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Weeping at the grave, we make our song
Alleluia - Lament and thanksgiving in Church of England funerals

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**Jeremy Paul Brooks
DThMin 2006
Research Based Thesis**

**Weeping at the grave, we make our song:
Alleluia**

Lament and thanksgiving in Church of England funerals

Abstract

The thesis considers the changing nature of funerals carried in England over the last twenty years and a possible response by Church of England ministers. Those changes are outlined in terms of the changes in venue of funerals, the changes in content and the changes in officials conducting funerals.

As a theological basis for a response, the thesis examines the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar, and in particular his book *Mysterium Paschale*. Balthasar considers each of the three days of Easter in turn, finding particular power and importance in Holy Saturday. It is this weight that he gives to the day in which Jesus is actually dead that is important in forming a liturgical response in the carrying out of funerals.

One commentator describes a Christian funeral as a remembrance of an individual's death in the context of the Easter event: key to what we do as Christian ministers is remind people of the hope that we have because of Christ's resurrection at Easter. However, whilst the proclamation of the meaning of Easter Sunday is vital in any Christian funeral, just as important is a taking seriously of Good Friday and Holy Saturday. These days remind us of the importance of grief and mourning in funerals. The thesis examines both the formal and informal content of funerals conducted by church ministers in England today to see how they give an appropriate understanding of the death and resurrection of Christ.

The appropriate liturgical response to mourning is lament and, having considered how the three days of Easter are reflected in the actual content of the funeral, the final chapter considers the biblical notion of lament and how it may provide resources for funeral ministry.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Death, like the sun, is not to be looked at steadily¹

The maxim of the French author, François de la Rochefoucauld (1613 – 1680) served as a warning to the twentieth century Briton, for whom death was seen as the great taboo. By the end of that century, Tony Walter argued that this attitude was beginning to change: indeed, in entitling his book *The Revival of Death*², published in 1994, he suggests that this change has come about. This revival had derived from the contradiction that people felt between their own private experiences of the death of a loved one, and the public discourse surrounding death: they wanted the process surrounding death and the funeral made more personal and were therefore prepared to bring issues of death out into the open. Whilst acknowledging the truth of de la Rochefoucauld's maxim, Walter comments elsewhere that the wise man lives in the light of death.³

Whilst Walter may have been premature in claiming in 1994 that there had been a revival in the willingness to discuss matters of death, the years since then have provided ample evidence for an increased interest. The Natural Death Centre was founded in 1991 by Nicholas Albery and Josefine Speyer who wanted to develop a concept of 'do-it-yourself' funerals, modelled on the concept of natural childbirth. Since then, it has grown considerably in its aim 'to inform, empower and inspire the public in all matters relating to death and dying, and in particular to increase

¹ François de la Rochefoucauld, *Maxims* (1678) No. 26

² Tony Walter *The Revival of Death* London: Routledge, 1994

³ Walter *Funerals and how to Improve Them* London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1990 p30

awareness of funeral choices outside of the mainstream'.⁴ It played a major part in 'Death Fest', a 'Festival for the Living' at the South Bank Centre in January 2012, in which its stall took its place next to coffins in the shape of electric guitars or convertible cars as an alternative to more traditional shapes. Its *Natural Death Handbook*⁵ has just been released in its fifth edition, providing advice on alternatives to cremation or traditional burial as well as advice on dying with dignity and ensuring that a funeral reflects the individual who has died rather than any imposed belief or value system.

At the heart of the Natural Death Centre's ethos is a postmodern approach to life which wants for each individual a bewildering assortment of cultural references and possibilities that claim to make that individual unique. It does not matter that the original context for coffins in the shape of a beloved object is the elaborate funeral rites of wealthy Ghanaians: the idea can simply be imported into a British funeral because it expresses something of the deceased's individuality. Walter describes this as the 'Sinatra Syndrome' - 'it is not so much that I have decided to do it my way: I am required to'.⁶

Faced with this vast array of choice, a traditional funeral conducted by a religious minister seems a poor alternative. Chapter 2 of this thesis outlines the changing patterns of funerals over the last twenty years in more detail, but it is clear that the changes in funeral practice have been at the expense of religious ceremonies,

⁴ Taken from their website at www.naturaldeathcentre.org.uk

⁵ The Natural Death Centre *The Natural Death Handbook* (5th edition) London: Strange Attractor Press, 2012

⁶ Walter *Revival* p37

particularly those carried out by Church of England ministers. Clergy who have been ordained for over twenty years tell stories of the weeks following their ordination in which their training incumbent showed them how to take a funeral in week one of their ministry and then went on holiday for a fortnight: by the time they returned, the newly ordained curate had taken four more. This is not a pattern that anyone ordained in the last ten years would remotely recognise: there simply is not that number of funerals conducted by the clergy any more. Parish clergy may sigh at this loss of business, but the Church has not taken much decisive action to reverse this trend.

Yet death and religion have been inextricably linked for thousands of years. Thomas Long points to evidence from caves in Northern Iraq dating back fifty thousand years, which suggests that the beginnings of religion may well have been connected with death rites. Surrounding the bones of Neanderthals were found pollen grains, suggesting flowers had been placed around the bodies in tenderness and awe. Similarly, Cro-Magnon graves have been found near Moscow, dating back some thirty thousand years, around which numerous artefacts have been placed which anthropologists have interpreted as indicating some ritual surrounding death. Long does not choose to be too dogmatic on this point, as to which came first, 'the ritual rhythms of death or religious awe'⁷, but argues that death and religion have always been linked: 'the dance of death moves to the music of the

⁷ Thomas G Long *Accompany them with singing The Christian Funeral* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009 p4

holy'.⁸ If the funerals of twenty-first century Britain show that that link is being severed, what response should religious people make to reverse that trend?

Long argues that our funeral practice tells us much of who we are as humans. 'A society that has forgotten how to honour the bodies of those who have departed is more inclined to neglect, even torture the bodies of those still living'.⁹ This is a big claim and Long provides no substantiation for it, yet scandals, such as emerged at Alder Hey Hospital in Liverpool in 1999 over the disposal of body parts reminded society of the duty it owed its dead. It suggests then that a right funeral theology impacts on who we are as people and a society, rather than simply being of interest to those who must deal with funerals and death through professional occupation or forced personal necessity.

Professor Douglas Davies, the Director of the Centre for Death and Life Studies at Durham University describes Christianity as 'the most death-focused of all major religions', having at its theological centre and interpretive key, the death of Jesus.¹⁰ Funerals, then, should be of major concern to Christian ministers because our faith gives us something to say in the face of death. Our beliefs are centred on the death and resurrection of Christ, so that we understand our sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist in relation to them, and our lives as a pilgrimage from baptism to grave. It seems strange then, that our funeral theology and practice is not seen as central to the lives and ministry of Christian priests and pastors, but rather a

⁸ Ibid p4

⁹ Ibid p7

¹⁰ Douglas Davies *The Theology of Death* London: T & T Clark, 2008 p38

specialist subject for those who enjoy occasional offices, to be picked up on the job whilst a curate.

If it sounds curious to say this to the modern priest, it is not least because we have accepted the concealment of death that the twentieth century encouraged. No more would the words of the Litany in the Book of Common Prayer be echoed: 'From sudden death, Good Lord deliver us'. In contrast, a good death for today is described by one commentator as 'a sudden and unforeseen death by stroke or heart failure. How nice for him! we hear people say'¹¹. The swift death that comes suddenly and allows for no preparation, but where death does not linger in the household longer than is absolutely necessary, is seen as infinitely preferable to the death that is slow in arriving, leaving the dying time to put their affairs in order, and make their peace with God and neighbour – the sort of death that the writers of the Prayer Book deemed was the ideal. Philippe Ariès, the French sociologist, in *Western Attitudes towards Death* describes this death as a 'tamed death' which he contrasts with the 'wild death' of modern times where death is in the hands and under the control of hospitals and institutions. It is because of the fear of 'wild deaths' that people have been so relieved when death has come unannounced¹².

Death may have been hidden at a domestic level through the twentieth century, but its history of atrocity and massacre, of civil war, national conflicts and world wars has refused to keep the frailty of life hidden from view. Systematic

¹¹ J M Cameron 'On Death and Human Existence' *Cross Currents* 27: 1 (1977) 249

¹² See Philippe Ariès *Western Attitudes towards Death* Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1974

theologians have been confronted by the spectre of Auschwitz and have been asked how the impassible, glorious, omnipotent God affirmed in Nicene theology can speak to such a situation. German theologians such as Jürgen Moltmann have recast their focus away from the God portrayed in glory for centuries of Christian theology towards the God who hung and died on the cross and asked how such a God can speak today. However, perhaps we should look to an earlier writer than Moltmann: the English poet, Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy, who served as an army chaplain in the First World War. In his poem 'High and lifted up', he writes:

God, the God I love and worship, reigns in sorrow on the tree,
Broken, bleeding, but unconquered, very God of God to me.¹³

Studdert Kennedy wrote his poetry during the First World War in response to the atrocities around him: he is more than fifty years ahead of systematic theologians such as Moltmann, who initially explored similar ideas in *The Crucified God*, published in 1972. Moltmann's assertion that 'only the crucified Christ can bring the freedom which changes the world because it is no longer afraid of death'¹⁴ reminds us that crucified Christ does not only redeem the world, he also shows what God is like.

Although Moltmann is probably the best known amongst Protestant scholars for his focus on the crucified Christ, it is his older Catholic contemporary, Hans Urs von Balthasar, whose work provides the theological framework for this thesis, in particular his work on the three days of Easter, *Mysterium Paschale*.¹⁵ His ideas are

¹³ From 'High & Lifted up' in *The Unutterable Beauty The Collected poems of G A Studdert Kennedy* London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1927 p38

¹⁴ Jürgen Moltmann *The Crucified God The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* London: SCM Press, 1974 p1

¹⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar *Mysterium Paschale* tr Aidan Nichols Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990

outlined in Chapter 4 of the thesis. There are a number of reasons why Balthasar is particularly helpful in an enquiry into funerals.

i. A Christian funeral can best be seen, in the words of one commentator as ‘primarily a remembrance of this person’s death in the context of the Easter event’¹⁶. A theologian whose focus has been on the three days of Easter provides helpful material for reflection – indeed the willingness to engage with the suffering God of Good Friday and the buried God of Holy Saturday provide particularly powerful aids for consideration.

ii. Balthasar’s concentration on Holy Saturday seems particularly pertinent. Edward Oakes describes his work on this day as ‘the central innovation of his thought’¹⁷ and it has particular application in the conduct of funerals. Ever since the Reformation, Protestant theology has tended to stress that funerals are for the living, rather than the dead. As will be seen, one result of this in recent times is that frequently the dead are not even present at the main service, but have been committed through burial or cremation in a private ceremony beforehand. Balthasar’s insight that the final point of redemption of the world took place on Holy Saturday when Christ lay dead, suggests that God ministers to us in death, as much as in life. To say that the funeral is for the living, rather than the dead, undermines this truth.

iii. One of the difficulties that many theologians face with their interpretation of the Crucifixion is that there is implied there a change in the nature of God: the impassible God now takes on suffering at the cross. Balthasar avoids

¹⁶ Paul Sheppy *Death Liturgy & Ritual Vol I : A Pastoral and Liturgical Theology* Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003 p8

¹⁷ Edward T Oakes SJ ‘The Internal Logic of Holy Saturday in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar’ *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9:2 (2007) 184

this error by locating the kenosis of God, not just in the Passion or even the Incarnation, but in the very essence of the Trinity as will be seen in Chapter 4. Separation from a beloved, felt so keenly at death, can then be seen as part of the very nature of God from all eternity.

iv. One of Balthasar's major contributions to theology is his theological aesthetics. In the *Theodrama*, he maintains that theology is worked out in the lives of the praying Church and practising Christians. Given that funerals now are so concerned to focus on the individual who has died – and it will be seen how this does contrast with earlier ages – the dynamic of Theodrama will prove particularly helpful in providing theological tools to engage with this.

v. Despite Balthasar's vast output of academic theology, he never formally taught in the academy. After a brief spell as Chaplain at the University of Basel, he worked as part of the Community of St John and in running his publishing house. Perhaps it was because he was part of a living praying community that he wished his work to be grounded in the lives of ordinary Christians – his desire to be a 'kneeling theologian' is not supposed to be a comment on the piety of his contemporaries, but rather a recognition of the vital place of prayer for all Christians. He bemoans a world motivated by over-activity where an ability to hold both prayer and action together is seen as only achieved as 'the extraordinary attainment of the heroic few'¹⁸: for him all Christian lives, whether in the academy, publishing house, or street, should be patterned in prayer. Not for nothing does Oakes begin his introduction to Balthasar's work with a quotation from Blaise

¹⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar *The God Question and Modern Man* New York: Seabury Press, 1967 p57

Pascal, 'Pious scholars are rare'¹⁹. Yet Balthasar was undoubtedly one. His focus on the praying life of the church makes his insights valuable for a project looking at the practical ministry of the church.

Although Balthasar's focus on Holy Saturday is revolutionary, he does not direct his attention there at the expense of an understanding of Easter Day. The longest chapter in *Mysterium Paschale* – just over 100 pages in the English edition – is devoted to a right understanding of Easter Sunday. He no doubt would have concurred with Moltmann's comment in his later work that 'Easter hope... shines backwards over the graveyards of history'²⁰. If concern is expressed that these theologians had lost the eschatological hope that is central to an understanding of the Resurrection, they are anxious to dispel such concerns. The Psalmist wrote that 'weeping may linger for the night but joy comes in the morning':²¹ it is Balthasar's concern to address the joy as much as the weeping in his writing.

The liturgical response to the three days of Easter is the offering of lament and thanksgiving: both seem suitable themes for a funeral. This thesis will consider in detail the content of funerals in the Church of England – both the formal content offered by the set liturgical texts and also the informal words from music, tributes and readings that form such an important part in most funerals in this country today. An assurance of hope has been at the centre of funerals for centuries and this is complemented today with a right understanding of thanksgiving for the life

¹⁹ Edward T Oakes SJ *Pattern of Redemption: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* New York: Continuum Press, 1994, p1

²⁰ Moltmann *Crucified God* p74

²¹ Ps 30.6 All biblical quotations are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version* Oxford: OUP, 1989

of the person who has died. However, ironically, lament seems curiously absent from funerals - whilst the informal content seems frightened to offer too much that will emphasise grief, there is also little space for it within the formal liturgy. Chapter 6 will consider the theme of lament in more detail, suggesting in particular how the Psalms can offer resources to recover liturgical material that complements the theological material gained from a right understanding of the death of Christ.

Chapter 2: Death and Funerals in Britain

today

A. Introduction

Paul Sheppy, in his commentary on funeral liturgies, observes that rites in the Western world face a crisis. In Britain, and in other Western countries, the typical experience is of 'the twenty minute 'funeral slot' in which the ritual agenda is expected to be completed.'²² The majority of funerals in this country now take place at the crematorium, often situated a number of miles from where the deceased lived, in a building whose architecture owes more to municipal budgets than inspired tradition. The chief pressure on the minister or official conducting the service, as he or she is reminded in large print in notices on the vestry wall, is not to exceed the time limit of the service and thereby cause distress to the family following shortly after with the next funeral.

Tony Walter, writing in 1994, argues that the reasons for this crisis stem from the fact that 'community and religion, the two underlying supports of habitual ways of dying and grieving, are in long-term decline and no longer provide unquestioned authority.'²³ This decline can be traced back thirty years prior to Walter's book, but since 1994, its effect on the way that funerals are carried out has been marked. Increasingly services are now taken by civil celebrants who may well be the Registrars in the main town near to where the deceased lived and where the death

²² Sheppy *Death Vol 1 p1*

²³ Walter *Revival p22*

was registered, rather than a local minister: indeed, they may come from even further away. The content of funerals has changed radically with services now focusing much more on looking back on the life of the deceased, rather than offering any hope for the future after death. The vast majority of services taken by civil celebrants and humanist ministers are conducted at the crematorium, rather than a more local building. According to official Church of England Statistics for 2009, even the clergy in the Province of Canterbury carried out more funerals solely at the crematorium, rather than at the church first, followed by a crematorium or cemetery committal: in the Province of York, church services still have a small majority.²⁴

There are, of course, positive developments in the way funerals are conducted. Many crematoria have responded well to this increased demand, increasing the time given for each service from twenty or thirty minutes to forty-five minutes, or building a second chapel to ease waiting lists for services. The experience of many people who choose to have a service conducted by a civil celebrant is that the service felt much more personal. The Institute of Civil Funerals has as its mission statement to provide funerals that are 'driven by the wishes, values and beliefs of the deceased and their family, not by the beliefs or ideology of the person conducting the funeral.'²⁵ That often accords well with what people think ought to happen at a funeral. In Tony Walter's book, *Funerals and how to improve them*, he argued cogently for 'person-centred' funerals, which took as their starting-point the celebration of the person's life, rather than focusing solely on reading the liturgy set

²⁴ *Church Statistics 2009/10* Archbishop's Council London: 2011 p26

²⁵ From the website of the Institute of Civil Funerals www.iocf.org.uk

for the time of death. Walter helps train those who work as civil celebrants, and undoubtedly their advent as officials trained to assist families in leading funerals has provided people with more choices. Many families feel that they are 'not religious enough' to ask a local vicar to carry out the service, but would like to say the Lord's Prayer or listen to a setting of 'Ave Maria', which they would not be able to do with a humanist official. It is to be hoped that a clergyperson would not make anyone feel that they need to be more religious to use his or her services, but nonetheless, the possibility of another official to take the service need not be seen by the church as a negative development.

How has the church responded to the changes that have occurred in their funeral ministry? Services conducted by ministers today are much more likely to be more personal to the life of the deceased. The liturgy set in the Church of England Book of Common Prayer, which a previous generation of mourners would have encountered, made no provision for any homily or eulogy in the service: the new service in Common Worship makes it clear that a sermon should be preached. Most clergy would use that opportunity – if no other tribute has been paid – at least to outline the facts of the deceased's life and draw on memories provided to them. The practice of ministers on 'crematorium duty' has all but ceased – where it operated, a minister would conduct all the funerals on a particular day and might only meet the family of the deceased at the door of the crematorium chapel.

However, there has been complacency about the clergy's role at funerals, which is only now being addressed. It is no longer the case that the vast majority of funerals

conducted in this country are carried out by religious officials – this is a development that has taken place in the last decade, as will be explored below. In 2012, the Church of England announced a Funerals project, similar to its Weddings Project which took place two or three years previously, to carry out research into why people wanted church funerals, and what could be done to promote them. As a step taken from the centre to engage with local realities, this is to be welcomed.

This chapter will explore changes in attitudes towards death and the conduct of funerals that have taken place over the last twenty years or so. In 1994, Walter wrote that ‘where the crematorium duty minister does not have the personal touch, it is an appalling final statement for someone who has spent his life carving out a little bit of individuality from the mass society and fails those survivors who wish to hang on to some remnant of that individuality.’²⁶ The landscape has changed considerably since then and these changes will be considered below.

B. Attitudes towards Death

Not all commentators agree that there has been a revival in interest in death as Walter argues. It is undoubtedly true that there has been a flourishing of subjects studied in the academy: the whole field of death studies is a burgeoning one, with journals such as *Mortality*, representing input from a wide range of disciplines. In an article on undertaking research on cemeteries, Kate Woodthorpe notes that much of the academic studies is based on empirical research, but is mainly focused around dying and end-of-life care, together with bereavement support. Her own

²⁶ Walter *Revival* p22f

subject of cemeteries, has been neglected²⁷: the same could be argued for funeral ministry. However, at a popular level, it is hard to maintain that there has been any great revival in interest. Writing from an American perspective, Thomas G Long comments that 'death in (American) culture is a mixture of taboo and terror For some Americans, death is more like pornography, endlessly fascinating whilst at the same time forbidden.'²⁸ This sense of guilty fascination or frightened ignorance is also true in this country – to admit to study the subject is likely to bring a response of nervous laughter, or a quick change of topic.

If Walter points to the decline in religion as a major factor in provoking the crisis in supporting people at the time of death, he also argues that the role that religion had preserved was a vestigial role from one that had declined since the Enlightenment. He comments that 'the Age of Reason shifted death from the frame of religion into the frame of reason, from the frame of sin and fate to the frame of statistical probability. The job of the public official is not to pray over the corpse, but to register, categorise and sanitise it'.²⁹ However, people still do want religion to play its part at the time of death: in earlier research that I carried out into my own funeral ministry, the main reason that people gave for wanting a vicar to conduct the funeral was that it was the right thing to do and they wanted a Christian funeral.³⁰ The key question for consideration by the church is whether that desire is in decline: the statistics outlined below certainly suggest it is.

²⁷ Kate Woodthorpe 'Reflecting on death: the emotionality of the research encounter' *Mortality* 14:1 London: Routledge 2009, p71

²⁸ Long *Accompany them* p22

²⁹ Walter *Revival* p9

³⁰ Kings College London MFS Study by Jeremy Brooks 'The Right Way to Say Goodbye: Clergy Funeral Ministry in Hoddesdon 2002-2006'.

