RITES OF DEATH AND DYING

Lawrence Boadt, C.S.P.
Mary Dombeck
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Three Papers Given at the 1987 National Meeting
of the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions

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Foreword

At one time or another we all face the experience of losing someone whom we love. The adjustment to this loss is challenging, and more than ever before the Church is attempting to respond to that challenge with sensitive and healing pastoral care.

It is no surprise then that at the twentieth annual meeting of the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions held at Breckenridge, Colorado, in 1987 the theme was the rites of death and dying. The insights and reflections offered by three of the main speakers at that gathering are now printed here for all who are helping others face the mystery of death.

Fr. Lawrence Boadt, C.S.P., sets the scene for the dialogue between death and dying and the Scriptures with the image of "going alone into the alone." Describing the elements of grief exemplified in the experience of C. S. Lewis, he then turns to the Scriptures in search for an understanding of this mystery of life. Exploring the psalms of lament highlights the contribution they can make in handling grief. Finally, he studies and positively critiques the use of Scripture in our present funeral rites.

From an anthropological perspective, the question of death rituals and American values is addressed by Mary Dombeck. In a study illustrated with abundant life examples, she explores three questions: (1) Do we find uniformity in funerary customs and death rituals in a society which historically and actually contains such ethnic diversity? (2) If

there is uniformity in the midst of diversity, what might funerary customs and death rituals tell us about life values in this society? (3) Finally, how do the customs and rituals transform the fact of spiritual death into social, religious, and spiritual reality for the participants?

Looking closely at the empirical evidence available, Fr. H. Richard Rutherford, C.S.C., exercises an empirical, hermeneutical, and critical analysis of the funeral liturgy to answer a very specific question. Using standard social science methods he gropes with a precisely defined issue: Does the funeral liturgy function in a meaningful way in the bereavement experience of religious Catholics (specifically widowed persons, who as a group constitute a manageable population as well as one at high risk)? Some of Rutherford's conclusions give encouragement and support to those engaged in ministry to the bereaved. As plurality of belief and expression increases, however, it will be most essential for the Church and its ministers to be even more present, consoling, and supportive to those who are grieving.

The authors are indeed successful in getting us to look at the North American Christian cultural scene as it relates to death and dying. What is even more valuable, however, is that we are led to face the question of exactly how effective the presentation of liturgical symbols in the rites of death and dying are in communicating the Paschal Mystery as a hope-filled balm to those in grief. Finally, we also begin to get a glimpse of what factors might be at work within the average North American Christian that prevents the hope-filled message of Jesus Christ from penetrating.

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The Scriptures on Death and Dying and the New Funeral Rite

LAWRENCE BOADT, C.S.P.

In his book *A Grief Observed,* C. S. Lewis tells how his wife, dying from cancer, would often quote to him the proverb, "Alone into the alone."[1]

This struck Lewis deeply and made the grief he experienced at the separation caused by her death all the more acute. He tried to picture her just as she had been so that he would not lose her presence. But when he gradually emerged from his grief to rediscover other people in his life, he found that this recovered awareness of the world actually sharpened his memory of his wife and made her more alive and part of his existence than all his maudlin efforts had been able to do in the midst of his denial of her death. She had not gone alone, nor was he alone without her.

Lewis' insight into his own personal sorrow explains one major purpose of formal church liturgy at the death of a person. It directly addresses the question of going alone into the alone. Christian conviction insists that we do not forget Christ's presence to us in the moment of death. Jesus declares, "It is the will of him who sent me that I should lose nothing of what he has given me, rather that I should raise it up on the last day" (John 6:39), or "'My sheep hear my voice; I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they shall never perish" (John 10:27-28). In

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declaring the power of the death and resurrection of Jesus for all believers, living and dead, Paul tells the Thessalonians, "We would have you be clear about those who sleep in death, brothers; otherwise, you might yield to grief, like those who have no hope" (1 Thess 4:13). In the same way the Book of Revelation envisions the death of the martyrs: "The lamb on the throne shall shepherd them. He will lead them to springs of life-giving water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Rev 7:17).

