed by a family member, despite there being thousands.
3. The book of Tobit in the apocrypha includes the story of an undertaker taking care, and it got him into trouble with the Assyrians who did not show respect to bodies. The first Christians shocked the Romans with the care they took of people when they died. To the

Romans a body was, as Plato taught, a corrupted vessel, a prison trapping pure souls yearning for release from the flesh. So early Christians took upon themselves the role of undertaker, volunteering to bury the dead, including the people who were most poor whose bodies were often simply discarded. The Romans were also baffled by the way Christians valued the bones of those executed for refusing to renounce the Christian sect. To Romans it was the mind that was to be valued, not the body. Muslims have the same respect for bodies. Care of bodies is humane and sacred.

4. Death is a dramatic transition. Despite our belief in resurrection, death is the taking of something deeply precious. We cannot soften that loss. It is more than passing, more than passing away, more than sleeping, more than going to another room. We will no longer engage this person. We will no longer share experiences with them. And there is no way to soften that, to make it less than it is. That can strike us in various parts of a service. I grew up in a small town and the crematorium was a long distance away, so when my father died, for me it was the moment the hearse drove from the church I knew down the street I knew. I don't want anyone to deny me the sense of loss, because of how much I cherished the person. It's very important we are not kept at arm's length or that the process is sanitised. We need to be careful when we hear the words "it's to save trouble" or "it's to save unhappiness". Death is hard. It's painful. It's final. There is no way around it.
5. Poemⁱⁱⁱ
6. We are people of ritual. Much of our lives is spent on daily rituals, from the moment we awake, although we may not think of them as rituals. And when certain things happen, we ritualise them as a way of attending to the depth of them, the meaning of them, as a way of processing our feelings, as a way of expressing truth. Traditionally, churches have been the ritualising communities, but that is less so now. Still, whether we use churches or not, we use ritual to give meaning and to allow us to express what it is we most deeply believe and cherish and what we feel. Good ritual enables a whole community to offer what is in them, what is happening within them, with others, at a time of death, as at a time of birth, at a time of marriage, at a time of transition. If we do not ritualise death, something of our humanity is lost. St Augustine said that those who bury the dead are performing a piece of theatre in which they act out the deepest truths they know about life and death.
7. In funerals, we ritualise faith. In funerals, we express some of the most important aspects of our faith because in death we face our *createdness* and we connect with a story larger than us and we connect with our world, with nature. When I take services at the crematorium at Anderson's Bay, I think of the Maori concept that spirits lift off from promontories. I look at the waves washing in from an immense sea, carrying us away, into the deep being of God. When I say the words "earth to earth" I think of the rhythm of being born and dying, and of how we each carry some element of the galaxy, the stars, and we are

returning to that. And I hold to the faith, that wherever we are, whatever we do, we are not separated from the love on God in Christ Jesus.

8. Tom Lynch says funerals carry us from here to there.
 - a. They involve direction and movement conveying the truth that the person is going somewhere.
 - b. The movement involves the labour of many hands – just as life itself does.
 - c. As we move across the land, we enact a story about life, death and hope.
 - d. As it moves across time, it speaks the promise of transformation.
 - e. In Whitianga, the church is on one side of the river and the cemetery on the other. So after the service in the Church we all went down to the river, put the casket in the middle of ferry, sat around it, went in the ferry across the river, and then carried the casket a hundred metres or so to the cemetery. I will never forget taking funeral services there when I was a student and what we enacted there.

9. Funerals are for those who are left, so take care when it is suggested that you might record your wishes. It is one thing to be prepared; it is another to take freedom from those who grieve.

I have crammed a lot into this, and more can be said. I guess what I am saying is that a funeral is very important for people, for those who are left, for the community as a whole, for the church. We need to organise funerals with care and thought so that they express what we really believe and the tradition of the church that says how we regard bodies says much about how we value life.

ⁱ The title is taken from Long, T G and Lynch T, 2013, *the Good Funeral – Death, Grief and the Community of Care*, Westminster John Knox Press Louisville Kentucky.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid* p 89 - 90

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid* p 112