The Age of Reason brought death into the hospital and out of the local community. Funerals were organised no longer by the local carpenter and minister, but increasingly placed in the hands of professional funeral directors. In a traditional society, death is present within the community and religion has prime authority in dealing with it: in a modern society, death is removed and it is medicine that reigns. There is no need to look back with nostalgia at a previous era: advances in medicine and pain relief brought many benefits to those who were dying. However, with these advances has come increased bureaucracy and an impersonal attitude to dying. This sits most uneasily in today's age which celebrates individualism and there has been a desire to regain control. Walter argues that with postmodernity, or a neo-modern way of looking at the world, it is the self which has the greatest authority. No longer is the community or the hospital the central focus for the place of death: it is the individual themselves, with the opportunity for the private place of death to be made public through the internet and instant access to all.³¹

This desire to regain control has manifested itself over the last forty years in a number of different ways. Elizabeth Kübler Ross's work *On Death and Dying*, first published in 1969, was revolutionary in suggesting that there are five stages of dying experienced in general terms: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Many therapists have built on her work since that time. Similarly, the modern hospice movement led by Dame Cicely Sanders has transformed attitudes towards palliative medicine in this country. Walter comments that it is no surprise

³¹ Walter *Revival* p47

that the two leading evangelists of changes in the way we view death were both women. He suggests that medicalisation led to masculinisation, which seeks to control through abstract systems. Liberation can only come through 'women (or patients) giving their own concrete, unedited stories'.³² It is no coincidence that the majority of hospices in this country are staffed overwhelmingly by women – perhaps it even links back to the traditional society where matters of death, and indeed birth, were the domain of the women in the community. Perhaps the development of the hospice movement was an inevitable consequence of the increasing role of women in the workplace, where male ways of operating were no longer sufficient. It is surely noteworthy, also, that it is women in the gospel narrative, who intend to play the chief role in Jesus' burial rites, and thus, it is they who are the first witnesses to the resurrection. Now that women can be ordained to public ministry in many Christian denominations in this country, they are also having a greater impact in the taking of funerals.

The acceptance in public discourse that the individual should have autonomy has led to increased concern in this country over the prohibition at law of assisted suicide and medical euthanasia. High profile cases such as Diane Pretty in 2001 and more recently Debbie Purdy in 2009, have brought to the public's attention medical cases where it seems wrong that a person cannot choose to end his or her own life. In both cases, the women were suffering from terminal illness – Pretty from Motor Neurone Disease and Purdy from multiple sclerosis – and wished to have the right to choose the time of their own deaths. However, due to their

³² Ibid p70

condition, they would need the assistance of their husbands to kill themselves. In both cases, they sought a ruling from the courts that their husbands would not be prosecuted for assisting another to commit suicide under the Suicide Act 1961. Pretty lost her case in 2001, but by 2009, the House of Lords was prepared to overturn this earlier decision and grant that immunity. Most commentators described it as a victory for human rights, and despite the defeat of Lord Joffe's Assisted Dying bill in 2006, a change in the statutory law in the near future seems likely. In the Scottish Parliament, the independent MSP Margo Macdonald – herself suffering from multiple sclerosis – had her attempt to bring in an Assisted Suicide bill defeated in December 2010: a little over a year later in January 2012, she had raised the matter again at Holyrood, convinced that there was public support for the move. The medical profession is overwhelmingly opposed to this move: in previous eras this would have been enough to convince people that they should be too. In the postmodern era, it seems baffling to many people that a person should not have the right to choose when they should be able to die, and the views of doctors should not affect this.

At the heart of the modern philosophy to dying is the right to 'die with dignity' – by calling itself Dignitas, the Swiss organisation that helps the terminally ill to die in a flat in Zurich has put itself firmly on the 'right' side in popular opinion. The discovery of over 300 cremation urns, dumped in Lake Zurich, from the crematorium used by Dignitas to cremate those who have died, raises the question

of how much dignity it is prepared to offer the dead³³ – Thomas G Long’s comments on the judging of a society by the way it treats its dead seems pertinent here. Indeed, one of the aims of the modern hospice movement, rooted as it is in Christian thought and teaching, is to allow people the right to die with dignity, although it is firmly opposed to any form of assisted suicide. It maintains that dignity can be ensured through the proper administration of pain relief, and the high level of care and support that hospices offer. Long is less sure that dignity is an appropriate word to apply at the time of death: ‘death often steals dignity, and Christians don’t stop loving and caring for people when there is little dignity left... Any idea that death – cold and unmitigated death – can be ‘spiritual’ is Platonic wishful thinking’.³⁴ Far more important than whether death can be dignified is the notion that life is sacred and that sacredness ‘is a divine gift, and it can be never taken away, even when the old thieves, disease and death, pillage us of our dignity’.³⁵ Long’s view is one that is squarely at odds with the notion of the autonomy of the individual, but it does express an important Christian viewpoint in the face of death. Balthasar’s insights from his theological aesthetics – considered in Chapter 3 - suggest that it is love that is the key consideration here: indeed, that may well be an easier notion for society to accept than the sacredness of life. One of the painful consequences of advances in modern medicine is that people are able to live with disease far longer than in former times and the release that many seek in death is delayed far longer than it would have been in previous generations.

³³ See for example, a press article of the story from April 2010 at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/switzerland/7641989/>

³⁴ Long *Accompany them* p27

³⁵ *Ibid* p26

C. Changes in Funerals in Britain today

With this focus on the individual, it is unsurprising that many have turned their attention to the funeral itself and noted its deficiencies. The importance of a personalised and individualistic experience of death and the funeral is key. The anthem for today's approach to mourning and the funerals could be said to be Michael Rosen's poem:

Don't tell me that I mourn too much
And I won't tell you that you mourn too much
Don't tell me that I mourn too little
And I won't tell you that you mourn too little
Don't tell me that I mourn in the wrong place
And I won't tell you that you mourn in the wrong place
Don't tell me that I mourn at the wrong time
And I won't tell you that you mourn at the wrong time
Don't tell me that I mourn in the wrong way
And I won't tell you that you mourn in the wrong way
I may get it wrong, I will get it wrong, I have got it wrong, but don't tell me.³⁶

Rosen's poem was written following the death of his son, and captures well the mood that people feel – what is most important to them at the time of grief is what they feel themselves, and the funeral should allow that unique sorrow to be expressed. There is nothing inherently at odds with the Christian story here – if every life is sacred, then each life can and should be cherished and celebrated at a funeral – but it is a long way from the type of service envisaged by the Book of Common Prayer.

There are three central changes that have taken place in the conduct of funerals in the last fifty years, and more specifically in the last twenty, which have had a very big impact on the general nature of funerals. These are the venue where the

³⁶ Michael Rosen 'don't tell me that I mourn too much' from *Carrying the Elephant* London: Penguin 2002

funeral takes place; the personnel carrying out the funeral; the content of the funeral. All three have had a large impact on the Christian nature of the service: much has been written by commentators on the third of these, slightly less on the first, but little on the second, the personnel carrying out the funeral. A recent press release from the Church of England acknowledged that the number of clergy-led funerals had dropped by 19% from 2002.³⁷ It is extraordinary that so little has been made of such a large drop in only eight years, and it remains to be seen whether the national project set up on funerals has come too late to make a difference.

1. The venue of the funeral service

By 1968, there were more cremations each year in England and Wales than there were burials. By 1988, 70% of all those who had died were cremated, rather than buried: this figure has remained relatively steadfast since that time, with Davies estimating that in 2000, about 72% of corpses were dealt with by cremation³⁸. However, when cremations first became widespread in this country, the practice was still for the main part of the service to take place in a local church or chapel, with only the committal happening at the crematorium. The twenty or thirty minutes provided by the crematorium was ample time to deal with this small part of the service. However most services now take place in their entirety at the crematorium³⁹. More time has been given by crematoria staff for this, but it nonetheless marks an important shift of thinking. No longer is the funeral service

³⁷ See the British Religion in Numbers website at <http://www.brin.ac.uk/news/2011/the-ways-we-say-goodbye/> for the press release

³⁸ Davies *Theology* p128

³⁹ In my local crematorium, the Chilterns Crematorium in Amersham, statistics show that in less than 20% of funerals conducted, there is a separate service elsewhere in a church or other building before or after the committal at the crematorium. This statistic is likely to be replicated across the country

for the deceased held in the midst of the community where he or she lived: even when there is a crematorium in the deceased's home town, it tends to be a mile or two away from the town centre. At the heart of the Church of England's ministry in this country is the notion that it is geographically based – wherever you live in the country, you live in a parish of the Church and every parish priest includes amongst their parishioners those who live in the parish, rather than simply those who worship in the church. The significance of place is beginning to be recognised by theologians such as John Inge:⁴⁰ by this removal of the place of funerals from the parish church to the municipal crematorium, the mission of the church is in a small way diminished.

This change reflects much broader changes in society. In a country that is increasingly urbanised, it is not possible to view communities in the same way. Parish boundaries can seem a curious anachronism in a city and it is no surprise to mourners that a death may need to be registered at some distance from where a person lived, and further, that the cremation will also take place at a distance. Similarly, the professionalisation of the care of the elderly may well mean that a person will end his or her days many miles from the home where they lived for the majority of their lives. Any sense of the importance of place is undermined by bureaucratic structures and modern life.

Set against the diminishing significance of the parish church at the time of death as a focus for grief has been the rise of All Souls Remembrance Services for many

⁴⁰ John Inge *A Christian Theology of Place* Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004

churches. These services are now held in many churches of varying churchmanship and theological persuasion and are often some of the best attended services of the year. Those bereaved families whose relative's funeral was conducted by the clergy in the last year, or last three years, are invited and many come, whether or not they are regular attenders at the church. These services mirror the annual remembrance events held by many local hospices in which a candle can be lit for a loved one and are a good reminder of the need to revisit memories of a loved one in a formal liturgical setting, long after the funeral has taken place. With the rise of All Souls services has also come a more relaxed view in many churches on remembering the dead in weekly intercessions. The hardline positions that were fought between those who made much of praying for the dead and those who would never mention them again by name in a prayer seem to have been somewhat relaxed along with the recognition that remembering the deceased amongst the communion of saints provides liturgical support to those who mourn. Chapter 3 argues for a renewed understanding of the relationship between the communities of the living and the dead in the West, and the popularity of remembrance services underlines the pastoral and missional opportunities a right understanding brings.

Hilary Grainger describes crematoria as 'paradigms of modernity' and in those places where there is a cross on display, they jostle for prominence with the chimney of the cremators.⁴¹ The buildings themselves cannot carry the burden of relieving pain or giving meaning, in a way that church buildings can do for

⁴¹ Hilary Grainger 'Overcoming 'an Architecture of Reluctance': British Crematoria' in ed Peter C Jupp *Death our Future Christian Theology and Funeral Practice* London: Epworth, 2008 p117

communities: only the mourners can invest the funeral service itself with meaning. The loss of the use of churches as places to remember at the time of funerals should trouble the church as much as the loss of funerals conducted by clergy themselves.

However, the practice of cremation challenges Christian theology on a deeper level than simply one of place. Philippe Ariès described it as 'a desire to break with Christian tradition; it is a manifestation of enlightenment, of modernity.'⁴² As far as the modern service is concerned, Davies comments that 'cremation poses questions for a Christian theology of death that often pass unasked.'⁴³ At the heart of these questions is our understanding of life beyond the grave: is this best understood as the resurrection of the body or the immortality of the soul? Traditionally, those religions or societies which have used cremation have rejected any notion of the resurrection of the body: it has been practice for centuries in Hinduism, with its stress on reincarnation, and was the chief means of disposal in classical Roman and Greek cultures, where Platonic notions of the immortality of the soul held sway.

Davies traces the discussions within Christianity between those who held on to the Platonic view of the immortality of the soul and those who maintain that the resurrection of the body is the true interpretation of the faith. It is certainly not as straightforward as thinking that orthodox Christianity has always upheld the latter view – the Fifth Lateran Council of 1513 affirmed a belief in the immortality of the

⁴² Ariès *Western Attitudes towards Death* p91

⁴³ Davies *Theology* p134

soul as representing true Catholic dogma. A number of notable Anglican theologians have argued strongly that it is the resurrection of the body that most closely articulates a Christian perspective on the afterlife: the gospel accounts paint a portrait of a transformed, risen body of Christ following Easter Day, and it is right then that we consider him to be the first fruits of those who rise from the dead, and that we too will be given transformed, risen bodies. William Temple in his Gifford Lectures in 1932 expresses it thus: 'Man is not immortal by nature or right; but he is capable of immortality and there is offered to him resurrection from the dead and life eternal if he will receive it from God and on God's terms'.⁴⁴ The theory of cremation need not undermine this, but its practice offers a message that indicates the body can be disposed of because it is of no significance in the after-life.

The view of many Anglicans of the afterlife illustrates this well. In a series of debates on cremation between 1937 and 1944, the Church of England concluded that the practice of cremation held 'no theological significance'.⁴⁵ Speakers were anxious to stress that God omnipotent was capable of creating new resurrection bodies from the ashes of the fire as He was from the decaying bodies of the dead. Peter Jupp points out that William Temple himself was cremated on his death in 1944, and his predecessor, Cosmo Laing, followed his example two years later⁴⁶. However, the symbolism that pertains to the destruction of a body by fire has ensured that a different message is understood in the pew. In a survey carried out by Douglas Davies and Alastair Shaw in 1995 of the beliefs of Anglicans and

⁴⁴ William Temple *Nature Man & God* Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1934 p472

⁴⁵ See Davies *Theology* p137

⁴⁶ Peter Jupp *From Dust to Ashes: The Replacement of Burial by Cremation in England 1840 – 1967* The Congregational Lecture 1990 London: The Congregational Memorial Hall Trust Limited, p19

Catholics into the afterlife, only 4% of Anglicans maintained a belief in the resurrection of the body: 33% argued for the immortality of the soul. 32% believed that death was simply the end of existence, with no life beyond.⁴⁷

Despite the theological ambiguity that cremation offers, all mainstream Protestant denominations in the West accept its practice, and the Roman Catholic church has done so for nearly 50 years. Some theologians have questioned its acceptance⁴⁸, but certainly in this country it is now the majority practice which church ministers have accepted, without questioning too much the underlying theological assumptions behind it.

Davies argues further that there is an asymmetry between burial and cremation that the Church has not provided for adequately in its liturgy and thought. At burial, the body is interred in the ground, in the presence of the mourners and that is the final event for the mourners: the body has now been decently disposed of. Furthermore the symbolism of burial is clear – summarised best in God's words to Adam after the Fall in Genesis 3: 'You are dust and to dust you shall return'.⁴⁹ However, committal at a crematorium is more complicated. Although they are legally entitled to, it is unheard of for mourners to wish to view the actual cremation, and therefore if the symbol at the heart of a cremation is fire, it is a hidden symbol.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Davies *Theology* p141

⁴⁸ See for example John Lampard *Theology in Ashes: How the Churches have gone wrong over cremation* London: Methodist Sacramental Fellowship, 2007

⁴⁹ Genesis 3.19

Furthermore, the committal to the flames is not the final act: there are ashes that are left over to be disposed of. In his research on cremation, Davies surveys the final destination of cremated remains taken from data gathered in 1986. 57% of all remains were strewn in the crematorium grounds, 15% were interred in crematoria remembrance gardens, 4% placed in graves or niches, 22% taken by the deceased's representatives, and 2% held, pending further instructions from the family.⁵⁰ The only time that the Church would provide any liturgy for the disposal of those ashes would be amongst the 22% returned to the deceased's families, who then went on to request that the ashes be interred in a church or cemetery memorial garden. However, many of the people in that category would scatter the ashes without further ceremony, or simply keep the urn on the mantelpiece or in the bathroom cabinet at home. The cremated remains are the most important focal image of cremation, yet there is no liturgy attached to them and the symbolism of ashes is lifeless and without hope. The symbol of a corpse going down into the ground provides hope insofar as Jesus himself had a corpse which was buried, but there can be no future hope attached to ashes.⁵¹

Natural Burial: The rise of the alternative ceremony

The first natural burial ground in Britain was opened in Carlisle in 1993: less than twenty years later, there are over 200 such grounds listed, though often they are no more than a section of a municipal cemetery. Burials that take place at such places are often referred to as 'woodland burials', though often the grounds are still open fields, in which trees are being planted to represent each burial that takes place

⁵⁰ Douglas J Davies *Cremation today and tomorrow* Nottingham: Grove Books Ltd, 1990 p8

⁵¹ Davies *Theology* p143

there. Over half of the sites are run by the local authority and many are part of an existing cemetery; the remainder are privately managed. In 1994, the Association of Natural Burial Grounds (ANBG) was established by the Natural Death Centre and a number of natural burial grounds belong to the ANBG. With the rise of ecological awareness in Britain, and a desire to seek environmentally friendly solutions to many aspects of life and death, there has been a sharp increase in the use of natural burial grounds. Indeed, there are more natural burial grounds in this country than crematoria, although far fewer ceremonies are performed there.⁵²

There has been very little academic discussion on the rise of natural burial grounds. Andrew Clayden and Katie Dixon provide some history and background on woodland burials in Britain in their article in *Mortality*,⁵³ but there is little other literature on the subject. It does seem to lend itself, however, to giving rich resources for theological reflection. Douglas Davies points out the symbolism of the dust of death becoming the dust of life as trees are planted alongside and nourished by the decaying corpse – further, the oft-used description of the cross as the tree on which Jesus hung and that tree of judgement thereby becoming the tree of hope and life also offers theologians and liturgists strong links to make⁵⁴.

⁵² The best source of information about natural or woodland burial sites in Britain appears to be the website of the Natural Death Centre at www.naturaldeath.org.uk. I am indebted to Peter Taylor of the Chiltern Woodland Burial Park for information and guidance on woodland burials

⁵³ Andrew Clayden & Katie Dixon (2007): 'Woodland burial: Memorial arboretum versus natural native woodland?', *Mortality*, 12:3 (2007) 240-260. I am also aware that in July 2012 a new book from the Centre for Life and Death Studies in Durham is to be published entitled *Natural Burial: Traditional-Secular Spiritualities and Funeral Innovation* by Douglas Davies and Hannah Rumble. I have not had the opportunity to engage with this particular text in my thinking

⁵⁴ See Davies *Theology* p118

Despite all these links, there has been no Christian liturgy written in this country for woodland burials, and their openness to people of all faiths and none can mean that they are viewed with some suspicion by clergy. In 2002, the Diocese of Ely opened the Arbory Trust, which describes itself on its website as ‘the first Christian woodland burial charity’⁵⁵, but a distinctively Christian presence seems otherwise absent from the world of natural burials.

If environmental awareness has led to a desire for a greener way of burial, greener alternatives to cremation have also been developed. In 2007, a company was formed in Scotland called Resomation Ltd, using a process whereby the body is immersed in a water and potassium hydroxide solution. The heat required for resomation is only some 180° Centigrade rather than several hundred degrees, and it is claimed that greenhouse gases are thereby reduced by some 35%. The body is reduced to white powder similar to ashes, and a thick liquid which can then be disposed of in various ways, including by means of drainage. According to the website of Resomation Ltd, it is still awaiting the approval of patents before it can be made available in this country⁵⁶. Undoubtedly, this process suffers from an image problem whereby it can be seen as though body remains are simply washed down the drain.

Another process known alternatively as promession or alternatively cryomation, has also been developed whereby the body is effectively freeze dried, before being disposed of through shallow burial, which decomposes within 12 months. Claims

⁵⁵ See www.arborytrust.org

⁵⁶ See www.resomation.com

are made for this that the reduction in pollution over traditional cremation is some 80%⁵⁷. Cryomation and resomation are both very new technologies and have not had a real impact on the way that bodies are disposed of, but this is likely to change in the next ten to twenty years. If the church engages with the issues as little as it has for natural burials, it will be seen as irrelevant to the discussion.

2. The officials conducting funerals.

Twenty years ago, the vast majority of funerals in England took place in the local church, with a short committal service at the crematorium, or less frequently the cemetery, afterwards; or were conducted in their entirety at the crematorium by the crematorium duty minister for the day. When Walter wrote his 1990 book on funerals, the practice of 'crem duty' for local clergy was still prevalent: often the officiant conducting the service had not met the family at all before the service began and little effort was made to personalise the service for the family. Small wonder, perhaps, that Ken Livingstone found 'Church of England funerals ...about as moving as the checkout at a supermarket'.⁵⁸

Grace Davie, writing in 1994, uses the fact that 'it is still relatively rare for an English person to die without some form of religious ceremony'⁵⁹ as evidence of the ongoing place of religion in Britain today. It supports her argument that there is still a place in Britain for 'vicarious religion', where the church and its members hold on to the memory of faith and religion on behalf of the community. It is a notion

⁵⁷ www.promessa.org.uk and www.cryomation.co.uk provides more information on this system of body disposal. See also the *Natural Death Handbook* p106

⁵⁸ Quoted by Walter *Funerals* p9

⁵⁹ Grace Davie *Religion in Britain since 1945 Believing without Belonging* Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1994 p56

that had been outlined over twenty years earlier by Bruce Reed in *The Dynamics of Religion*. Using insights from social psychology, he suggests that religious people often have a representative task for others, who never go to church themselves, but for whom it is important that their friend does ⁶⁰— put crudely, this is the ‘say one for me’ phenomenon. He also identifies a vicarious role for religion where the symbols of the faith, particularly its buildings hold great significance for the wider community: they may not use the building themselves for religious purposes, but it is extremely important to them that they are there. As the crematorium has replaced the church as the main venue for funerals, this vicarious role is in danger of being lost altogether.