But a death is also part of the life of the community. Paul's treatment of what happens to those who have died in 1 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians 15 highlights the unity of the living Church with those who have died, and the great hymn of Colossians 1:15-20 describes the cosmic rule of Christ, who is "the first-born of the dead," over living and dead alike. Paul also emphasizes both Christ's presence to and the union of all other disciples with the deceased when he declares, "While we live we are responsible to the Lord, and when we die, we die as his servants. Both in life and death, we are the Lord's. That is why Christ died and rose again, that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living" (Rom 14:8-9).

C. S. Lewis' book offers a second powerful statement in the opening sentence: "No one told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid."[2] Here, Lewis focuses on the mourners and their sense of grief. The great writer seems to echo the words of the psalmists, who speak of their fear before enemies and sickness and misfortune: "My heart has become like wax melting away in my bosom" (Ps 22:15). "Do not fear the terror of the night nor the arrow that flies by day nor the pestilence that roams in darkness" (Ps 91:5-6). Against this

fear the psalmists can declare: "Even though I walk in the valley of death, I fear no evil" (Ps 23:4), and "The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom should I fear?" (Ps 27:1). Here confidence in God dispels fear. And this, too, then, is a reason for the funeral liturgy: to help channel grief into hope.

David Dempsey, in his book *The Way We Die*, has summarized a number of studies that show prolonged bereavement can lead to mental disorders and psychosomatic diseases.[3] It certainly falls to the funeral liturgy—from the moment of the news of the death of a person on through the series of possible rites and memorials—to help channel that bereavement process into a healthy movement from the devastating effects of loss to healing and then to hope for the deceased in the life to come. Finally, the mourners reenter a positive and realistic place in the world without the deceased—but not without a healthy memory of the lost one.

Loneliness, fear, and other aspects of the bereavement process need the liturgy to help channel their potentially negative energy into a realization of a shared community of faith in tragedy and a trust in the God of life. Only in the liturgical rites are the three aspects brought together fully, i.e., the deceased individual with his or her grieving loved ones, the community, and God. All three must be part of the bereavement process for a true healing and reintegration to take place.

One of the most profound of Lewis' insights comes at the end of his grieving process, after he has filled four notebooks with his lamentations and mourning, and it is finally about God.

The notes, he says, that he has written, have been about

himself, his wife, and God, in that order. But the order and proportions are exactly the opposite of what they ought to have been. He nowhere fell into the mode of praising God, or really even his wife, and that would have been the best for him. Praise, he notes, is the mode of love which always has some element of joy in it.[4] Praise given in due order would first recognize God as the generous giver, his wife as the gift, and himself as the beneficiary.

The Role of the Scriptures

In noting the elements of grief above which one man has experienced, I answered them with references to passages of the Bible that offer both a reflection of that grief and a proclamation of hope. This is the most natural thing in the world for a Jew or Christian to do because we consider the Scriptures as a normative guide to the understanding of the ultimately religious mysteries of life. The Bible shapes our own self-identity as religious people who ask the meaning of events beyond our comprehension. The very scope of the biblical story and the breadth of its literary reflections on the different aspects of our human life provide the opportunity to discover the proper relationship among ourselves as individuals and as community within our relationship to God.

The General Instruction to the *Order of Christian Funerals* selects five reasons for reading God's Word: (1) to proclaim the paschal mystery, (2) to teach remembrance of the dead, (3) to convey the hope of being gathered again into God's kingdom, (4) to encourage the witness of Christian life, and (5) to tell of God's designs for a world in which suffering and death will relinquish their hold on all whom

God has called his own.[5] These are broadly conceived goals that cover the whole range from affirming the kerygma of the Scriptures down to practical help for the bereaved to hold on to the memory of their beloved one and to regroup their lives. In proclaiming the kerygma of God's salvation in the Old Testament, and the mystery of Christ's passion, death, and resurrection in the New, the reading of Scripture is directed as much to the rest of the community as to those who have been personally touched by the death of the beloved.

Yet, today, even with the advent of a revised *Order of Christian Funerals,* several recent commentators have pointed to even more that Scripture can offer in the liturgical celebration of the funeral rites, especially in the area of recognizing and accepting the pain, loss, seeming irrationality and meaninglessness of death that every mourner like C. S. Lewis must pass through before claiming as his or her own the message of hope and victory over death found in those same Scriptures.