In line with most commentators, Davie does not offer any statistics to support her assertion that the majority of funerals were still conducted by clergy: indeed little research had been done in this field. Douglas Davies, in his study *Cremation Today and Tomorrow*, draws on two research projects, the Cremation Research Project and the Rural Church Project. Both studies were undertaken in the late 1980s. The former project was conducted in Nottinghamshire and asked, among other questions, who should conduct funerals. Of the responses given, 73% said that they preferred clergy to conduct services. The highest support was given amongst rural communities, where the figure was 87%; a suburb surveyed produced the lowest figure here of 61%⁶¹.

⁶⁰ Bruce Reed *The Dynamics of Religion* London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1978, p56f

⁶¹ Davies *Cremation* p17

In the Rural Church project, a survey was taken from five dioceses – Durham, Lincoln, Southwell, Gloucester and Truro. Here, 85% of the respondents felt that clergy should conduct funerals. When people were asked specifically if they would accept other officials, such as undertakers or crematorium staff conducting funerals, about 25% of respondents said that they would. This figure is the same, whether or not the respondent was a member of a church electoral roll. When clergy in the Diocese of Southwell were asked this question, only 5% were against the idea, with a further 27% unsure.⁶²

Davies reflects on these figures firstly by acknowledging that ‘currently clergy conduct the very great majority of funeral rites’: for the 25% of the response group who could envisage having a non-ordained official conduct the service, there would have to be ‘a major change of custom’⁶³. This change of custom has fast come about since these surveys. As long ago as 1989, Tony Walter wrote of crematorium managers who witnessed families who did not want a clerical funeral so sat quietly listening to music or conducted the funeral themselves. Such managers believed that ‘if there was someone to help them organize a non-clerical funeral, the demand would increase substantially.’⁶⁴

The national picture is very different now. The Church of England’s own figures suggest that parish clergy now conduct less than 40% of all funerals carried out in England. The extent of this change has not been fully appreciated by many

⁶² Ibid p18

⁶³ Ibid p18

⁶⁴ Tony Walter ‘Secular Funerals’ *Theology* Vol XCII (1989) 394

commentators. Peter Jupp quotes the humanist commentator Simon Allen who calculated that in 2007, humanist services and those conducted by civil celebrants accounted for less than 0.5% of all funerals in the UK⁶⁵ - far too few to sound any alarm bells with the church.

In 2009, the Co-Op funeral service carried out a survey of funerals that it had directed entitled *The Ways We Say Goodbye*⁶⁶. Each year it conducts about 100,000 funerals every year. Of these, about 10% were conducted as humanist ceremonies, either by an official minister, or by a member of the family; and a further 25% were described as 'contemporary', led by a civil celebrant, inspired by the desires of the family, rather than by any particular belief or ideology. Already it can be seen that these figures show a much greater diversity of types of funeral conducted than commentators had traditionally allowed for. The assumption that clergy conduct most funerals looks to be increasingly untenable. The Co-Op's figures are certainly the most recent accurate data, but informal conversations with undertakers and crematorium staff suggest that the trend away from funerals conducted by religious ministers has only increased. The Funeralcare research confirms what most parish clergy have experienced whereby they conduct fewer and fewer funerals.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Peter C Jupp 'The Context of Christian Funeral Ministry today' in ed Peter C Jupp *Death our Future Christian Theology and Funeral Practice* London: Epworth, 2008

⁶⁶ Co-Operative Funeral Care *The Ways we Say Goodbye* – published online at www.co-operative.coop/Funeralcare/PDFs/Ways%20We%20Say%20Goodbye%20Brochure.pdf

⁶⁷ I am grateful in particular to Messrs Powells of Hoddesdon, Hertfordshire and Messrs Arnolds of Beaconsfield, together with the staff at the Chilterns Crematorium, Amersham, for their assistance in my research.

Part of the difficulty that researchers had in assessing how many funerals were conducted by the clergy is that the Church of England did not collect or publish nationally any accurate data prior to 2000. Given that most of the funerals in England were carried out by Church of England ministers, this was a serious drawback and researchers could only rely on the anecdotal evidence of local undertakers, crematoria and cemeteries.

Since 2000, the Church of England Statistics department has provided a more accurate picture. Figures are available for individual dioceses from 2001 with the proportion of funerals in that diocese given from 2004. The national figures to 2009, the most recent year available, are as follows:⁶⁸

Year	Total deaths	Clergy-led funerals	
2000	501,300	232,600	46%
2001	496,100	228,000	46%
2002	499,100	224,800	45%
2003	503,400	227,100	45%
2004	481,500	212,500	44%
2005	481,800	207,200	43%
2006	472,700	199,300	42%
2007	472,900	194,300	41%
2008	478,000	188,000	39%
2009	461,500	176,660	38%

The confidence in the prevalence of clergy-led funerals at first glance certainly appears to be ill-placed. There has been a decline in the number of funerals conducted by parish clergy, year on year: if it continues at the rate of 1% per annum, the clergy role in funerals will become as marginal as it is for weddings and baptisms. However, given that these figures present such a different picture from

⁶⁸ Statistics available at <http://www.churchofengland.org/about-us/facts-stats/research-statistics.aspx>

the common perception of the prevalence of clergy-led funerals, further questions should be asked of the statistics.

Some regional variations could account for part of this: looking at the specific figures for 2009, this can be seen. The figures for Bradford and Blackburn, areas with large Asian communities are 26% and 32% respectively. In urban dioceses the figures are particularly low: only 18% of funerals in the London diocese were carried out by Church of England ministers in 2009, and dioceses such as Southwark, Manchester, Liverpool and Birmingham are also well below national averages. Only Hereford diocese had a figure approaching 2/3 of all deaths at 63%: there are only seven dioceses out of forty-three in total where the figure is 50% or more.

The picture painted by these statistics suggests that already the Church of England is only conducting a minority of funerals in England and that most people are opting for a non-religious ceremony. Two further factors, however, should be borne in mind:

- a. The number of funerals conducted by other Christian denominations and other faiths. In some areas, such as Bradford or Leicester, funerals conducted according to the rites of other faiths are likely to be significant in number. As far as other Christian denominations are concerned, it is unlikely that in most parts of England and in the nation as a whole, they would make up more than 10% of the total.
- b. There are undoubtedly large numbers of Church of England funerals conducted which are not reported back to the central statistics office. The

statistics are based on parochial annual returns, so only record the funerals undertaken by parish clergy. However, if a parish priest is unavailable to take a funeral, local undertakers will often use retired clergy or non-parochial clergy. Similarly if the deceased died in a hospital or a hospice, where strong relationships had been established with the chaplains there, they may have been asked to conduct the funeral. They are under no duty to account to dioceses for fees paid, or make annual returns so no record is kept of funerals undertaken in these circumstances.

In its preparatory paper for the 1998 General Synod Debate, the Churches' Funerals Group estimated that about 70% of funerals were conducted by Church of England ministers.⁶⁹ If the official statistics produced for 2000 show a figure of 46%, this suggests that some 20% of funerals conducted by Church of England clergy go unrecorded. With the advent of civil celebrants, it is likely that there is a drop off in those figures too – say to 15%. On this analysis, the best that can be said for 2009 was that about 53% of funerals were conducted by Church of England ministers – hardly the overwhelming majority that most commentators seem to imagine.

The problem with the role that retired and other non-parochial clergy play in funerals is that they frequently have little or no links with the geographical community from which the person came. There may also be little opportunity for ongoing pastoral care for the family. The increase in All Souls Services has already been noted with its recognition for the need for liturgical remembrance beyond the

⁶⁹ *Good Funerals* GS Misc 539 available at <http://www.christianfunerals.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/06/good-funerals.pdf>

funeral of the one who has died. Some churches also have bereavement support groups too which provide ongoing support to those whose loved ones have died. These are by no means ubiquitous, but if the priest who conducted the funeral has no local network, the possibility of such ongoing support does not exist.

The church may be happy to affirm that it still carries out a majority of the funerals in England, but if this makes no difference to the families concerned beyond the funeral itself, it is hard to see of what benefit this is to them. Davie's notion of vicarious religion may mean that it is sufficient that the church is there to carry out the office when needed, but if what is offered does not offer ongoing comfort to those who mourn as well as resurrection hope in the time of death, the church has not advanced much beyond the days of crematorium duty ministers. The role of vicarious religion becomes even more precarious if the church is only baptising a quarter of all infants, conducting less than 50% of all marriages, and only just over 50% of all funerals.⁷⁰

Further, if 15 – 20% of all funerals conducted by the Church of England are now conducted by ministers who are not primarily parochial clergy, this does undermine the geographical self-understanding that the Church of England has. It confidently boasts that everybody in the land is entitled to use the services of its clergy for the occasional offices, based on where they live, but with the one occasional office

⁷⁰ Davie's notion of vicarious religion does look extremely tenuous the further away from her book that we get. It has been much criticised – see for example 'Vicarious religion: an examination and critique' by Steve Bruce & David Voas *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 25:2 (2010) 243 - 359

where the majority of people still do use the Church of England, the link with any sense of geography is fairly tenuous or non-existent.

A close inspection of the true picture of funerals in this country reveals a much more complicated picture than most Christian commentators allow for. Clergy may still conduct the majority of funerals in this country, but their share of funerals seems to be decreasing every year. And when many of the funerals are conducted by clergy who have no ongoing link with the family through the parish system, the role of the church in the bereaved families' lives is even more marginal than it would ordinarily be. Davies' research in the 1980s showed that having a minister to conduct the funeral was still 'the right thing to do', and indeed the author's own limited research in 2008 confirmed this same point. However, it is not an assumption that is shared by those who shape policy, and the advent of civil celebrants is likely to make an increasingly large impact in the years ahead. Perhaps there is a parallel with weddings here: 20 years ago, the perception amongst brides was that the church was 'the right place to get married': this perception is much rarer to find nowadays.

In January 2002, the Government published a White Paper entitled *Civil Registration: Vital Change*⁷¹ which paved the way for non-religious funeral services to be carried out by civil celebrants. Many people found the idea of a humanist funeral unattractive, as although they were not particularly religious, they still liked the idea of singing a hymn, or saying the Lord's Prayer together. In July 2004, the

⁷¹ HMSO *Civil Registration: Vital Change Birth, Marriage and Death Registration in the Twenty-first century* London: Cm5355

Institute of Civil Funerals was formed as a result of 'the need to drive upwards the quality of funeral ceremonies in the UK by furthering the provision of Civil Funerals and supporting the work of Civil Funeral Celebrants'.⁷² It offers its own training courses, to which experts such as Tony Walter contribute, and provide accreditation for individuals who wish to officiate at funerals as celebrants. Initially, a number of Registrars of Births, Deaths and Marriages became involved in carrying out these duties – from a clergy perspective, it is difficult not to conclude that, since Registrars will see families before even the undertaker, they are in a strong position to suggest that they help the family by carrying out the role of funeral celebrant as well. Notions of the 'quality' of a funeral may sit uncomfortably for the church, with its connotations of market provision – it is difficult to see how this can accurately be measured. However, such a word will undoubtedly resonate well with those who use the services of celebrants.

The Institute of Civil Funerals currently has about one hundred and twenty members, and keeps accurate records of all the funerals that the members take each year. In 2010, they conducted about four thousand funerals. This still represents less than 1%, but the figure is growing every year. It is likely that the British Humanist Association, with three hundred and fifty members who conduct funerals, carry out a similar number, but there are many more funerals carried out by people affiliated to no such organisation. This should raise concerns about standards and quality of care provided, but there is no requirement for a civil

⁷² Taken from the Institute website at www.iocf.org.uk/about.htm

celebrant to belong to any co-ordinating organisation⁷³. The Co-op's research suggests that there were some 150,000 funerals carried out in England in 2009, which did not involve a religious celebrant. This figure is in stark contrast to the figures suggested by Simon Allen, quoted by Peter Jupp above.

Walter, in a paper in *Mortality*, argues that the West has adopted over the years, three different approaches to funerals: a commercial model, such as is adopted in the USA, a municipal model, such as in France or Italy, and a religious model, such as in Sweden, where many of the functions that we would perceive to be carried out by the state are undertaken by the Church. He argues that in Britain, there is a genuine mixed model, with all three of the approaches intermingling: a commercial undertaker acts as funeral director, the state is involved in registration and providing the crematorium, but the service is still carried out by a religious minister⁷⁴. However, with the advent of civil celebrants, it is clear that the religious approach will be diminished. So far, there has been no real research on the impact of civil celebrants on funerals in England: as they continue to provide a good service for mourners, it is likely that they will become increasingly prevalent and the Church of England will be called upon less to carry out funerals. Walter's premise is based on market analysis – this is undoubtedly a shift away from the presumptions of the Church, but towards the accepted presumptions of many in society. The Church need not accept that the market is the right model for understanding

⁷³ I am grateful to Mervyn Pilley, Chief Executive of the Institute of Civil Funerals who has provided me with the statistics quoted here

⁷⁴ Tony Walter 'Three ways to arrange a funeral: Mortuary variation in the modern West'. *Mortality*, 10 (3), (2005) p186

funeral provision, but if it does not even engage with the analysis, it is likely to find that its services will be called upon less often.

There still appears to be an assumption amongst many clergy that they have the right to carry out funerals for people in their parish. Resentment runs high when the topic turns to whether or not they are consulted by undertakers before the time and date of a crematorium funeral is booked. Jupp comments that 'some clergy have yet to learn that ... funeral directors are technically and legally in charge'⁷⁵ rather than the clergy themselves. Clergy might resent the fact that a time for a funeral is arranged before they have the chance to say whether or not they are available, but if a family expresses the understandable need for some certainty, the undertaker cannot be blamed for acceding to that request. The clergy merely act as sub-agents of the funeral director. If the experience of mourners is that civil celebrants will provide a good service, and funeral directors find them more co-operative to work with, it is unsurprising if the numbers of people using them will only increase in the years ahead. The church should be able to show that it has something distinctive to offer at the time of death: something that is different from civil celebrants and so it is to the content of funeral services that we should turn now.

3. The content of funerals

The essayist Anatole Broyard in his memoir about dying with cancer, *Intoxicated by my Illness*, commented that 'once we had a narrative of heaven and hell, but now

⁷⁵ Jupp 'Context' p13

we make our own narratives’⁷⁶. This echoes well with the purposes of the Institute of Civil Funerals, but it also reflects what many people want from their funeral, whether conducted by a Christian minister or not. A Christian funeral, however, should be able to proclaim a gospel narrative alongside the person’s story. As will be argued below, this is best done in the presence of the body: the trauma and sorrow of death, represented by the coffin is met with the good news of Easter. There is some evidence, however, to suggest that many Christian ministers have forgotten, or feel disempowered in knowing how to articulate this in the context of a funeral. The public may still express a desire for a Christian funeral, but, it is clear from looking at the sorts of services provided, both locally and more nationally, that what constitutes a Christian funeral, as far as the content of the service is concerned, is not as straightforward as clergy would like to believe. Indeed, it often seems as though the church itself does not understand what it means by this. In 1998 the General Synod of the Church of England staged a debate on funerals. Bishop Geoffrey Rowell, Chair of the Churches’ Funerals Group commented afterwards ‘We have just spent 40 minutes debating the Churches’ funeral ministry. Yet not one speaker has spoken of the central Christian contribution to funerals, our Lord’s resurrection from the dead.’⁷⁷ Similarly when Walter asked ordinands whom he was teaching on what resources Christian ministers could draw upon in helping the deceased, they talked exclusively of all they had learnt over their three years in college about pastoral theology and care of the bereaved: ‘I have yet to hear a student refer to the sections in Christian Doctrine that deal with the

⁷⁶ Quoted in Thomas G Long ‘Telling the truth about death and life: Preaching at funerals’ *Journal for Preachers* 20: 2 1997 p10

⁷⁷ Quoted by Jupp in ‘Context’ p16

Resurrection'.⁷⁸ If ordinands do not make those connections in training, their disempowerment is fixed from their earliest time of ministry.

Perhaps because ordinands and clergy have been so concerned with the care of the bereaved, they have welcomed a change in emphasis in funerals from the prospective hope of salvation to a retrospective celebration of the life of the deceased. There has been a great concern that the official liturgies that the Church of England provided were far too impersonal, and the service was adapted to redress that balance. It was not until 1965 that the deceased was mentioned by name in the liturgy: reference was always to 'our brother'.⁷⁹ Paul Sheppy acknowledges that today we would find this far too remote, yet we keep death as remote as possible: in 16th and 17th Century Britain, death was an intimate neighbour, but the individual identity of the deceased became lost.⁸⁰

Few clergy still use the Prayer Book rites for the burial of the dead and modern liturgical revisions have allowed for a much more personal service. The possibility of a sermon, which could include a tribute to the deceased, moves in successive liturgical revisions from 'a sermon may be preached' in the Alternative Service Book of 1980 to 'a sermon is preached' in Common Worship in 2000. In the ASB, the deceased was to be named at the commendation, and a vicar following the rubric carefully could avoid mentioning the deceased by name up to this point. In

⁷⁸ Walter *Funerals* p98

⁷⁹ See Trevor Lloyd 'The Church of England's Common Worship Funeral Services' in ed Jupp p165

⁸⁰ Paul Sheppy *Death Liturgy and Ritual Vol 2 A Commentary on Liturgical Texts* Aldershot: Ashgate 2004, p33

Common Worship, the deceased is named in the opening exhortations to the congregation.

As far as the official liturgies used, then, much has been done to address concerns of commentators such as Walter on the impersonality of the service. The liturgists who created Common Worship also made another significant change to the options available to families, though many would question how beneficial this change was. The Book of Common Prayer provided liturgy which spread over about 10 pages: the liturgical provision in Common Worship extends to 188! Despite the numerous options, Nick Watson points out that the Common Worship provision never manages to say that the person is dead!⁸¹ There are long sections of alternative prayers to say, different commendations to use, alternative services to be used with the death of a child. Sheppy compares the breadth of this provision with the liturgy of the Scottish Episcopal Church which was advised by the bereavement expert Colin Murray Parkes. In its modern rites of 1987, Sheppy writes, the church 'managed to achieve their purpose in a small booklet of twenty-two pages that could be kept in an officiant's coat or cassock pocket. Such brevity has not commended itself to those drafting succeeding funeral liturgies'.⁸²

The death and funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales in 1997 is described by Sheppy as having had 'an international effect'.⁸³ Commentators who wrote before that time, such as Walter, make frequent reference to the impersonal nature of

⁸¹ Nick Watson *Sorrow and hope: preaching at funerals* Cambridge: Grove Books Ltd, 2001, p10

⁸² Ibid p49

⁸³ Sheppy *Death Vol 1* p9. At a recent meeting of undertakers and clergy which I attended in the Diocese of Guildford, all the undertakers agreed that things seemed to change overnight from Diana's funeral.

funerals: writers since 1997 point to all the ways in which services have become more personal. And yet, ironically, as Sheppy points out, what the public saw of the ceremonies surrounding Diana's death was 'everything but the funeral rite and the coffin'.⁸⁴ The funeral rites themselves were conducted in private at the Spencer family chapel. But it is the event in Westminster Abbey, which was more akin to a memorial service that many people wish to emulate with their own loved ones' funerals. What was remembered was not the Christian nature of the service but the other more secular contributions: indeed, Sheppy comments that 'the Archbishop of Canterbury's prayers felt like an intrusion into a showbiz event'⁸⁵. Elton John's reworking of 'Candle in the Wind' opened people's minds to the possibility of secular music being included as part of the service, and Earl Spencer's tribute to his sister has made it commonplace for a member of the family to feel that they ought at least to try and say a few words on the day. It is rare now in a bereavement visit to plan a funeral to encounter a family who have not at least considered playing a favourite piece of music before, after or during the service: the surprise is when they feel that the piece ought to be religious. Similarly, whilst many families do not feel able to give a tribute, there is a sense of shame and embarrassment amongst them that they cannot do so. Sheppy contrasts three funerals which all took place around the turn of the century and were all televised: Princess Diana, Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother, and Basil, Cardinal Hume. The other two funerals followed much more closely the set Anglican or Roman Catholic liturgy, but it is Diana's that has had the greatest impression in changing

⁸⁴ *ibid* p101

⁸⁵ *ibid* p101

perceptions on how funerals ought to be carried out.⁸⁶ Sheppy finds the reasons for this in people's perceptions of what the funeral is all about: 'most of our contemporaries do not see death as the gateway to eternal life, and so look to the funeral to provide a means of summing up the past'.⁸⁷

There is nothing 'unChristian' about mourners wishing a funeral to be personal and to make reference to the life of the deceased. However, it does seem that what is meant by wanting a Christian funeral is limited to wanting the vicar to do it: the important parts of the service are shaped much more by individual taste for particular readings and music. People may still have a belief in the supernatural and so want the clergy to stand with them at the funeral, but the content of belief exhibited at the service should represent the deceased and their family much more than the vicar and the church which he or she represents. Indeed, a retrospective focus is more bearable because meaning can be found there – as Sheppy comments, 'for the vast majority of mourners, death is dreadful because no meaning can be attached to it.'⁸⁸

If the task of the Christian minister at a funeral is to present the person's life in the light of the Resurrection of Christ, clergy are divided on the difference it made to those who died with no expressed faith. Long puts both viewpoints carefully. On the one hand, suggesting that 'putting the weight of God's intent to redeem creation on a series of personal choices is something like the man in a cottage on

⁸⁶ I have also received many requests for the poem recited at the Queen Mother's funeral which begins 'You can shed tears that she has died, or you can smile that she has lived'

⁸⁷ Sheppy *Death Vol 1* p103

⁸⁸ Sheppy *Death Vol 1* p59

the coast of Normandy in June of 1944 as the Allied forces swept along the beaches, thinking he had to choose whether to be liberated or not.’⁸⁹ He cites Jurgen Moltmann in support of this view, but is also careful to offer an alternative view which argues that ‘a sweet and easy universalism itself fringes on the freedom of God (God *must* redeem every human being, because, after all, that’s what I would do)’⁹⁰. Again, he is able to call on notable modern theologians such as Miroslav Volf in support of this position.

Nick Watson considers the first of these interpretations of the effect of Christ’s death as little more than ‘a sort of compulsory heaven for all’ which he believes is contrary to the gospel message⁹¹. Those clergy who try and resist the first of these are simply seen as insensitive and unkind. Wesley Carr maintains that it is important not to offer theological hope that cannot be justified. So to the question ‘will I see my loved one again, when I die?’, ‘pastoral sensitivity and theological perception both demand a gentle ‘No’.’⁹² Again, this may be an example of good theology – though Scripture is notably silent on the form of life hereafter – but it sits uneasily with the modern tendency to pull together a smorgasbord of belief to provide comfort and easy reassurance. Nonetheless, there is strong theological support for seeing Christ’s death as representative and affecting the whole of humanity. Those conducting the funerals of people who never acknowledged the effect of Christ’s death on them personally need not feel that they are denying the faith by continuing to offer hope of redemption.

⁸⁹ Long *Accompany Them* p54

⁹⁰ Ibid p55

⁹¹ Watson *Preaching* p8

⁹² Wesley Carr *Brief Encounters Pastoral Ministry through the Occasional Offices* London: SPCK, 1985 p113

A second pitfall which Watson identifies is to go along with a view of 'death is nothing at all' which so many bereaved families cling to, despite feeling the most dreadful loss. This is hard to avoid when the family request particular favourite readings and music. The words wrenched from a sermon by Canon Henry Scott Holland that now form the poem 'Death is nothing at all' offer false comfort to the family, and are hardly consistent with the resurrection hope of the New Testament. Scott Holland preached these words as part of a sermon, entitled 'The King of Terrors' at St Paul's on the death of Edward VII. In it, he contrasts the rage and sense of impotence which greets us at bereavement with those times when we feel that 'death is nothing at all'. However, it is only the latter of these two emotions which are described in the popular reading and suggests a worldview which is completely at odds with anyone who is grieving. J.M. Cameron remarks that 'In the Christian and Jewish traditions death has always been terrible, something that reveals the distance between God and man and man's dereliction; and it is therefore thought to be something that in some obscure sense ought not to happen'⁹³. Scott Holland's words are the non-Biblical reading that is most often requested by families for a service, and pastoral sensitivity makes it extremely difficult to deny the family's request that this be read, but clergy should certainly be aware that it presents a different view of death from that offered in the Christian tradition. Indeed, it rarely expresses what the family is actually feeling, but rather what they believe they ought to feel.

⁹³ Cameron 'On Death' *Currents* 27 No 1 Spring 1977 p246

Funerals are increasingly now subtitled as a celebration of a person's life, or a thanksgiving, and there is pressure to focus on thanksgiving, rather than giving space to grieve. Ewan Kelly quotes a poem by Roger McGough which offers a corrective to this:

I don't want any of that
'we're gathered here today
To celebrate his life, not mourn his passing.'
Oh yes you are. Get one thing straight.
You're not here to celebrate
But to mourn till it hurts.

... so get weeping. Fill yourselves with dread.
For I am not sleeping. I am dead.⁹⁴

Sometimes the focus on thanksgiving masks an unwillingness to engage with grief and Kelly is surely right to insist that part of the priest's role is to ensure that he or she does not collude with this unwillingness.⁹⁵

The changing content of most funerals today is not simply due to a change in official liturgy. In 1984, the Daily Telegraph carried a report on the role of the crematorium chapel superintendent and officiant as joint arbiters of what was allowed to be played as music at a cremation: it reported an instance of 'Bridge over Troubled Waters' being banned⁹⁶. It is impossible to imagine a situation where this would occur today in a crematorium, though some clergy will still insist that no such tracks may be played in the church, whether as part of the service or as entrance or exit music – secular tracks were to be kept strictly for the crematorium. Such an attitude, however, is relatively rare amongst clergy. Nowadays, the family may be

⁹⁴ Roger McGough 'I am not sleeping' p44 *Selected Poems* London: Penguin 2006

⁹⁵ Ewan Kelly *Meaningful Funerals Meeting the theological and pastoral challenges in a postmodern era* London: Mowbray 2008, p139

⁹⁶ Quoted by Brian Parsons 'Music at Funerals: the challenge of keeping in tune with the needs of the Bereaved' in ed Jupp p208

willing to sing a hymn as part of the service, but it is often Frank Sinatra singing 'My Way' as they leave the crematorium that provides them with their real inspiration. Such music frequently takes the place of hymns in providing meaning for mourners. It is not that such poems or songs cannot be used to illustrate gospel truths – though even the most inventive preacher would struggle to make 'My Way' compatible with the gospel of grace – but simply that funeral services today often have at their heart words that do not find their root and meaning in the Christian faith. Clergy cannot therefore assume that they will instinctively be able to hold such services together.

The Protestant confusion over for whom the funeral is conducted has not helped. In the years following the Reformation, Protestant theologians argued strongly that the funeral was for the bereaved, not the deceased. There was no longer any need to offer last rites: the fate of the dying was determined by a decision to accept faith in Christ, rather than on the ceremonies of the church⁹⁷. This attitude has pervaded much thinking to this day. One of the leading text books on the occasional offices used by ordinands in their training for a generation has been Wesley Carr's *Brief Encounters*, and in it, he maintains simply that the funeral is for the mourners, not the deceased.⁹⁸ This follows the pattern established from the Reformation when the focus of the funeral shifted from working to ensure the salvation of the deceased, to comforting the bereaved and warning them of the need to attend to their own salvation. By focusing on the bereaved rather than the dead person, one

⁹⁷ See Susan C. Karant-Nunn, *The Reformation of Ritual: An Interpretation of Early Modern Germany* London: Routledge, 1997, 138-89 for a discussion of changing attitudes towards the funeral

⁹⁸ Carr *Brief Encounters* p115

consequence noted in the opening chapter is that it has seemed increasingly unnecessary for the dead person actually to be present at the funeral! Frequently, it is committed Christians, who seem to prefer this option in order to stress the resurrection hope whilst not wanting to upset the congregation by the sight of a coffin.

Walter argues that it tends to be the professionals, rather than the bereaved themselves, who believe the funeral is for those who mourn. He points to a British survey that was carried out, asking what the most important aspect of the funeral was. Answers from the professionals tended to focus around the bereaved, whilst families and friends of the dead tended to focus, in opposition to Carr, on the deceased.⁹⁹ There does however appear to be a contradiction for those families who think that the funeral is for the deceased, but still would prefer that they were not present in their coffin at the service: perhaps it ought to be the role of the officiating minister to provide pastoral guidance to see this contradiction and allow the coffin to return to the main service.

In 1965, the Liturgical Commission of the Church of England found five purposes in the funeral:

1. To secure a reverent disposal of the corpse.
2. To commend the deceased to God.
3. To proclaim the glory of the risen life in Christ here and hereafter.
4. To remind us of the certainty of our own death and judgement.

⁹⁹ Walter *Funerals* p117

5. To make plain the eternal unity of Christian people in the risen Christ.¹⁰⁰

It considered adding the comfort of the bereaved as an additional point, but felt that this came through in all these points. However, what is clear from this list is the sense that a funeral is not simply for the bereaved, or indeed for the deceased: it is there for both.

The Churches' Funerals Group discussion paper *Guidelines for Best Practice for Clergy at Funerals*¹⁰¹ identifies three roles of the clergy – theological, liturgical and pastoral. It is notable that included in the liturgical purpose is 'offering a tribute to their life'¹⁰² – this would certainly not have been seen as part of the liturgical role in earlier times. Indeed, in drawing up a list of purposes for today's funeral, it would be impossible not to add 'to offer a retrospective view of the deceased's life': this is as true of services conducted by clergy as it is of secular and humanist services. Indeed, clergy seem much more at ease with this purpose than they do reminding people of the eternal hope of resurrection in Christ.

Ewan Kelly offers a notable example of the liturgical purpose of the clergy in *Meaningful Funerals*. He argues that it is the role of the minister conducting the funeral to be a 'co-constructor' of the service with the bereaved and cites one example where 'neither I, nor any of the other participants, mentioned God, possibilities of an afterlife, or any other religious belief or affiliation For me, the Lord was implicitly a large part of not only the funeral, but also that which had

¹⁰⁰ Quoted by Sheppy *Death* Vol 1 p10

¹⁰¹ Available at <http://www.christianfunerals.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/06/guidelines-for-best-practice.pdf>

¹⁰² Ibid p5

informed its mode of construction.’¹⁰³ It is hard to see how such a funeral offers any prospective hope to the mourners: is the Church carrying out its task sufficiently in proclaiming the Good News if God is not mentioned? The only inkling mourners would have of his presence is the acknowledgement that the official taking the service is a religious representative. For Kelly, it is enough that religion is still connected with death, and quotes the historian David Starkey, himself a committed atheist, who wanted a Christian minister for his father’s death as a reminder of the ‘musical, half-comprehensible sonorous language, and triggering memories of Grandma’s prayer book. I couldn’t care less about whether I believed in the resurrection of the dead: that’s what I wanted’.¹⁰⁴ But this holding on to past memories is something that will fade away within a generation: the Church must find a more longer lasting reason for conducting funerals than that.

The role of the minister must be more than simply representing a tradition that brings back memories of a former generation. According to Walter, he or she is there to conduct the drama of a funeral liturgy. He comments that psychologically, the main purpose of a funeral is to remind us that the person is dead. This may seem trite and self-evident, yet if the readings talk of the triviality of death or suggest to the mourners that ‘I am not dead, I did not die’,¹⁰⁵ - or even when the opening words proclaim that ‘whoever lives and believes in me will never die’ - the reminder is all the more necessary. The Christian understanding of the gospel is that we must know the awfulness of Good Friday in order to experience the joy of

¹⁰³ Kelly *Meaningful Funerals* p118

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in *ibid* p163

¹⁰⁵ Concluding line to the popular poem read at funerals ‘Do not stand at my grave and weep’, by Mary Elizabeth Fry

Easter Day: the role of the minister is to articulate the faith that the mourners doubt they have, but would like to have, whilst also holding the trauma of the event with the bereaved.¹⁰⁶ This is a much more profound role for the minister than simply being there to provoke memories of a bygone age.

Sheppy's theological framework of a Christian funeral being set in the context of the Easter event is a helpful focus and hardly contentious: the main part of this thesis is concerned with working out how that should take shape for a Christian funeral. However, he recognises that there is a tension here:

To allow all the family requires may obscure the Christ whose death encompasses all human death. To deny the family may equally obscure the Christ who came not for the righteous but for sinners – of whom the Church is, of course, comprised.¹⁰⁷

This neatly encapsulates the dilemma felt by sensitive clergy as they have tried to plan a funeral with families who want a Christian funeral but whose main concern has not been with proclaiming resurrection hope, but with celebrating a life which, in their eyes, was well lived.

This analysis fits well with a Christian understanding of the funeral that offers hope to the bereaved through the resurrection of Christ. It also challenges those funerals of church members where the coffin is dealt with privately and only witnessed by immediate family before a Service of Thanksgiving takes place in church without the coffin. This longing to proclaim the good news of Easter Day may be commendable,

¹⁰⁶ Walter *Funerals* p125

¹⁰⁷ Ibid p8

but it overlooks the pain and chaos of Good Friday and Holy Saturday which should also be acknowledged in a Christian funeral.

Are Christ's death and resurrection central to funerals conducted by Christian ministers? It is difficult to find evidence for this. Undoubtedly, the set liturgy proclaims the resurrection from the opening words, but if these words are so obscured by the readings and tributes given, the liturgical words will not be remembered. Civil and humanist funerals explicitly set out as their purpose a retrospective celebration of the deceased's life, but a Christian funeral has a prospective purpose too. It is difficult to maintain with conviction that the prospective focus of a Christian funeral, which proclaims the good news of hope for all and God's judgement and mercy is not overwhelmed by the desire of the family to maintain a retrospective focus, concentrating on the life of the deceased and all that he or she meant to them.

D. Conclusion

The British way of death has changed dramatically over the last half-century, much of the change occurring in the last twenty years. Some of these changes can be accounted for by the move in society from modernity to a postmodern, or neo-modern outlook on life. The undisputed place of medicine and science is being challenged and the rights of the individual against society and against any other rights are given priority.

The rise of cremation in Britain is more in line with modernity's obsession with technology that can eliminate the decay that nature enjoins upon its world. In this country, many would argue that it is in an inevitable consequence of living in a crowded island, where there is simply not space to bury everyone. Walter rejects this notion, citing the fact that there are more cremations every year in Canada than there are in Belgium: in the small, overcrowded European country, they simply choose to re-use burial plots, an idea which is only just beginning to find favour in this country¹⁰⁸. Whatever the reasons, it is most unlikely in this country that people will turn their back on cremation in favour of burial. Perhaps the challenge that the church needs to address is how to ensure that the symbolism of cremation can be used to speak of the future hope of resurrection and to ensure that its mission, based as it is on a theology of place, rooted in the parish, is not undermined by crematoria located several miles from the community.

The statistics on who conducts funerals paints a confusing picture. The official statistics of the Church of England and the Institute of Civil Funerals account for only a little over 40% of all funerals: anecdotal evidence suggests a further 15% taken by clergy. If funeral ministry is important to the Church of England's mission, it does seem key to try and investigate further this discrepancy.

As far as the content of funerals is concerned, it does seem as though, in Long's phrase, the clergy have lost 'their eschatological nerve'¹⁰⁹ in holding firm to a future hope of risen life. Few would argue that we should return to services which

¹⁰⁸ Walter *Funerals* p21

¹⁰⁹ Long *Accompany them* p73

seemed completely impersonal, without reference to the deceased, yet clergy should have confidence in proclaiming the prospective purpose of the funeral too, whilst also giving space for grief felt at the impact of a loved one's death.

Whilst Christianity's ministers may have lost their nerve when speaking of the death and resurrection of Christ, its systematic theologians have found a new vigour over the last fifty years. Theologians such as Balthasar, as well as Protestant theologians like Moltmann and Kazoh Kitamori¹¹⁰ have offered a new understanding of God rooted in the crucifixion of Christ. It is an understanding that gives voice to suffering and takes seriously the death of God. In doing so, it provides tools to the Christian minister to recover confidence as he or she ministers to those who have experienced the death of a loved one.

¹¹⁰ See in particular Kitamori's work *Theology of the Pain of God* London: SCM Press Ltd, 1966

Chapter 3: Death in Christian understanding

The work of these theologians on the Crucifixion and Resurrection has had a major impact on the understanding of God that has developed in theology over the last fifty years. A full analysis of Balthasar's contribution will be explored in Chapter 4. However, if Davies is right that Christianity is the most death-centred of all of the major religions, then points of contact that will be helpful in understanding funerals can be found in many other places. This chapter will consider some of these other points of reference.

A. Death in Christian worship

1. Biblical understandings of death

Long distinguishes three distinct voices towards death in Scripture, distinguishing between individual death, death as a mythic force, and death in Christ, suggesting that we understand this best when we distinguish between death and Death.¹¹¹ The individual death is something that we will all encounter and is simply a statement of our mortality. The undertaker and poet Thomas Lynch describes this universal statistic somewhat wryly as 'THE BIG ONE' – in any town, large or small, there is a one hundred percent death expectancy.¹¹² This awareness of our own mortality, according to Long, generates human creativity and faith, whilst also giving us the anxiety of impermanence, stimulating rebellion against our mortality through delusions of immortality, or leading us inwards into despair: 'in short,

¹¹¹ Long *Accompany them* p38

¹¹² Thomas Lynch *The Undertaking Life Studies from the Dismal Trade* London: Vintage, 1998, p5

awareness of our mortality both prompts us to wisdom and prompts us to sin'.¹¹³ Where our society sees a gaining of wisdom from contemplation of mortality – as can perhaps be observed in the response to the recent autobiography of Philip Gould¹¹⁴ – it pauses wistfully and wonders how such wisdom is to be attained in the horror that permeates its general attitude towards death. Such wisdom is also lived out in the small lives of faithful Christians, who approach dying with confidence and trust in their Lord. Any parish priest can give examples from their own congregation.

However, it is a mistake to think that this should be our only attitude towards death. Long identifies a different reality from our own individual deaths: Death as a mythic force. This death comes to us, never as a friend, but as an alien and destructive force, described by St Paul as 'the last enemy'¹¹⁵ and it is the enemy of God's intention. It is Death that is represented as entering the world in the Fall of Genesis 3 and it is of this death that St Paul asks, 'Who will rescue us from this body of death?'¹¹⁶ 'Human life', Long comments, 'is bounded by mortality, by small-d death, and savaged by the voracious appetite of our old enemy, capital-D death'.¹¹⁷ It is useful in funeral ministry to keep these two types of death in mind. When we are bidden to remember that 'death is nothing at all', or when faithful Christians fear to mourn the loss of a beloved fellow Christian, the role of the priest here is to remind us that Scripture has a more respectful – and more damning – attitude towards death. Christ's wrestling in the Garden of Gethsemane suggests that it

¹¹³ Long *Accompany them* p38

¹¹⁴ Philip Gould *When I Die: Lessons from the Death Zone* London: Little, Brown, 2012

¹¹⁵ I Corinthians 15.26

¹¹⁶ Romans 7.24

¹¹⁷ Long *Accompany them* p40

held a more powerful grip in his mind too. Similarly, it is possible for a believer to approach his or her own death with peace, whilst acknowledging the awfulness of death for those left behind.

At the heart of St Paul's theology is a desire to point to Christ as an answer to his question on who will be his rescuer from death. But the surprising route by which our rescue is effected is through the midst of death itself. In the previous chapter of Romans, St Paul sets this out: 'if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him'.¹¹⁸ It is this that represents Long's third voice in Scripture towards death, death in Christ. We live in Christ because we have died with him. This perspective has shaped the whole of Christian history and thought.

2. Funerals in the early church

Long traces the attitudes of Christians towards death from its earliest days in the Roman Empire. Its Jewish heritage ensured that burial was the means of disposal, in contrast to the preferred Roman practice of cremation: as Christianity gained in influence, the Romans too started to revert to their earlier practice of burial¹¹⁹. However, what is striking about early Christians' attitude towards death, in contrast to their neighbours, is their willingness to deal with the corpses. Whilst Judaism had elaborate rituals for laying out the bodies, they were nonetheless seen as unclean, whereas for Romans the bodies were simply to be disposed of as quickly as possible. Christians in Rome came to prominence, not simply for burying their own dead, but also for being willing to bury the poor who had died with no one

¹¹⁸ Romans 6.8

¹¹⁹ Long *Accompany them* p60

prepared to take responsibility for this. Concern had been expressed amongst educated Romans in the first century that the bodies of the poor were being allowed to fester, or simply be dumped in a common pit, but only the Christians were prepared to give them a decent burial. The prevailing influence of Platonism ensured that educated Romans held to a view that it was the soul that remained of importance beyond the grave, and those Christians who insisted on giving honour to corpses, were fleeing from more enlightened ideals.¹²⁰ However, the fact that Christians were prepared to put right the social ill of bodies dumped in a common pit earned them grudging respect, even whilst they were considered ill-educated and unenlightened. If society is now scandalised when dead bodies or body parts are not treated with respect, it gained that sensitivity not least from its Christian heritage.