Thus I would like to review several aspects of the biblical view of death itself by sketching some of the information we know about ancient Israel's customs surrounding death, by mentioning some theological attitudes towards death found in the Scriptures, and, finally, by discussing some of the recent suggestions about the value of the lament psalms for broadening our own understanding of the bereavement process.

The Hebrew Scriptures on the Nature of Death

The conception of death in the Hebrew Scriptures is not delineated like a clear set of laws from the Torah, but rather

like a jigsaw puzzle in which we have many pieces, but not all that will be needed to understand the design completely. Part of this is due, no doubt, to the nature of the Scriptures themselves, which are concerned to proclaim the power of God over life and which do not focus on the enduring results of failure and death. Another part is due to the curious anomaly that biblical literature, alone among all ancient religious writings, avoids almost entirely any mention of the afterlife until very late in pre-Christian times. This contrasts strongly to the preoccupation with caring for the dead, built on the correlation between a proper interment and the hope for an afterlife, that dominated Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Canaanite (Ugaritic) literature.[6]

The Bible prescribes no mandated way of conducting a funeral liturgy. Several practices associated with the death of an individual are described, but they rarely reveal the inner understanding of Israel on the question of what death really means in terms of continued life.[7] At the news of a death, mourners would pour dust or ashes on their heads (Josh 7:6; 1 Sam 1:12; Lam 2:10; Job 2:12), a practice also prescribed for penitential rites; tear their garments (Job 1:20; Josh 7:6; 2 Sam 1:11; 3:31; Gen 37:34); put on sackcloth (Gen 38:34; Isa 58:5); sit in silence on the ground (Num 11:4; Deut 1:45; Job 2:12; Lam 2:10); and avoid contact with the body to prevent uncleanness (Num 5:2; 19:1-22; Lev 21:1-12). Texts also provide us with a number of specific rites to be carried out. Spices were burned at funerals, at least of high officials (Jer 34:5; 2 Chr 16:14; 21:19); weeping and lamentations were performed by professional dirge singers (Ezek 32:16; 2 Chr 35:25; Ezek 27:32); fasting was required for a period of time (Esther 4:1-3); and it was usual to let one's hair grow long and not be cut (Ezek 44:20). There may have

been a funeral feast, a *marzeah*, which was commonly practiced among the Canaanites but less certainly in Israel; apparent allusions exist in Amos 6:7; Jer 16:4-7; Ezek 24:16-17. References also occur in some of these passages to a "bread of mourners" that was eaten.[8]

Some customs were widespread but officially condemned, such as shaving the head or beard (recorded in Isa 22:12; Job 1:20; Jer 7:29; 16:6; 41:5; 48:37; Ezek 7:18; Amos 8:10; but condemned by Lev 19:27-28). Gashing the body was also well known in Ugaritic documents but forbidden in Israel, probably because of its importance in pagan cultic rites (Lev 19:24; cf. Jer 16:16).

Bodies were to be buried, and not cremated (2 Sam 25), except for serious crime (Josh 7). Proper burial was important, but any further contact with the dead was repeatedly condemned in Israel. The most notorious example is the attempt of King Saul to contact the ghost of the prophet Samuel before the battle of Mount Gilboa in 1 Samuel 28. Although the story treats necromancy as really possible, the authors condemn the practice outright and consider it the final sin of Saul that seals his coming death which Samuel had earlier prophesied. Necromancy is also condemned in Leviticus 20:6, 27; Deuteronomy 18:9, 11; Isaiah 8:19.

One biblical usage in which we have extensive confirmation from other ancient literature is that of metaphors and names for death. Sheol is called "The Hidden Place" (Job 40:13), the "Plain" (Ps 31:9), the "Mire" (Job 17:2), the "Pit" (Isa 14:19), the "Ruin" (Ps 73:18), the "House" (Isa 14:18), the "Place of Silence" (Ps 94:17; 115:17), "Destruction" (Prov 15:11), "Perdition" (Ps 73:18), "Deep Darkness" (Job 10:21; Ps 49:20), the "Slippery Place" (Ps 66:9), "The Land of Dust" (Job 34:15), "The City" (Ps 9:15),

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