Although the early Church stood out in its attitude towards the dead from its Roman neighbours, it did nonetheless borrow ideas from pagan rituals. When wealthy Romans died, a coin was often placed under their tongue as a fare for Charon, the ferryman of the dead, for passage to the next world. This idea was taken up by Christians who acknowledged the journey that the dead would make, not to the world of the dead, but into the arms of God. Rather than a coin being placed there, the Eucharistic host was placed under the tongue as a viaticum to the dying to provide nourishment as they journeyed to God. In contrast to the night-time processions of the Romans, Christians carried their dead in the day and replaced the black and red robes of mourning with white robes, the garments of

¹²⁰ Ibid p30

baptism and resurrection. The faithful would give the deceased the kiss of peace on the forehead or cheek, the same symbol of forgiveness and reconciliation that took place at the Eucharist. After the body had been placed in the ground, the mourners would share a Eucharistic meal around the grave or in the home afterwards.¹²¹

What seems significant in the customs of the early church is that its funeral rites consciously pick up references to its other worship and in particular the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist. The mourners' white robes as a reminder of the deceased's baptism, the eucharistic host in the viaticum, the words used in the service, the kiss of peace and indeed the celebration of the Eucharist after the burial has taken place: all point to a ritual whose theology is enmeshed in the whole practice and liturgy of the church. It is not so easy to see the same points of reference in Church of England funerals today.

3. In the midst of life we are in death

If the Christian life is a pilgrimage from baptism to grave, or font to catafalque, it is possible to see a theology of death at many moments in that journey. In his study, *The Theology of Death*, Douglas Davies traces the influence of thoughts of death at many moments in the Christian life and journey – in marriage as much as in baptism, and in the Eucharist¹²². However, it is in baptism as a rite of passage that we see the themes of death and life brought together first in the Christian pilgrimage. Baptism is not simply a thanksgiving for births, or a declaration of faith:

¹²¹ Ibid pp 66 - 71

¹²² See Davies *Theology* chapter 3 and pp159ff for detail

it is a burial with Christ in his death that the baptisand might rise with him in life.

The prayer over the water which precedes the baptising of the child in the Common

Worship rite makes this clear:

We thank you Almighty God for the gift of water
to sustain, refresh and cleanse all life.
Over water the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation.
Through water you led the children of Israel
from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land.
In water your Son Jesus received the baptism of John
and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah, the Christ,
to lead us from the death of sin to newness of life.
We thank you, Father, for the water of baptism.
In it we are buried with Christ in his death.
By it we share in his resurrection.
Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit.
Therefore, in joyful obedience to your Son,
we baptize into his fellowship those who come to him in faith.
Now sanctify this water that, by the power of your Holy Spirit,
they may be cleansed from sin and born again.
Renewed in your image, may they walk by the light of faith
and continue for ever in the risen life of Jesus Christ our Lord;
to whom with you and the Holy Spirit
be all honour and glory, now and for ever. Amen.¹²³

The Old Testament motifs of water as the source of life in creation, and liberation at the Exodus are joined by water as the cause of death. Candidates for baptism are buried with Christ in his death, that they might share in his resurrection. Water is symbolic now, not just of life and liberation, but death itself. However, in that death comes the source of life: until we experience the death of baptism, we cannot know the life that joining with Christ in his death brings. From the start of our Christian pilgrimage, we are taken down into the waters of death in order that we might know the hope of resurrection in our life too.

¹²³ *Common Worship Holy Baptism* London: Church House Publishing, 2000

The significance of this moment for the Christian pilgrim has long been acknowledged. In his study on Martin Luther's baptismal theology, Jonathan Trigg highlights the importance for Luther of the once for all moment of baptism as well as its significance in the daily pilgrimage. The first begins when 'the baptisand is plunged beneath the water (at least symbolically) and is raised up from it' but the right use of baptism only becomes clear when the converted man begins the process of submerging the old man beneath the waters of baptism as a daily practice. 'Where faith is present, the *significatio* of baptism stamps its character upon the whole life of the Christian, who has to learn, experience and practice what the slaying of the old Adam means'.¹²⁴ Similarly what is seen in the theology of the great Church reformer is lived out in the practice of churches throughout the world. Long gives the example of an African American Baptist congregation in Louisiana which gathers each year by the shores of the Ouachita River to baptise new converts¹²⁵. Its members describe the point in the river where this happens as 'the old burying ground': this eloquently grounds their practice in a right understanding of death and baptism. In a different context and place, it says precisely what the Common Worship liturgy says in the ritualised baptism of infants in ancient fonts: in baptism, 'we are buried with Christ in his death'.

Alongside an acknowledgement of death at the start of our Christian pilgrimage, there has also been in past centuries an ease with those who have actually died— an ease which has all but disappeared in the Western church today. Robert J Hoeffner cites Hippolytus in the third century whose vision of the church was of a ship on a

¹²⁴ Jonathan D Trigg *Baptism in the Theology of Martin Luther* Leiden: E J Brill, 1994, p94f

¹²⁵ Long *Accompany Them* p79

stormy sea in which the dead and living were aboard together and there was a continued relationship across the waters of death. In this understanding, which remained until medieval times, 'death was not an end to life, but a change in the manner of living'.¹²⁶ Hoeffner cites a number of the Church Fathers, including Cyprian, Ambrose and Augustine in support of the solidarity that existed between the living and the dead. It is a solidarity that began to be lost in the Middle Ages where it was replaced with a fear of hell which the rise of individualism in the Modern period has only accentuated: the prime concern has become for the fate of the individual, rather than our common journey within the Body of Christ.

It is significant that African thought, where Christianity has flourished over the last one hundred years, has kept a strong sense of communal identity. It has preferred its own definition of personhood as 'I am because we are' to the Cartesian maxim of 'I think therefore I am' accepted in the West. It has also maintained much stronger links with the dead through its veneration of ancestors: Leopold Senghor, the Senegalese poet, and the first President of an independent Senegal, wrote of how the living and the dead were joined by a tender bridge – '*un pont de douceur*'. It is an idea that would have resonated with Hippolytus.¹²⁷

As well as being aware of the community of the dead, previous generations were encouraged to live in the knowledge of their own deaths with educational aids such as the *Ars Moriendi* literature of the fifteenth century onwards. In it, a scene was

¹²⁶ Robert J Hoeffner 'A Pastoral Evaluation of the Rite of Funerals' *Worship* 55:6 (1981) p484

¹²⁷ Likewise, the Mexican festivities surrounding *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) on All Souls Day show a similar attitude

set between Satan and the dying Christian and the tempter offers various reasons why the Christian should fear for his death, and the respondent similarly is able to outline the reasons why his faith in Christ's death gives him confidence. Long comments that 'the *Ars Moriendi* devotional practices built upon and helped to form Christian virtues: faith in the teeth of the fear of death, hope in the face of despair, patience in the midst of the struggle, and enjoying this world and the life given by God without clinging desperately to it'¹²⁸ The desire to die a good death was enjoined upon Christians and in their lives they were to prepare for it.

Long suggests that modern Christians may not be attracted to the notion of *Ars Moriendi* literature¹²⁹ but Davies points to one modern phenomenon which could claim to replace it: the Hell House. This is a dramatic recreation of hell in American evangelical and fundamentalist churches, where unbelievers are encouraged to enter and find out something of the horrors of hell that await them unless they repent and turn to God. 'Scenes of death and suffering, replete with blood and gore, show angels and demons contesting for human souls. The performance ending (sic) by passing into a room where numerous believers are already kneeling waiting to pray for any who now wish to convert before it is too late'.¹³⁰ He quotes the American writer Brian Jackson who evaluates this as an 'unfortunate strategy that relies on terror – and not only that, but the terror of young people in an unreflective moment of spatial horror – as the primary motivation for changing

¹²⁸ Long *Accompany Them* p111

¹²⁹ Ibid p112

¹³⁰ Davies *Theology* p83

one's life'.¹³¹ This 'turn or burn' evangelism gains power in a society for which death is a hidden place of horror. The contrast with the *Ars Moriendi* literature could not be greater: the prospect of death is not a time for quiet reflection, but emotional manipulation, and faith is to be sought through fear, rather than thankfulness.

4. Death and the Eucharist

To this horror, the church offers a corrective in its understanding of the sacraments and the offering of the Eucharist to the Christian pilgrim. In baptism, the child is taken down into the waters of death, that he or she might rise again in the waters of life with Christ. It has been common practice for centuries that this was done in a private ceremony at which only the family and godparents were present, but as Davies points out, even in the Book of Common Prayer, the opposite is enjoined. In the preface, it urges that the rite be performed on Sundays or other Holy Days, not only as a proper way to receive someone 'into the number of Christ's Church' but also that 'every man present may be put in remembrance of his own profession made to God in his baptism.'¹³² In witnessing another baptism, we are reminded of our own and, as Luther tells us, encouraged to drown the old Adam once again. In Common Worship, it is expected that the baptism will take place in the main service, though baptisms still do take place outside the main service in many places.

Davies goes on to remind readers that the Eucharist 'develops the baptismal theme of Christian identity as a conquest of death rooted in Christ's passion and

¹³¹ Quoted *ibid* p83

¹³² Book of Common Prayer *The Publick Baptism of Infants* Davies *Theology* p39

resurrection'.¹³³ Set in the context of a Passover meal, which reminded the Jews of the Angel of Death which killed all the firstborn of Egypt as the people of Israel are led out into new life, the twin themes of death and life inhabit the whole meal. In the Eucharist, we are fed in our spiritual bodies, risen from the death waters of baptism, by the sacrificed body of Christ, which is also a resurrected and transformed body. Whether the Eucharist is interpreted as the transubstantiated body and blood of Christ, or a meal eaten in memorial of Christ's death - or any interpretations between these two points - the symbols of life and death and life renewed are central to any understanding of the service.

It is not simply in its theology that the Eucharist emphasises death and new life. In 1989, Davies, together with Charles Watkins and Michael Winter carried out research on behalf of the Rural Churches Project, in which they asked regular churchgoers whether they had any sense of the presence of dead loved ones during the Eucharist. Their research was published in *Church and Religion in Rural England*¹³⁴. Significantly, 50% of those aged between 18 and 34, and 47% of those over 65 reported sensing such a presence – about one third of respondents in other age groups similarly reported a link. This reaffirms early church understandings of the link between the living and the dead, as well as reinforcing Senghor's tender bridge. In the Eucharist, we are reminded of the death of Christ and the dead are remembered or prayed for (depending on church tradition) as part of the intercessions. Perhaps then it is unsurprising that worshippers are put in mind of

¹³³ Davies *Theology* p159

¹³⁴ Douglas Davies, Charles Watkins & Michael Winter *Church and Religion in Rural England* Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991

their own dead loved ones. However, that they actually report experiencing their presence centres the Church's liturgy and worship traditions in community and communion with the dead in a way that our society is reluctant to give the living at any other moment of their lives.

B. The Death of God in Christian Thinking

Whilst for twenty centuries, the church had a well-developed understanding of death and the place of the dead amongst the living, its understanding of God remained untouched by categories of death. Although the death of Christ is the centre of the Christian faith, it was important to maintain that God himself could not die on the cross – Christ could only die in his human nature. In the age of Christendom, God had been conceived in imperial terms of majesty and glory. However, philosophers rejected such a God in the face of human suffering and pain and argued that atheism is the only intelligible solution. The theologian Eberhard Jungel comments that now humankind has pushed itself into the place of God: 'Man casts his shadow on the world and it falls back on him from the world monstrously enlarged'.¹³⁵ The story of the twentieth century caused theologians to reconsider their understanding of God. Moltmann comments that 'A God who is conceived of in his omnipotence, perfection and infinity cannot be the God who is love in the cross of Jesus'.¹³⁶

In seeking to answer the philosophers, theologians have acknowledged, implicitly or explicitly the impact of the World Wars on their thinking. Donald Mackinnon

¹³⁵ Eberhard Jungel *God as the Mystery of the World* Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1983, p52

¹³⁶ Moltmann *Crucified God* p250

describes the nervous tension' in Balthasar's work that 'bears witness to the author's passionate concern to present the engagement of God with his world in a way that refuses to turn aside from the overwhelming, pervasive reality of evil.¹³⁷

Balthasar writes in the shadow and knowledge of Auschwitz. This can be seen in his meditations on the Stations of the Cross as Mackinnon points out: it is just as true in *Mysterium Paschale* and indeed all his writings on the Passion. Mackinnon summarises the twentieth century as 'marked indelibly in history as that of Auschwitz, Maidanek and Treblinka'¹³⁸: and any theologian must reckon on this. It is also of course the century of the Armenian genocide, the Killing Fields and the Rwandese tribal massacres: and indeed many of the centuries since Christ could point to other equally horrific savagery by man against man. Nonetheless, a willingness to reflect upon their own experiences in their understanding of God has given theologians powerful aids to their own reflections.

It is not just world events that have enabled theologians to write out of their own experience. Alan Lewis in his study of Holy Saturday, *Between Cross and Resurrection A Theology of Holy Saturday*¹³⁹ writes it having been diagnosed with terminal cancer. Written as it is, in the light of his death and mortality, he is able to attain that wisdom of which Long spoke when considering death. Thomas

¹³⁷ Donald Mackinnon 'Some Reflections on Hans Urs von Balthasar's Christology with special reference to Theodramatik II/2 and III' in ed John Riches *The Analogy of Beauty The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986 p165

¹³⁸ Ibid p179

¹³⁹ Alan E Lewis *Between Cross and Resurrection A Theology of Holy Saturday*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003

Weinandy complains that 'it is not easy to review a book authored by a dying man' – concerned as he is to show that Lewis's project is 'theologically erroneous, philosophically ill-advised and spiritually misconceived', it is clear that he is uncomfortable providing a critique for a theology which was informed by Lewis's terminal illness.¹⁴⁰ There has been a movement in the twentieth century, whereby theologians have reflected on their own experience, and allowed it to speak to them of God in a new way. Lewis comments that the story of the twentieth century gave theologians the courage to overthrow the defences of Nicaea and only a suffering God can speak to a suffering world.¹⁴¹

John Bolt in his critique of this aspect of theology wonders why it is necessary to posit a suffering God. He asks the question of Jungel's work, but it may as easily be asked of Balthasar. He wonders whether humankind is no longer able to seek an overwhelming authoritarian God. In looking at the evidence from the world, he dismisses this possibility, pointing to the growth of political absolutism (often in the name of liberation), and indeed the flourishing of authoritarian religion, in which God must be absolute. If millions of people around the world are content to worship an all-powerful God, perhaps it is just in the academy that professors find it such a problem.¹⁴² Nonetheless, insights from the academy may be true ones, even if not yet accepted by worshipping Christians. If the academy suggests that atheism is a better solution to the problems of the word than a classically formulated understanding of God, it is right that theologians in the academy answer the

¹⁴⁰ Thomas G Weinandy 'Easter Saturday and the Suffering of God: the theology of Alan E Lewis' *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5:1 (2003) p62

¹⁴¹ Lewis *Between Cross & Resurrection* p164

¹⁴² John Bolt 'Review of God as the Mystery of the World' in *Calvin Theological Journal* 21: 2 (1986) p254

question and challenge their own understanding of what God is like. It does not need to be a wandering away from Christian orthodoxy to posit a Trinitarian understanding of the event of the cross which challenges previous understandings of God.

The small human stories at the heart of this dilemma are illustrated by a graphic and controversial example by Moltmann in *The Crucified God*. He quotes a passage from *Night*, Elie Wiesel's story based on his experiences in Auschwitz:

The SS hanged two Jewish men and a youth in front of the whole camp. The men died quickly, but the death throes of the youth lasted for half an hour. 'Where is God? Where is he?' someone asked behind me. As the youth still hung in torment in the noose after a long time, I heard the man call again, 'Where is God now?' And I heard a voice in myself answer: 'Where is he? he is here. He is hanging there on the gallows'.

Moltmann concludes 'any other answer would be blasphemy'.¹⁴³

The theologian is criticised for the use of this story, not least by Roy Eckardt, a Christian theologian and colleague of Moltmann at Tübingen, as well as being Visiting Professor at the University of Jerusalem. Eckardt argues that since the victims of this story are Jews, it is not valid for a Christian theologian to appropriate it for his own ends. To do so is to bring Christian presuppositions to Auschwitz which would be abhorrent to those who endured its horrors:

For what could constitute a more dreadful example of this than the trinitarianization, the Christianization of Auschwitz, of those poor souls who, had they been allowed the choice, would have in many instances *willingly*, rather than *unwillingly*, inhaled the gas and entered the flames rather than accede to any trinity of God.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ Moltmann *Crucified God* p274

¹⁴⁴ Roy Eckardt 'Jürgen Moltmann, the Jewish People, and the Holocaust' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 44:4 (1976) p684

The difficulty with Eckardt's argument is that it does not allow Christian theology to speak at all to stories not populated solely by Christians. But if Christian faith and orthodoxy speaks of a God who loved the whole world and died for the whole world – rather than simply for those who would call themselves Christians – then its theologians must be able to see God in the stories of the whole world and see God in their midst.

It is surely legitimate to see in the story of Auschwitz the story of every human tragedy writ large. If God is present in the hanging of a small boy, he will also be present in the sufferings that I endure, and the sorrow I feel in grief, no matter how much smaller they are to that awful event. And herein surely lies the pastoral answer to every bereaved person's rebuff that his or her own suffering is not so great, when compared to the horrors that stalk our world. For if God is present in the greatest of those horrors, he is also present in the pain now felt by the bereaved. Peter Althouse suggests that to excuse or suppress grief over the loss of those we love is to suppress our humanity and betray the memory of our loved ones who have lived¹⁴⁵: we can add that to suppress grief is to refuse to acknowledge the God who is present in the midst of that grief in the suffering of his love for the world. Further, to deny the pain of death is to refuse to allow the hope of resurrection, for crucifixion cannot be bypassed in the route to the hope of new life.

¹⁴⁵ Peter Althouse 'In appreciation of Jürgen Moltmann: a discussion of his transformational eschatology' *Pneuma* 28:1 (2006) p22

C. The hope of Resurrection

The recovery of an understanding of the revelation of God centred in the crucifixion has enormous power for a ministry at the time of death and at the funeral. However, it is just as vital for the funeral minister to hold out to the bereaved hope in the future. Moltmann describes the Christian faith as 'From first to last, and not merely in the epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving'¹⁴⁶ and it is this hope in the future that is also vital in any funeral ministry.

It is a point that should be remembered in the funeral. With ever more elaborate tributes to the person who has died, today's funeral in Britain can feel as though its sole purpose is a retrospective thanksgiving for a life. Common Worship provides in its funeral order that 'a sermon should be preached', but when there has been a family tribute, the minister's address can be marginalised, if it takes place at all. The opening words of the funeral service proclaim the hope that is offered in Jesus' words from John 12.25: 'I am the Resurrection and the Life: he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die' – though this thesis will question whether this is the right moment for these words. It may also be that the family is more concerned to listen to the words of 'Wind beneath my wings' or whatever other piece of music that has been chosen on entry, than to hear the words read from Scripture. The sermon offers an opportunity for a prospective focus in a funeral – a hope for the future – and it is just as important as giving thanks for what is past. It may well be the moment

¹⁴⁶ Moltmann *Theology of Hope* London: SCM Press 1967 p16

when people in the congregation feel vaguely uncomfortable at hearing something which they do not believe, but that does not seem to be sufficient justification for omitting it.

D. Conclusion

There is much in Christian theology that would support Tony Walter's claim for a revival of death in society today: the difficulty for the Church is that society is looking elsewhere to celebrate this revival. However, the tools needed to assist are there. At the beginning of our pilgrimage as Christians, we are plunged into the deep waters of death at our baptism – and so it is unfortunate when the plunging is so symbolic that the link with death and drowning is entirely forgotten. However, in the Eucharist, the link with death cannot be forgotten: its meaning can only be found in the death of Christ.

The willingness of past generations, and other cultures to recognise amongst the dead an ongoing community which inhabits a different space alongside of us, provides this culture with a perspective it should surely recover. Moltmann comments that 'To keep company with the dead in backward looking gratitude and forward looking hope doesn't mean holding onto memories and clinging to the dead in such a way that we no longer have a life of our own. It is rather that the dead are present in a kind of second presence.'¹⁴⁷ It is a perspective that resonates well with a Christian hope in the resurrection of the body, and is a helpful corrective

¹⁴⁷ Jürgen Moltmann *In the End, the Beginning* London: SCM Press, 2004 p151

to the lure of Spiritualism and the denial of anything beyond this life that cannot be seen.

If, as Lewis maintains, only a suffering God can speak to a suffering world, then we have in the story of Good Friday and Holy Saturday, the central theological key to be able to address those who are experiencing the pain of bereavement. He need not speak only to the horrors of Auschwitz, though perhaps it has been such events that have confronted theologians most starkly and forced them to revalue their understanding. If God is present and speaks to such situations of horror, then he can speak to all who suffer grief. Using Balthasar's work, the next chapter will now explore this in more detail.

Chapter 4: Von Balthasar and the death of God

A. Background and Influences

A few weeks before Hans Urs von Balthasar died in 1988, he finally accepted the offer of the position of Cardinal. He died a few days before the ceremony was due to take place. At his funeral, the oration was given by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) who said that he was offered the cardinal's hat because 'the Church itself tells us that he is right in what he teaches us of the faith'.¹⁴⁸

The church itself had in fact been rather reluctant through much of Balthasar's life to acknowledge that he had been right. He was viewed with suspicion for much of his career for the links he made with the theology of Karl Barth, and in consequence was not invited to Vatican II as a *peritus* (expert theological consultant). When he left the Jesuits in the 1950s, no bishop was prepared to incardinate him and he had to set up a publishing house, the *Johannes Verlag* with Adrienne von Speyr in order to make a living; both the publishing house and his Community of St John (*Johannesgemeinschaft*) were mistrusted by the Vatican authorities. Ironically, many of the changes made there had been things that he had been calling for in his book published in the 1950s, *Razing the Ramparts*, yet after the event, he was equally critical of many of the developments in the church that might previously have been justified in his name. The usual conclusion concerning Balthasar is summed by David Moss and Edward Oakes as 'that most peculiar of theologians –

¹⁴⁸ Joseph Ratzinger 'Funeral oration for Hans Urs von Balthasar' quoted by Edward Oakes in 'Descensus and Development: A Response to Recent Rejoinders' *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 13: 1 (2011) p14

one who is both intensely traditional (perhaps the most traditional of all twentieth-century theologians) and also astonishingly, startlingly idiosyncratic'¹⁴⁹.

In his aesthetic theology, they argue, he effectively devised a whole new school of theology, a school which many theological colleges respond to by ignoring. It would be surprising to find useful theological tools on ministry here at the time of death, but, rooted as his work on beauty is in the death of Christ, it will be a useful starting point for this chapter.

His teaching on Holy Saturday, regarded by Edward Oakes as 'the central innovation of his thought'¹⁵⁰ is regarded as some of his most controversial work, but is of central importance in working towards a theology to be used at the time of death and funerals. Catholic theologians such as Alyssa Pitstick dismiss his work as a heretical departure from Catholic orthodoxy: Alan Lewis, a Protestant, claimed that Balthasar's thinking permeated his whole project.¹⁵¹ This reliance is not unusual amongst Protestant scholars, and it would seem that Balthasar's work on Barth has made the former accessible to as many Reformed scholars as to Catholic. Balthasar's influence is seen in their writings.

Because Balthasar never taught formally in the academy, but was part of the Community of St John as a 'kneeling theologian', his insights are important for

¹⁴⁹ David Moss & Edward T Oakes SJ 'Introduction' in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar* Cambridge: CUP, 2004, p6

¹⁵⁰ Edward T Oakes SJ 'The Internal Logic of Holy Saturday in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar' *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9:2 (2007) 184

¹⁵¹ Lewis Cross p2

those who exercise parish ministry: for him all Christian lives, whether in the academy, publishing house, or street, should be patterned in prayer.

If the implicit influence of the Holocaust has already been mentioned, the explicit debt owed to Adrienne von Speyr should also be named. Balthasar insisted when he wrote *Unser Auftrag (Our Task)* that he owed her his greatest debt in theology. The book was written 'to prevent anyone after my death from separating my work from that of Adrienne von Speyr.'¹⁵² He certainly held her mystical visions in the highest respect, claiming that she received graces not seen in the church since the time of Theresa of Avila, but also that he received far more from her, theologically, than she from him.¹⁵³ None of her mystical writings were published by him till after her death in 1967 and they can make for uncomfortable reading in the academy. Indeed, it would seem that many Balthasarian scholars would prefer not to engage with her at all. Alyssa Pitstick spent an entire doctoral thesis concentrating on Balthasar's theology of Holy Saturday¹⁵⁴, but suggests in a footnote that discussion of Speyr's influence is 'outside the present scope' of her project¹⁵⁵. Elsewhere she refers somewhat disparagingly to the 'allegedly mystical conclusions of Adrienne von Speyr'¹⁵⁶, but as she also goes on to say that Balthasar wrote *Mysterium Paschale* to prepare the way for Speyr's ideas, it seems curious that scholars are so little prepared to engage with her ideas. Even Edward Oakes, who is unswerving in

¹⁵² Hans Urs von Balthasar *Our Task: A Report and a Plan* tr John Saward San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994 p13

¹⁵³ See Hans Urs von Balthasar *First Glance at Adrienne von Speyr* tr Antje Lawry San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981 p13

¹⁵⁴ Alyssa Lyra Pitstick *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell* Grand Rapids: Wm Eerdmans, 2007

¹⁵⁵ Ibid p412 n186

¹⁵⁶ Pitstick 'Development of Doctrine or Denial? Von Balthasar's Holy Saturday and Newman's Essay' *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11: 2 (2009) p138

his praise and commitment to Balthasar, relegates a discussion of her thought to the end of his book, whilst conceding that Balthasar may not have approved of such a course of action.¹⁵⁷

The best source of biographical detail on Speyr is Balthasar's *First Glance at Adrienne Von Speyr*, though the devotion he appears to show her on occasion comes uncomfortably close to hagiography. The two first met in 1940 when she, a twice-married Protestant, came to see him with a view to converting to Roman Catholicism. He says that throughout her childhood, she had been dissatisfied with the version of Protestantism she had received and one of her most important events of early life had been in 1917, aged 15, when the Virgin Mary had appeared to her in a vision, and as a result of which she received a wound under her left breast, which she took to be a sign that she belonged to God.

She was baptised on All Saints Day in 1940, and Balthasar claims that shortly afterwards 'a veritable cataract of mystical graces poured over Adrienne in a seemingly chaotic storm that whirled her in all directions at once'.¹⁵⁸ Balthasar became her spiritual director and shortly afterwards moved into the household with Speyr and her second husband, Werner Kaegi, a professor at the University of Basel. Speyr provided details of all her visions to Balthasar as part of that spiritual direction and he in turn took them down on paper for eventual publication after her death. Of particular importance here are her experiences of the Passion of Christ. From 1941 onwards, during Lent and Holy Week, she 'was allowed to share

¹⁵⁷ Oakes *Pattern of Redemption* p10

¹⁵⁸ Balthasar *First Glance* p33

in the suffering of Christ'.¹⁵⁹ This included from 1942 exterior stigmata on her hands and forehead. She was deeply uncomfortable with these and prayed that these might be less visible to others: it seems that this prayer was granted and they became invisible. Balthasar comments that the pain was so intense that she could not believe that the blood from the crown of thorns could not be seen since she felt it running so clearly over her forehead. Every year, she felt the fear and humiliation of Holy Week and described it in great detail to Balthasar; every year, the passion ended on Good Friday 'at about three o'clock in the afternoon, with a death-like trance into which flashed the thrust of the lance.'¹⁶⁰ From here she experienced the descent into Hell and until the early hours of Easter Sunday, she would remain in a trance, after which she could give details of the horrors of her time in Hell.

These visions undoubtedly were a huge influence on Balthasar in his theology of Holy Saturday, although he did comment that in his original work in *Mysterium Paschale*, he did not go as far as he would like in placing Speyr's mystical experiences in a theological framework. Nonetheless, the effect of her visions is key in understanding Balthasar's project. At the end of his chapter on 'Incarnation and Passion' in *Mysterium Paschale*, he mentions various works of devotional literature on the cross and comments that he includes them because 'they represent attempts to harmonise a personal and concrete devotion to the Passion with the patristic vision of the whole economy of salvation'.¹⁶¹ It is a fair summary of what he seeks to do in the book, using the personal and concrete devotion to the

¹⁵⁹ Ibid p64

¹⁶⁰ Ibid p64

¹⁶¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar *Mysterium Paschale* San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990 p41

Passion that Speyr experiences, with his theological exposition of it. The visions should be of significance to practical theologians too because they are a reminder to them that Balthasar's theology is born out of experience, albeit mystical: they must allow the reality of grief and suffering borne to speak too.

This essay will concentrate on two main sources of Balthasar's thinking, as it relates to the passion and death of Christ. Firstly, his theological aesthetics, looking briefly at the source of beauty in his 7 volume work, *Herrlichkeit* (translated as *The Glory of the Lord*), and then considering how he considers death in the next part of the trilogy *Theodramatik* (*Theodrama*). The main source of his thinking is found in his work *Mysterium Paschale*, which will also be considered in detail below.

B. Themes of death in the Theological Aesthetics

Balthasar's greatest theological project was his theological aesthetics, and within his thinking there are many tools that can be considered useful for this project. He approached his subject through consideration of the Platonic 'transcendentals' of Being – the Beautiful, the Good and the True. In an overview of Balthasar's theology, Edward Oakes points out that the order that he takes these is very important for him. Balthasar was concerned that Descartes and Kant had caused modernity to invert the order of things, so that epistemology, or knowledge of the truth was the first area of consideration. But, influenced by the Thomistic maxim that nothing exists in the mind that was not put there by the senses, Balthasar maintained that beauty should be the first thing to study. This would then lead on to goodness – our response to beauty – and only then could truth be looked at. *The*

Glory of the Lord is thus the first part of the trilogy, then *Theodrama*, and he finally completed the three volume *Theologik (Theologic)* and epilogue in the years before his death in 1988. Oakes says that the direction of the trilogy 'works in conscious opposition to the direction of Kant's trilogy, the *Critique of Pure Reason*, *Critique of Practical Reason*, and the *Critique of (Aesthetic) Judgement*.¹⁶² It is a deliberate effort to deny the supremacy of the isolated ego that drives Balthasar's thinking.

1. Beauty

One of the dilemmas for modern theology is that it had lost the category of beauty. John O'Donnell argues that this can be traced back to Martin Luther who saw no aesthetic harmony in theology: there could be nothing beautiful about the cross, and so aesthetics as a category should be rejected by theologians.¹⁶³ This is taken further by Søren Kierkegaard, who saw a complete disjunction between the aesthetic and religious sphere. And yet, the critique offered by Balthasar and Barth of Kierkegaard is telling: music can undoubtedly unite these two spheres. And if music, then why not other categories of beauty? It is to this question, that Balthasar gives his answer:

Beauty is the word that shall be our first. Beauty is the last thing which the thinking intellect dares to approach, since only it dances as an uncontained splendour around the double constellation of the true and the good and their inseparable relation to one another. . . No longer loved or fostered by religion, beauty is lifted from its face as a mask, and its absence exposes features on that face which threaten to become incomprehensible to man . . . We can be sure that whoever sneers at her name as if she were the

¹⁶² Edward T Oakes SJ 'Hans Urs von Balthasar: The Wave and the Sea' *Theology Today* 62 (2005) 364 - 74

¹⁶³ John O'Donnell *Hans Urs von Balthasar Outstanding Christian Thinkers* London: Continuum, 1991 p13

ornament of a bourgeois past—whether he admits it or not—can no longer pray and soon will no longer be able to love.¹⁶⁴

This link with love is central to Balthasar's thinking – it is in relationship that we understand true beauty. In theological terms, it ensures that beauty cannot be understood apart from relationship with God, nor seen except in God's loving actions towards humankind.

Two central terms at the heart of Balthasar's aesthetics are form, or *gestalt*, and glory – *herrlichkeit*, or the Latin *doxa*. Both are key to any understanding of theological beauty. His central concern is to say that God is the supreme beauty: hthis beauty is best described by the word 'glory' or '*Herrlichkeit*' – and of course in German, 'Lord' or '*Herr*' forms part of the very word. God is at the heart of what glory means, and we see the form of his beauty in the world. But the Incarnation means that the supreme understanding of what this glory looks like is seen in Christ. It is ultimately in Christ that we see the form of this beauty. Ben Quash summarises it thus: 'The entire thrust of Balthasar's aesthetic project was to say that God's revelation 'concretises': it is a radiance that takes form'.¹⁶⁵ The form that was seen in Christ can still be seen in the body of the Church: in those lived-out relationships, part of the mission of the church is to show the glory of God.

But here Luther's objections loom large in the confrontation between aesthetics and Christology. How can we possibly speak in terms of glory when the supreme image that we have of Christ is of a dying man on the cross? Balthasar refutes the

¹⁶⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar *The Glory of the Lord volume I Seeing the Form* tr Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982 p18

¹⁶⁵ Ben Quash *Theology and the Drama of History* Cambridge: CUP, 2005 p60

idea that this is a contradiction, speaking instead of a paradox. This is so because it is for the sake of love that the beautiful one entered into the abyss and took on the ugliness of the cross. But true love can never be ugly and can only reveal what true beauty looks like.¹⁶⁶ Noel O'Donaghue wonders if Balthasar's project fails because he has to retreat to a simple Platonic inner form of what true beauty looks like – how can it be possible to judge the beauty of the form of Christ except by some inner sense of what beautiful means?¹⁶⁷ And how could that inner sense ever include the ugliness of the crucifixion?

The Synoptic gospels and the Fourth Gospel provide different answers to this. As far as the Synoptics are concerned, Oakes points to the Transfiguration. It is an event which seems to be all about displaying divine glory, but it is set in the context of the impending Passion, and cannot be understood apart from it.¹⁶⁸ And if the synoptic gospels use the Transfiguration to link glory and passion, then John's gospel is much more explicit. From the opening words in John 1.14, where John first speaks of the glory of the Word, we gradually understand that this glory is most fully revealed as Jesus is lifted up on the cross: thus it is that Jesus prays that God would glorify his name in John 12.27 as he acknowledges that the hour has come. Beauty leads inexorably to goodness, and so love can provide a way to understand beauty. As John Riches points out, it is legitimate to say from the New Testament that 'Glory is eternal love descending into the uttermost darkness'.¹⁶⁹

Balthasar shared with Speyr a love of John's gospel – seen in the naming of the

¹⁶⁶ O'Donnell p21

¹⁶⁷ Noel O'Donaghue 'A Theology of Beauty' in ed John Riches *The Analogy of Beauty The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986, p7

¹⁶⁸ Oakes *Pattern* p202

¹⁶⁹ John Riches 'Afterword' in *ibid.* p217

Community of St John, and the publishing house of the *Johannes Verlag* – so it is unsurprising that Johannine notions of glory should infuse his thinking.

By emphasising that glory is seen in the Cross and Passion, Balthasar undoubtedly provides a tool to the pastor in bringing hope and healing to those in crisis amongst his or her flock. Edward Oakes says that the central Balthasarian doctrine of aesthetics is that ‘form is so constituted as to be able to irradiate from within itself the light that illuminates its beauty’¹⁷⁰. To speak of the beauty and glory of God to those who are dying and bereaved may seem initially to be unhelpful and crass: however, if the light of that beauty shines through on the cross and the Passion, then it becomes a powerful source of meaning and restoration, because it points to love.

Pastoral practice acknowledges that it is possible to see beauty in the midst of agonies of death and dying, when surrounded by love. One of the most remarkable books to be written on dying in recent years is Philip Gould’s autobiography of his own death, *When I die: Lessons from the Death Zone*. The final chapters were written in the days leading up to his death. He wrote this:

My life gained a kind of intensity that it had never had before. It gained a quality and a power it had never had before.

Intensity comes from knowing you will die and knowing you are dying. This is particularly true when you are given the death sentence, as I was. Suddenly you can go for a walk in the park and have a moment of ecstasy ... I go to the exhibition tent and I sit there and have a coffee and I feel ecstasy after ecstasy after ecstasy. This is built upon this feeling of certainty, of knowledge, of death. There is ecstasy because I am not dead yet.

¹⁷⁰ Oakes *Pattern* p148

In the morning (his wife Gail) came to see me and by this time I did not look good. Gail just gave me this smile of tenderness that was almost beyond words it was so wonderful. The tenderness she showed me was beyond anything I could ever have expected. It was extraordinary. I felt security. I felt, finally, I am safe at home. I knew then that the tenderness I saw on her was utterly dependent upon the knowledge that I was going to die.

Death gives meaning to life... when you are going to die soon, you really do feel the absolute intensity of life.

But ...I cannot feel better than this. I do not see how life can be better for me than this. I know how life can be better for those who care for me and love me. I understand that, I do not try to deny that. But for me, even though this may well be the worst of times, it is also the best of times.

In her book *On Death and Dying*, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross says that with love this period can be the most fulfilling and extraordinary time of life. I am sure she is right.¹⁷¹

It is important for the pastor not to romanticise death, and Gould speaks elsewhere of the horrors and indignities of terminal illness. Yet what he speaks of in these passages is beauty – realised because of the presence of love, as Oakes identifies. It offers a startling contrast to society's notions of 'dying with dignity'. Death through terminal illness such as cancer is rarely dignified because the body is failing. When Gould describes being measured for a catheter, what is clear in that moment is that dignity is gone. In death, we are confronted by the frailty of our human flesh and bodies which let us down.

Perhaps there is a parallel to be drawn here with another moment in our life-cycle when the importance of our fleshly bodies comes to the fore: childbirth. There has been a successful movement in recent years through organisations such as the Natural Childbirth Campaign for more choice in childbirth, but to suggest that dignity is key to the actual process of giving birth is to invite ridicule of those who

¹⁷¹ Gould *Lessons* pp132, 134, 142, 151

are considered 'too posh to push'. However, childbirth need never be demeaned because it is surrounded by love.

So it can be with death. It is for the same reason that those who encounter the work of modern hospices see them not as places to be feared, but places of acceptance and love. There is a drive within the hospice movement to offer 'death with dignity': this analysis suggests that this is a false goal, and they should concentrate instead on offering death as a place to be surrounded by love. In this light, a theology of beauty can provide helpful reflections. Francesca Murphy insists that Balthasar's purpose in his theological aesthetics was not as a stand-alone entity, but as a gateway to 'an agapic theology', that is to love.¹⁷² A consideration of beauty, which on initial encounter seems a most unproductive notion to assist a theology of funerals, is transformed through the death of Christ into a helpful aid to thinking.

2. Goodness

Such beauty, rooted in pure love, leads us into the next section of the trilogy, a consideration of goodness. He moves from the contemplation of beauty to the action of a drama. Quash comments that Balthasar's concern is to write a theology that is in touch with our lived out Christian life, and so contemplation must inevitably lead to action.¹⁷³ As Rowan Williams points out in his essay on Balthasar and Rahner, 'knowledge is essentially participatory'¹⁷⁴ and so cannot be separated

¹⁷² Francesca Murphy 'Beauty as a gateway to love' in ed Oleg V Bichkov & James Fodor *Theological Aesthetics after von Balthasar* Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2008, p.5

¹⁷³ Ben Quash 'The Theo-drama' in ed Oakes & Moss *Companion* p143

¹⁷⁴ Rowan Williams 'Balthasar and Rahner' in ed Riches *Analogy* p26

from the lived history of humanity. And in drama, Balthasar finds a category that can best explain his purposes. He coins the neologism *theodramatik* to provide the title for the central part of his trilogy.

Quash outlines Balthasar's method in taking Hegel's division of literary genre of epic, lyric and drama as the starting point for the justification of using drama here. The first of these presents completed action – it 'reports it under closure'¹⁷⁵. It is possible then to stand back from the action and view it impartially, and it is quite possible to view the Christian story in this way. The Eucharist can be remembered as past event and God is always referred to in the third person. Balthasar maintained that a theology that relied exclusively on the Bible for its norms and authority was more likely to speak in this epic voice – it would not get caught up in ongoing revealed action.¹⁷⁶ It is perhaps a fair criticism of the Order for the Burial of the Dead in the *Book of Common Prayer* that it speaks only in this epic voice, with no mention of the person who has died by name or engagement with the actual circumstances of the death.

In contrast, lyric is the genre of the self-contemplating mind: it is the genre 'of the introverted individual, apprehending everything singly and in isolation'¹⁷⁷. Again, it is a genre that can reveal some of the truth of the Christian story. Balthasar says that in this mode, the individual is able to relive in a vivid way some past event, and the Eucharist becomes an intensely personal encounter. Here God is addressed as

¹⁷⁵ Quash *Theology* p41

¹⁷⁶ Ibid p42

¹⁷⁷ Hegel *Aesthetics*, p1038, quoted by ibid p43

Thou.¹⁷⁸ We see in von Speyr's mystical visions a good example of the lyrical mode of theology.

However, it is in drama that these two other genres are brought together as objective and subjective truth. Here, Quash argues, theology can find a tool that will offer a corrective to modernity's search for objective knowledge and the voice of the mystic¹⁷⁹. Knowledge is no longer presented as objective fact: neither is it the preserve of the subjective solitary. Knowledge is now lived out in the drama: actor, playwright and director must all play their part in creating the story, and must all be free to do so. The power of this analysis seems immediately evident: it allows human freedom to be expressed fully within the Christian story, and, as Quash argues, breathes new life into classic Christian formulations of faith such as the hypostatic union¹⁸⁰.

It is in Volumes III, IV and V in particular that Balthasar's writings have particular relevance to thinking on death and dying: it is in these volumes that Balthasar works out his Christology. He comments in his introduction to Volume III that Jesus' resurrection to eternal life is 'God's last word on the meaning of life and death'¹⁸¹ and he is concerned to work out how this drama unfolds from the beginning of Creation to the denouement on the cross.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid p44

¹⁷⁹ Ibid p50

¹⁸⁰ Quash 'Theodrama' p150

¹⁸¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar *Theo-Drama Vol III The Dramatis Personae: The Person in Christ* p17

As the drama unfolds, those involved find themselves making decisions. It is these decisions that constitute the Christian story. God's decision to create included a decision to create finite freedom to live out the drama. The story of Creation and the Fall is the story of the exercise of freedom to say No to God: the pattern of redemption is set through the Incarnation, Passion and Resurrection of Christ. And in this drama of redemption, human agents are involved from the start. As Oakes points out, this Yes of God starts with Mary's Yes to Gabriel – her consent to the incarnation inaugurates our redemption: 'Only this realization, enshrined in the infallibly defined dogma of the Immaculate Conception, can preserve the essential feature of our theodramatic redemption: that God has in his infinite freedom decided to save us in a way that respects our finite freedom but which also demands his infinite power of grace to fulfil.'¹⁸² One wonders from a Protestant perspective whether the doctrine of the immaculate conception undermines rather than preserves Mary's finite freedom – it is surely sufficient to say that Mary showed obedience to accept the task of God, as, for example Abraham did, without having to rely on her sinless perfection.

If the Incarnation brings about the possibility of our participation in the theodrama, then it is at the cross that we see its centre. On the cross, Christ is made to be sin for us: here 'is finite freedom driven out of its last refuge and set on the path towards infinite freedom'.¹⁸³ Infinite freedom, by contrast, can continue to be itself

¹⁸² Oakes *Pattern* p256

¹⁸³ Hans Urs von Balthasar *Theodrama Vol II Dramatis Personae Man in God* San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990 p245

even in the finitude that 'loses itself'. In being made sin, Christ embodies the human No towards God, that we might find the freedom to say Yes to him.

The cross also reminds us of the place of tragedy within the drama. Quash quotes from Aeschylus' *Oresteia* to illustrate this powerfully: 'Batter, batter the doom drum, but believe there'll be better' ¹⁸⁴ In pastoral ministry, the doom drum must be taken as seriously as the belief that there will be better; to trivialise the former is as far from the Jesus of the New Testament as reducing the latter to a vague wish. Donald Mackinnon comments that Christianity properly understood provide men with a faith through which they are entitled to hold steadfastly to the significance of the tragic.¹⁸⁵ There is on the far side of the cross a free and unconditioned divine glory, yet we see it from the shadow of the cross.

The drama begins at Creation and in Adam 'God's Word hovers over mankind... and promises to open up the divine sphere of freedom'¹⁸⁶. The Son offers himself back to the Father as a means of perfecting Creation and in his Incarnation we see the drama unfold. However, it is at the Cross that we find the ultimate meaning of the Incarnation: it is in his death that we find the ultimate meaning of his life, as Philippians 2 makes clear. Then, through the Resurrection, the Holy Spirit is ushered in that humanity might also participate in this drama.

¹⁸⁴ Quash *Theology* p85

¹⁸⁵ Quoted in *ibid* p87

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid* p39

For Balthasar, the coming of the Holy Spirit ensures that the drama can go on: 'the entire acting area is an atmosphere of reciprocal indwelling and interpenetration on the part of God and man/world, but it is not something static'.¹⁸⁷ It is into this drama that the Church and the faithful can place themselves: in their deaths and bereavements, they find themselves in the story that Jesus originally told on the Cross. If as believers, we take our identity from Christ, what Balthasar describes as 'the acting area' is open to us and we participate in the drama. We find ourselves through grace made manifest in Christ's death and resurrection as theological people 'that is, the Father's child, who has been given a share in a qualitatively unique way in Christ's mission: this takes place through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in him, whereby he becomes a dwelling place of the divine Persons.'¹⁸⁸

Balthasar's exploration of the meaning of Holy Saturday, more fully realised in *Mysterium Paschale* is also expressed here. The Son of God descends into the abyss of all that is anti-divine when he goes down into Hell. It is at this point that he is furthest from the Father, yet the bond between Father and Son is not completely broken: stretched to the limit, yet God remains God even in the depths of Hell.

Balthasar opens the next volume of *Theo-Drama* with the recognition that there is a nearness between Heaven and Hell: 'it is only when heaven is wide open that hell too yawns at our feet'.¹⁸⁹ At this point in the action, there is a titanic wrestling between God and humanity for the latter's destiny: humanity will not simply roll

¹⁸⁷ Ibid p54

¹⁸⁸ Ibid p527

¹⁸⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar *Theo-Drama Vol IV The Action* p11

over and accept the future that God offers: it resists being embraced by the mystery of the Cross. Indeed, death is seen as 'the ultimate limit of existence: existence gesticulates in the face of death and death is its innermost certainty'.¹⁹⁰

The Church's vocation, then, to minister to the dying and the bereaved seems particularly important in the light of this, yet it seems increasingly uncertain about its role in the drama at this point. The modern hospice movement began as a Christian response to the needs of the dying, though perhaps as it has become increasingly significant in this country in caring for the terminally ill, the centrality of the Christian vision has been pushed aside. The Church's near monopoly in the conduct of funeral services could also be seen as a moment in which it can be a participant in the drama of life at the point of death: it is now losing that monopoly in this country and if the Church is to continue with its role at the time of death, it must surely work out how it can enter into the drama of people's lives and offer hope again.

Balthasar again turns to Speyr to show where hope exists in death. He quotes from her first commentary on John's Gospel where she says that 'in the world, death is a limitation, a conclusion, an end. In God, death is always the beginning of new life'.¹⁹¹ For Balthasar then, death is part of God's life and even the bitter, abandoned death of Jesus is 'the pure expression of (God's) eternal, Trinitarian life'.¹⁹² He maintains that the God-forsakenness of the Son during the Passion was just as much a mode of his profound bond with the Father in the Holy Spirit as

¹⁹⁰ Ibid p117

¹⁹¹ Adrienne von Speyr *John vol 1 : The Word becomes Flesh* San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987 p44

¹⁹² Vol IV p252

death was a mode of life and suffering a mode of eternal bliss: separation is for God a mode of union. Again, Balthasar wishes to push paradox in his understanding of God to its very limit: death and life, separation and union are all joined together.

However, by maintaining a focussed Trinitarian base to his theology, it is possible to make sense of Balthasar. Separation is an inevitable consequence of kenosis, and as is seen in his argument in *Mysterium Paschale*, kenosis is part of the nature of God from all eternity. That separation has been there throughout the Incarnation: it is simply pushed to its furthest point in the Passion and ultimately on Holy Saturday. This is necessary because it is at this point that it encompasses the furthest point of humankind's rejection of God. In Hell, Christ comes to see what has been excluded from him to this point: the darkness of God which is God's first response to humankind's rejection of him. However, in Christ, God offers a second response, and by the encounter of these two responses, Christ embraces and overcomes the first response. If Christ died for sinners once for all, there is a timelessness about the event: Speyr sees in the separation of the Father from the Son 'the weight of an eternity'¹⁹³. This timelessness then encompasses all those who have ever lived in rejection of God's way: as he makes clear in *Mysterium Paschale*, even at this point of rejection, they have the possibility of being embraced by the presence of God's love in Hell. Even if man in his absolute freedom chooses to cut himself off from God, he encounters a yet more cut off God at that point. Many have accused Balthasar of universalism at this point, but even at this furthest point, Balthasar would acknowledge the place of human freedom –

¹⁹³ von Speyr *John vol 3: The Farewell Discourses* San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992 p124

this point will be dealt with in more detail below. Although God's love is available for redemption, even in hell, humanity's freedom is also available to reject that love. It is here that the nearness of heaven and hell with which Balthasar opened Volume IV seems particularly apposite: heaven is wide open but hell yawns at our feet and the choice between the two must be made.

Quash wonders if Balthasar really is open enough in his drama to allow for the open possibility of history to play itself out – he argues that he often shows a Hegelian tendency towards epic in his theology.¹⁹⁴ Balthasar says of Barth that he 'veritably thrums with a hymnic certainty of victory'¹⁹⁵, but Quash suspects that Balthasar is not open enough himself, and offers his own version of the story in his final chapter which avoids those epic tendencies.¹⁹⁶ However, his conclusion is ultimately supportive of Balthasar: 'We should not of course, forget the power and attractiveness of the vision that von Balthasar holds out to us and the resources it holds for a resilient and open quality of Christian mission in the world'.¹⁹⁷ This vision is one that can be taken in the Christian life as we participate in the spaciousness of God. As John Barnett points out 'I believe this sense of spaciousness in the matter of vocation is one of the key pastoral challenges Balthasar offers the reader'.¹⁹⁸ It is a challenge that can be lived out in times of crisis as well as joy for Christian disciples.

¹⁹⁴ Quash *Theology* p120

¹⁹⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar *The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation* San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992 p364

¹⁹⁶ Quash 'Theodramatics, History and the Holy Spirit' in Quash *Theology*

¹⁹⁷ Ibid p162

¹⁹⁸ John Barnett 'Balthasar from a Parish Perspective' *Expository Times* 118:12 (2007) p591

One of the most bitter complaints offered about funerals is when the deceased is scarcely mentioned by name and there is little attempt by the priest to incorporate the facts of a person's life into the service. The Church of England services made no formal allowance for the deceased to be mentioned by name until the 1965 revisions, yet these revisions were surely welcome. Modern funeral services mitigate this by the provision of a eulogy, normally given by a family member or friend. However, it can be seen that the importance of this is entirely in accord with Balthasar's thinking on the theodrama. We need not complain that such eulogies undermine the gospel purpose of the funeral; if Balthasar is right, it is the responsibility of the officiating minister to work out the gospel in the context of the deceased person's life.

Goodness leads onto truth but it cannot be fully revealed until it is understood christologically and within the Trinity. Although the first volume of the third part of the trilogy, *Theologik* is contained in an earlier work published in 1947 as *Wahrheit der Welt (Truth of the World)*, he recognises that logically it belongs here within the trilogy, along with its two accompanying volumes. This chapter will not deal further with the *Theologik*: the parts of the trilogy that are most helpful for finding theological tools for working with the dying and bereaved can be seen in the first two parts, alongside Balthasar's great work on the Triduum Mortis, the *Mysterium Paschale*, to which we move now.

C. The *Mysterium Paschale*

Balthasar was originally asked to write *Mysterium Paschale* as an encyclopaedia article for *Mysterium Salutis*¹⁹⁹ ('The Mystery of Salvation') in 1969. He had been asked to step in at relatively short notice when the original contributor had been unable to carry out the task and Balthasar felt afterwards that he had not given full justice to his thought, or the theological interpretation of Adrienne von Speyr's visions of the Passion, due to the shortness of time given to him. It was published as a separate book that year also, as *Theologie der drei Tage*, but its English version, originally published in 1990, maintained its title from the encyclopaedia article.

It is his most extended treatment of Christ's passion, and it can be seen how Speyr's visions have shaped his thinking from early works to this point. Andrew Louth traces her influence back to one of Balthasar's earliest books, *Heart of the World*, written in 1945, only a few years after meeting her. Already Balthasar is beginning to explore some of his Trinitarian theology centred on hell, and Louth argues that 'the true dimensions of Balthasar's doctrine of the Trinity are revealed'²⁰⁰ In that work, the Son, the Heart, descends into suffering and death, and the Trinity is manifest, distended in the God-forsakenness of the Son'. It is in *Heart of the World* that Shelly Rambo, in her use of Balthasar's Holy Saturday theology, sees some of his most helpful work, and it will be considered below in the context of Balthasar's work on Holy Saturday.

¹⁹⁹ Ed J Feiner and M Loerer, *Mysterium Salutis III/2* Einsiedeln/Koln, 1969 pp133 - 326

²⁰⁰ Andrew Louth 'The Place of *Heart of the World* in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar' in ed Riches *Analogy* p153

1. The Kenosis of God

In the first part of the book, Balthasar shows why the notion of kenosis is so central to his thinking: once he has established that, he moves to consider each of the three days of the Triduum in turn. In his preface to the 2nd edition, he engages with theologians such as Kitamori and Jurgen Moltmann on the notion of the God who suffers, a notion which undermined the patristic theology of the impassible God. In many ways, he is dissatisfied with their treatment of it, because he believes that they have started in the wrong place when understanding the kenosis of God. Since the Anglican theology of the 19th Century, through such men as Charles Gore, kenotic theology has always been focussed on the human nature assumed by the Son – whether in its crude sense of the 19th Century, where the Son ceased to be God whilst he assumed his human nature, or in the more sophisticated thinking of Moltmann. However, Balthasar suggests that this can lead to a situation where only the ‘Jesus of history’ suffers, or perhaps Christ’s lower faculties, ‘whereas the fine points of his soul remained, even in abandonment, united to the Father in a beatific vision which could never be interrupted.’²⁰¹

Balthasar points out that kenosis is at the heart of the relationships of the Trinity. He follows the Scholastics such as Aquinas and St Bonaventure in recognising that the inner-divine processions are the condition of possibility for a creation, but takes this further to say ‘we shall never know how to express the abyss-like depths of the Father’s self-giving, that Father who, in an eternal ‘super-Kenosis’ makes himself ‘destitute’ of all that he is and can be so as to bring forth a consubstantial divinity,

²⁰¹ *Mysterium Paschale* tr Aidan Nichols Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990 pviii.

the Son'.²⁰² The progression of the kenosis of God through eternity can be seen: from the begetting of the Son and procession of the Spirit, to the creation of the universe, on to the Incarnation and ultimately in Christ's passion and death.

Balthasar's use of language is instructive. By speaking of an abyss here, Balthasar paves the way for his theology of the kenosis of God into another abyss, that of Hell. As Nichols points out in his introduction, Balthasar finds the centre of all his Christology in the Descent into Hell, because that is the final reaching point of the kenosis of God. Kenosis is the supreme expression of inner-Trinitarian love – and the abyss-like depths that began with the begetting of the Son now find their bottom in the actual abyss of hell. And so 'the Christ of Holy Saturday is the consummate icon of what God is like'.²⁰³ We have become used to recognise the importance of God's revelation of himself on the cross, and to see in the dying Christ, the icon of what God is like – but no other theologian has pushed it into Holy Saturday in this way.

Pitstick is certain that it is at this point that Balthasar goes beyond the realm of orthodox Catholic teaching. In her article applying the seven tests of doctrinal orthodoxy given by Cardinal Newman, she applies the tests to Balthasar's understanding of Holy Saturday and concludes 'Balthasar does not 'radicalise' the tradition, but contradicts it'.²⁰⁴ Other theologians remain uncertain. Paul Griffiths points out that Pitstick gives a greater imprimatur to the doctrines pertaining to

²⁰² Ibid viii.

²⁰³ Aidan Nichols 'Balthasar, his Christology and the Mystery of Easter' in ibid p7

²⁰⁴ Pitstick 'Development of Doctrine' p145

Holy Saturday than the Catholic tradition warrants²⁰⁵ Gavin d’Costa, whilst preferring to side with Pitstick on the issue, is prepared to allow for time in determining an orthodox outcome, in quoting Christoph Schönborn in his introduction to the Catholic Catechism: ‘Newer interpretations, such as that of Hans Urs von Balthasar . . . however profound and helpful they may be, have not yet experienced that reception which would justify their inclusion in the Catechism’.²⁰⁶ Clearly, from a non-Roman Catholic perspective, some of these difficulties do not exist – which is perhaps another reason why Balthasar has been welcomed by Reformed scholars when those from his own tradition have remained wary.

The kenosis of God is seen by Balthasar in both Incarnation and Passion; the two opposite heresies that the Passion was an accidental addition to the Incarnation, as Duns Scotus maintained, or the Incarnation was merely oriented to an end – the Passion – are both refuted. Balthasar wants to show ‘that to focus the Incarnation on the Passion enables both theories to reach a point where the mind is flooded by the same perfect thought: in serving, in washing the feet of his creatures, God reveals himself even in that which is most intimately divine in him, and manifests his supreme glory’.²⁰⁷

In Ephesians 1.3f, St Paul writes that humanity has been chosen before the foundation of the world to be blessed with every spiritual blessing: the whole pattern of our redemption has been ordered since before Creation and was in no

²⁰⁵ Paul Griffiths ‘Is there a doctrine of the Descent into Hell?’ *Pro Ecclesia* XVII: 3 (2008) p257

²⁰⁶ Quoted in Gavin d’Costa ‘The Descent into Hell as a Solution for the Problem of the Fate of Unevangelized Non-Christians: Balthasar’s Hell, the Limbo of the Fathers and Purgatory’ *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11: 2 (2009) p153

²⁰⁷ *Mysterium* p11

way dependent upon our sin. However, death tears apart the being of man as God envisages it, so it is in death that the key moment of the Incarnation must take place: 'Only in death, through the divine judgement does a man receive his definitive orientation. This is why Christ's redemption of mankind had its decisive completion not, strictly speaking with the Incarnation or in the continuity of mortal life, but in the hiatus of death.'²⁰⁸ And therefore, the mid-point of the restorative action of redemption must be the place of the original rupture: death or Hades.²⁰⁹

In saying that death is the restorative place of redemption need not point beyond the cross and the history of Christian theology would agree with this. Writers such as Maximus Confessor, Ambrose, and Augustine all point to the inevitable link that there must be between Incarnation and the Passion so that 'he who says Incarnation, also says Cross'²¹⁰. And that must be the shaping of our lives too – if we are to be his disciples, our lives must also be shaped by the Cross. Christianity is not simply to be an incarnationalism – we do not simply take root in the profane world, we die to it too. Certainly in parish ministry, it can be too easy to concentrate on those aspects of life which bring success in human terms and growth: those aspects, which seem to tie us too closely to the Cross – and surely bereavement and funerals ministry comes close here – can be seen as unattractive and unrewarding work. But God himself, Balthasar comments, 'in the moment of the world's very perdition, attains his most authentic revelation and

²⁰⁸ Ibid p13

²⁰⁹ Ibid p12

²¹⁰ Ibid p22

glorification'.²¹¹ This must have a profound impact on the shape of Christian mission for the church today: if it ignores those aspects to its mission which drive it to the cross and reveal the perdition of the community which it serves, in favour of work which appears to showcase human glory, it has lost its authentic voice.

The gospel writers all drive us towards the Passion – Balthasar points to the repeated use of the Greek word *δεῖ* (it is necessary) that punctuates Mark's gospel²¹². The gospel story cannot be told without it, and whilst it is undoubtedly a danger to ignore completely the impact of the Incarnation - so for example, very little attention is paid to it in the Church's creeds – the focus of our theology must remain at the cross. If the gospel writers all push us forward to that moment, the writers of the epistles bring us back there too – as Paul reminds the Galatians, he will glory only in the Cross (Gal 6.14), and to the Corinthians, he resolves to know nothing except Christ and him crucified (I Cor 2.2). Balthasar's focus on the cross and passion accords well with the New Testament witness.

The key text of Philippians 2 must not be ignored in any understanding of the kenosis of God. Balthasar recognises the difficulty of dealing with it briefly, when so much has been written on it by the Fathers and tradition, to say nothing of the vast range of exegesis that has arisen from it. He gives some space to the Fathers and one suspects that the quotation that he cites from Augustine²¹³ – it was with a stooping down that the Incarnation began – would find resonance in him, for whom

²¹¹ Ibid 14

²¹² Ibid 17

²¹³ Ibid p26

St John's gospel with its theme of being lifted up is so key in the expression of divine glory. But he considers that the Fathers fall short in their understanding of the kenosis, because none of them set it properly within the Trinitarian life of God. He argues that it can be glimpsed in Phil 2, though of course the language is not there to express it. In that hymn we see two images of God – the Father who is still in Old Testament colours and shares his glory with no other, and the Son who in his divine freedom can bind himself to the obedience of a slave. But he recognises that this disjunction in the attitudes of the Father and Son will not do: it is the Father who does not think it necessary to hold onto the Son and 'gives him up for our sake' as St Paul maintains in Rom 8.32 and Jesus himself implies to Pilate in Jn 19.11. And the Holy Spirit is consistently referred to in Scripture as the gift of both Father and Son. Only in Richard of St Victor, Balthasar argues, can we see support for his position that in the Incarnation, the triune God has not simply helped the world, but disclosed himself most deeply in what is his own.²¹⁴ This means that in seeing God, what we see most, is absolute love rather than absolute power and God's sovereignty is manifest not in holding onto what is his own, but in abandoning it. Balthasar agrees with Paul Althaus when he says that 'in the total powerlessness, the death anguish, of the Crucified... the full undiminished divinity is at work.... With this recognition... the old conception of God's immutability falls into pieces'.²¹⁵

In his next chapter, 'The Death of God as the Wellspring of Salvation, Revelation and Theology', Balthasar moves on to bring Holy Saturday into his understanding of kenosis. His first sub-heading in this chapter introduces a key thought for him: the

²¹⁴ Ibid p29

²¹⁵ Quoted ibid p33

hiatus. This is the gap between God and humanity that has opened up since the Fall and is seen supremely in death. He uses this term in other places to refer to the place where Jesus was in death, that is Hell. Balthasar's concern is to show that by God entering into the hiatus, or disjunction between humanity and God, He thereby redeems it and the fullness of God's plan for humanity is realised.

Balthasar's writing is full of Johannine allusion and language. If no one can see the Father except through the Son (John 1.18) then when the Son, the Word of the Father is dead, no one can see God, hear of him or attain him. The day exists – that is Holy Saturday – when God is inaccessible to humanity. The Word has now become silent and 'at the end of the Passion, when the Word of God is dead, the Church has no words left to say'.²¹⁶

This wordlessness of the Church is a useful reminder to theologians in assessing Balthasar's task. Perhaps it is justified to ask a theologian who wrote as much as Balthasar did – on the subject of Holy Saturday as much as anything else – what he can know of an absence of words. Yet a reminder of the importance of silence as the first response to death seems appropriate and resonates with Bonhoeffer's dictum that teaching about Christ begins in silence²¹⁷. Indeed, one of the difficulties that Balthasar faces in his theology of Holy Saturday is that the near silence that the New Testament imposes on Holy Saturday is filled by twenty centuries of speculative theology on the nature of hell and its chambers. At the heart of the increasingly bad-tempered exchanges between Pitstick and Oakes on

²¹⁶ Ibid p49

²¹⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer *Christology* London: Fontana, 1971 p1

Balthasar's theology appears to be a desire to accord with centuries of tradition on which chamber of hell it was that Christ entered, and provide definitive answers on matters which at best can only be tentative expressions of faith, and at worst, the product of wild medieval speculations.²¹⁸

For all that Balthasar offers many words in support of his theology, he allows for the silence of Holy Saturday to speak more eloquently than the centuries of tradition that followed it. He specifically criticises those who say too much in their speculation on the cross and death of Christ, saying that 'they make bold with words and concepts at a point where the Word of God is silent': when it comes to the Church's speculations on purgatory and limbo, it is not difficult to see exactly what Balthasar means. However, he is also critical of those who say 'too little, because philosophy does not measure that abyss into which the Word sinks down, and, having no inkling of it, closes the hiatus, or deliberately festoons the appalling thing with garlands'.²¹⁹ Once again, Balthasar shows his commitment to keeping the Cross and the silence of Holy Saturday together in his thought: the latter cannot just be dismissed as 'in-between time' until the Resurrection comes about.

The awfulness of silence in the face of death can be hard to manage in pastoral encounters. There is a temptation by people, inside and outside the church, to fill it with words. So we find an avoidance of the word 'death', in preference for

²¹⁸ See a series of articles in the Journal *First Things*, which begins with a contribution from both of them in 'Balthasar, hell and heresy: an exchange' *First Things* 168 (2006) pp 25-32 and continued in that journal and in the *International Journal of Systematic Theology*. The most recent article is from Oakes in 'Descensus and Development: a Response to recent rejoinders' *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 13:1 (2011) pp3-24

²¹⁹ *Mysterium* p65

euphemisms which speak of a person having 'gone' or 'passed away', or that they have 'lost someone'. Watson's comment about Common Worship not managing to say the person is dead seems pertinent here!²²⁰ And for those who would rush on too soon to the hope of Easter Day, a reminder to stay with the appalling tragedy and seeming hopelessness of Holy Saturday can enable sensitive ministry to those who are bereaved.

But Holy Saturday is a paradox because it is not simply the day on which the Word is silenced and the Church has nothing left to say. Balthasar insists that 'the death, and the dying away into silence, of the Logos so becomes the centre of what he has to say of himself that we have to understand precisely his non-speaking as his final revelation, his utmost word'.²²¹ Here is the utmost point of kenosis, and thus, the ultimate revelation of the self-emptying God. Karl Barth describes Christ as both the Humiliated One and the Exalted One: 'already exalted even in his humiliation and still the Humiliated One even in his exaltation'.²²² It is this understanding, with which Balthasar would agree, that makes sense of the Kenosis, so that in self-emptying, God does not divest himself of the Godhead, but defines it. With Barth, this finds supreme expression on the Cross: Balthasar extends it to be truest in the abyss, where 'all the world's salvation lies enclosed'.²²³

Nichols in his introduction argues that the reason that Balthasar pushes the final event of redemption back to Holy Saturday is that there, the active passion of God

²²⁰ See p47 & footnote 78 above.

²²¹ *Mysterium* p79

²²² Balthasar quotes of course from the German edition of *Kirchliche Dogmatik IV/1* p145, at *ibid* p80

²²³ *Mysterium* p72

Friday is made complete by the 'passive' passion of death. However, one of the difficulties that Balthasar must answer is precisely the silence of Scripture on this day that he finds so helpful. Scripture is not totally silent in the face of Christ's dying on the cross, and its words seem to underline the supremacy of the cross over the grave as the locus for humanity's ultimate redemption. Balthasar's words are full of Johannine vocabulary and imagery, but in his treatment of Good Friday, he does not engage with Jesus' final words from John's gospel: 'It is finished'. The Greek word here τετελεσται is from the vocabulary of the market place: the price is paid in full. If Balthasar pushes the final point of redemption beyond this moment on the cross, he is in danger of undermining John's scheme of redemption, whereby the cry of completion means exactly that.

Christ's cry can be understood within an eschatological framework, whereby the final fulfilment of these words remains in the future: seen in this light, Christ's presence in hell is the supreme moment of eschatological waiting for fulfilment. St Paul speaks of the whole of creation waiting with eager longing for its setting free from captivity (Romans 8.21) and it is in this eschatological waiting that the church lives through the centuries. If we follow Barth – and indeed the mainstream tradition – rather than Balthasar in locating redemption on the cross, rather than in hell, then we see that the eschatological waiting of church and creation is taken up into the Godhead on Holy Saturday.

2. From the Last Supper to Good Friday

In the remaining three chapters of *Mysterium Paschale*, Balthasar deals with each day of the triduum in turn. His exposition on Good Friday 'Going to the Cross'

includes his thoughts from the Last Supper and Gethsemane also. In stressing the link between the Incarnation and the Passion, it is again the kenosis of God that drives Balthasar's thinking. He links John 10.18, where Jesus says that he lays down his life of his own accord, with John 12.49, where Jesus says that he speaks only the words that his Father commands. The linking of these two verses is important for Balthasar as the first speaks of the divine command to lay down his life, whilst in the second, Jesus is speaking of the command to speak and the words to say – the context is still the Passion, but it links here also to the whole Incarnation. Throughout the gospels, the Incarnation is lived out in knowledge of the Passion.

It is also lived out in communion with his disciples, which leads Balthasar onto his reflections on the Eucharist as it relates to the Passion. Beyond the Last Supper, there is nothing: only that which it freely inaugurates, that is dying.²²⁴ But there is a tension here, which Jesus' words on the Bread of Life in John 6 make clear. On the one hand, some of Jesus' words there take on an almost Gnostic quality – it is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is useless; the words I have given you are spirit and life (John 6.63). But just before these words Jesus speaks of eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the Son of Man, and those who do this abide in Christ, and he in them (John 6.53, 56); indeed to do so is the way to resurrection. Balthasar says that it is at the Last Supper that these two seemingly contradictory attitudes find their unity. He rejects Bultmann's downplaying of the importance of the actual eating and drinking - St John affirms that the Word was made flesh, and there must

²²⁴ Ibid p96

be a unity between Christ's bodiliness and his words of Spirit that give life.²²⁵ The Church then receives this flesh through faith and through faith, the disciple grants Christ space in, and power of disposition over, his whole existence. Strengthened by the Eucharist, the Church fulfils its mission to serve in the place of death.

It is at the Mount of Olives that Balthasar says the Passion begins. Here, the Father distances himself from the Son as the Son pleads with Him; here, the Church, represented by the disciples, also is absent. In the final chapter, the thesis explores the place of lament – particularly drawing on the Psalms – in Christian worship. At the Mount of Olives – and in Gethsemane in the Synoptic gospels – Jesus utters his own laments in complaint to God²²⁶. Here, and elsewhere, Balthasar plays out the links with the Temptations. He points out that in the Garden – and indeed throughout the Passion – the temptation facing Jesus is played out without reference to the devil, unlike the Temptations at the beginning of his ministry. As he points out in *The Threefold Garland*, the temptations there showed the glories of the world, against which Jesus could hold out the glory of God, worthy of all adoration. Here, the temptations are between two images of God: one the all-powerful and all-good, the other a severe God of justice: 'The sun of love has disappeared behind the clouds: only the threat of divine thunder can be sensed'.²²⁷ This quotation surely reveals a division within the godhead which Balthasar takes too far. It is an accusation that Rahner levels against Balthasar elsewhere in relation to Holy Saturday – this accusation surely holds good here too. To speak

²²⁵ Ibid p97

²²⁶ See in particular the discussion of the use of Ps 42 at p181

²²⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar *The Threefold Garland: The World's Salvation in Mary's Prayer* San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982 p46

only of two contradictory images of God does seem to forget the divine offering of self as a gift, and that gift freely offered since the beginning of time.

Balthasar follows the journey of the Passion through the surrender of Christ in the Garden, through the trial of Christ. He was suspicious of much New Testament studies, concerned as it was with analysis of text rather than seeing it as a unity: his concern here is not to provide detailed exegesis of each verse, but to provide a theology that underlines the unity of the gospel within the Christian story. So the various characters in the story represent different groups in the story of God. Indeed, Judas can represent different groups almost simultaneously – he is faithless Israel as he hands over Jesus, but (perhaps mindful not to be accused of anti-Semitism), Balthasar also emphasises that he is also ‘the visible agent of all that sinners – Christians, Jews, pagans – do in common’²²⁸. At the trial, Judas is representative of the disciples who hand Jesus over to the Chosen People, the Jews, who in turn hand him over to the non-Chosen people, the Roman officials: all of humanity is implicated in Christ’s death. Balthasar builds up the increasing alienation of Jesus from all around him. Even towards his mother, there is alienation: on the cross, as Mary looks to stand close, Jesus creates distance between them by handing her over to John. At this moment, Mary has solidarity in the Cross: the Father forsakes the Son, and the Son forsakes the Mother, by handing her over to another.²²⁹ Jesus is now utterly alone from all those who loved him, those on earth and those in heaven.

²²⁸ *Mysterium* p110

²²⁹ *Ibid* p126

Despite this utter abandonment, Balthasar is consistent in reminding the reader that at the point of forsakenness, the glory of God is also revealed: 'in the ecce homo, we hear an ecce Deus too'.²³⁰ In John's gospel, this could not be clearer: the lifting up of the Son of Man on the cross is the revelation of the glory of God – it is a single indivisible happening. This is why the one who comes on the clouds in Revelation 1.7 is the pierced one – it is there that God is revealed.

The Church's mission, as the Body of Christ, is at the Cross. There, Jesus' arms are flung open wide to embrace the whole world, and the pouring of water and the blood, the sacramental symbols of the Church, from his side, ties his Church into the crucifixion: 'the whole Church, insofar as she is in all seriousness (through the Eucharist) the body of Christ, must be co-crucified with her Head, and that, in the first place, without a retrospect onto the subjective suffering of Christians, but rather through the sheer fact of her existence and the logic of her faith.'²³¹ It is in standing at this place that the Church finds the means to reach out to the world in love. The danger for the church is that it has found its place at the cross to be uncongenial and has moved itself to the other side of Easter in the hope that the glories on that side of the horizon will attract people across. Ministering at the time of death and in funerals is one way that the church can remind itself of its calling to stand at the foot of the cross and offer hope there.

3. Holy Saturday

And so to Holy Saturday. Silence again fills his thoughts and words: this quotation from the first volume of *Explorations in Theology* makes this clear:

²³⁰ Ibid p118

²³¹ Ibid p134

What the spoken word could not do – it only provoked increasing resistance – was done by the sacrificed Word slowly dissolving in the words of the Cross and, finally, fading away into the tremendous, inarticulate death cry which sums up all – the spoken and the unspoken and the inexpressible – that God had to communicate to us.²³²

And paradoxically it is in silence that we understand the final and utmost revelation of the Word: ‘the death, and the dying away into silence, of the Logos so becomes the centre of what he has to say of himself that we have to understand precisely his non-speaking as his final revelation, his utmost word’.²³³ There may be few words from the cross, but there are still words. It is only in the grave that Christ is utterly silent – and it is here that the final revelation of God is given. And the gospels, in sympathy with this silence, no longer show the eloquence with which they have described the Passion generally: on Holy Saturday, the gospels are silent too. ‘We are grateful to them for this.’²³⁴ Early Christian writings from the Shepherd of Hermas onwards have provided speculation and stories around what Christ was doing in hell, but the gospels themselves are silent – and apart from I Peter, which Balthasar must deal with at length, so is the rest of the New Testament. And if Balthasar has wanted to express Christian truths through paradox – true beauty being shown in the ugliness of the Cross, for example – now we have another one: the Word’s final revelation is made in the silence of the grave. Anyone who has sat alongside someone who has been bereaved will know that truth can come in the silence as much as it can with well-meant words of comfort offered to the other person.

²³² Hans Urs von Balthasar *Explorations in Theology Vol 1 The Word Made Flesh* San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989, p27

²³³ *Mysterium* p79

²³⁴ *Ibid* p148

Rambo comments that one of the difficulties that Balthasar faces is that his Holy Saturday theology must assume particularly complex dimensions, including the attempt 'to witness to events that exceed the boundaries of comprehension and resist articulation'.²³⁵ She believes that he retreats in *Mysterium Paschale* from a more fully idealised view of Holy Saturday, which had been mediated through Speyr's visions and is articulated in his earlier work *Heart of the World*. Here in a mystical retelling of John's Gospel, the divine incarnation is represented by the descent of God's heart, into the world. From the cross, what survives is a tiny drop, barely alive, and it is this trickle that goes down into hell. This trickle is all that is left of the love of God in Jesus: it is the bond of the Spirit which is driven down into hell with the Son, so that the Trinity is never severed, but stretched to its weary limits. Love cannot march triumphant into hell, as some notions of the harrowing of hell insist upon, but makes its weary way, forging a path through the trackless ways of hell. Rambo insists that this weary Spirit gives substance to an undeveloped pneumatology in Balthasar's understanding of Holy Saturday: 'this securing Spirit ensures that the Godhead does not sever, that the divine Being can die but not die a tragic death. In a sense, the Spirit is the necessary hinge between tragedy and triumph.'²³⁶

Balthasar's mystical writings in *Heart of the World* were not well received, and Rambo suggests that he deliberately seeks to give a more systematic approach to his subject in *Mysterium Paschale*, thereby losing some of his pneumatological

²³⁵ Shelly Rambo *Spirit and Trauma A Theology of Remaining* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010 p61

²³⁶ Ibid p71

force. Balthasar is clear, however, that it is the bond of the Spirit in hell that ensures that the Trinity is not severed with the death of the Son of God in hell, and Rambo's criticism seems unjustified. He does accept, however, that von Speyr's visions find less space for articulation in *Mysterium Paschale*. He puts this down to a lack of time: Rambo suspects that it is done in an attempt to find greater theological acceptance for their task than was found in *Heart of the World* – she complains that 'the body of Speyr must be theologically erased' in the later work to make it theologically digestible to Balthasar's readers²³⁷.

Underlying all of Balthasar's concerns to emphasise the death of God on Holy Saturday is the well-known dictum of Irenaeus, which is quoted by Balthasar – only that which has been assumed can be healed and saved. Holy Saturday rather than Good Friday is the logical end place for the world's redemption, because the 'deadness' of the grave is the last aspect of humanity and mortality to be assumed by the Son of God. If death has been redeemed, Jesus must have experienced it in precisely the same way as we did. Therefore on Holy Saturday, he is dead. Balthasar is uncomfortable with those parts of tradition that see Jesus march in triumph into Hell and perform all manner of activities. Even the Creed, which speaks of Christ having 'descended to the dead' gives to a dead man an active verb. Surely we should rather say that he was with the dead.²³⁸ Jesus was dead in precisely the same way as we one day will all be dead – this solidarity with the whole of humanity is vital if our redemption is to be complete.

²³⁷ Ibid p68

²³⁸ *Mysterium* p150

The only two references in Scripture that ascribe any activity to Jesus in the grave are in I Pet 3.19 and 4.6 (though Balthasar acknowledges that many commentators have denied that they are a reference to Christ's death²³⁹). In the former text the writer speaks of Jesus 'in the spirit' making a proclamation to the spirits in prison, whilst in 4.6, he maintains that the gospel was proclaimed to the dead by Jesus. These texts do appear to be a problem for Balthasar's line of argument. He stresses the solidarity Jesus manifests to the dead by preaching to them, but the problem is that he is involved in an activity – preaching – which completely undermines one of the key qualities of being dead – that is total inactivity! Perhaps all that can be said is that here again is paradox – activity is ascribed to he who is by definition inactive – yet it is difficult to see when paradox simply becomes contradiction.

By going down to the dead, and, as the silent Word, preaching to the dead spirits there, salvation is brought to those who are there. Great anxieties have been expressed through the Christian ages as to who precisely was able to benefit from Christ's preaching in Hell. Balthasar will have none of the fourfold divisions of Hell that the Church Fathers and Scholastics established – and which indeed are used by commentators such as Oakes and D'Costa to speculate on what sort of universalist theology is permissible within Balthasar's scheme. He says that it is poor theology to say that Christ could not bring salvation to one particular chamber, and rejects any notion of divisions within Hell. There are no depths of Hell that Christ could not reach or God would not go. But in Hell, God the Son is utterly cut off from his Father, and yet it is in this place of being the Son being cut off from the Father, that

²³⁹ Ibid p156

our salvation is wrought. Oakes comments that in Hell, the most essential component of the *Gestalt* 'is the depth of God's self-emptying love in letting the Son taste fully the depths of divine reprobation'.²⁴⁰ The concerns that Pitstick and D'Costa show for maintaining a traditional understanding of the fourfold chambers of Hell are no doubt intended to offer reassurance to those concerned that the Catholic teaching they have received is contradicted. However, for those bereaved people concerned that their loved ones are suffering in limbo or in purgatory, Balthasar's insights offer clear-sighted comfort.

In Hell, all those who are there are given the chance of salvation through Christ's death: there is none who is excluded from this possibility. Naturally, many have concluded from this that Balthasar is arguing for some sort of universalist theology, whereby Hell is now empty. He is anxious to deny this possibility:

The desire to conclude from this that all human beings, before and after Christ, are henceforth saved, that Christ by his experience of Hell has emptied Hell, so that all fear of damnation is now without object, is a surrender to the opposite extreme (i.e. of saying that there were places in Hell which Christ could not reach).... We have to say that precisely here the distinction between Hades and Hell acquires its theological significance. In rising from the dead, Christ leaves behind him Hades, that is, the state in which humanity is cut off from access to God. But, by virtue of his deepest Trinitarian experience, he takes 'Hell' with him, as the expression of his power to dispose, as judge, the everlasting salvation or the everlasting loss of man.²⁴¹

Despite Balthasar's words, he is still used as an apologist for universalism – or at least for providing succour to those who see the possibility of salvation for those who have not explicitly accepted Christ. Ironically, in Oakes' article exploring this

²⁴⁰ Edward T Oakes 'Internal Logic' p192

²⁴¹ *Mysterium* p177

idea, and in D'Costa's reply, both rely on the Scholastics' fourfold division of Hell with which Balthasar refuses to engage.²⁴²

Hades ceases to exist as a result of Christ's death, because it was the place beyond God: now God has entered into death. And so the notion of Hell is created as a result of the death of Christ – and so the meaning of Hell must be understood christologically because it was in Christ that it found its existence. As John Webster points out, what this means is that God refuses to abandon those who have abandoned him and he is found even in the place of abandonment: 'because he shares Hell with the sinner, the sinner's wilful attempt to live and die without God is forestalled'.²⁴³ What it does not mean is that all those in Hell are automatically saved, as Balthasar seeks to make clear in the above quotation.

Balthasar follows Barth in rejecting any notion of double predestination – another source of the criticism that he is a universalist. Christ's descent into Hell and his preaching to the spirits there means that there can be no notion that some have been predestined to Hell from the beginning of time. It was for this reason that Origen was condemned as heretical by the early church and Balthasar follows Origen closely. Thomas White points out that it has been official doctrine of the Catholic Church since 1658, when Pope Innocent X issued a bull against Jansenism, to say that Christ died for all human beings, rather than just for those predestined to salvation – Balthasar, in this regard at least, is squarely in line with official

²⁴² See Oakes 'Internal Logic' and D'Costa 'Descent into Hell' for the discussion

²⁴³ John Webster 'Hans Urs von Balthasar: The Paschal Mystery' *Evangel 1.4* (1983) p5

Catholic teaching.²⁴⁴ But if he says that the effect of Christ's death is to save those who are in Hell, then there can be no one who is not saved and Hell must be empty. Webster rather sees Balthasar's universalism as consisting of the acknowledgement that God is present universally to the blessed, and to the damned in Hell. If the dead Christ is able to proclaim the gospel to the spirits, perhaps there is also a way in which the dead spirits can make their response to him: even in Hell, there is the opportunity to respond to God. In Hell, as on earth, God cannot compel his will on anyone to be saved: even in death, we have the opportunity to accept or reject. Even the deepest abyss will be forever illuminated by the heavenly shimmer of light²⁴⁵ and those who dwell there in death have the chance forever to be drawn to that light.

This is an extraordinary picture of Hell that Balthasar paints. No longer can it be seen as the place of utter darkness: even as the place of God-forsakenness, it is the place that God has been on Holy Saturday. In a pastoral setting, the notion of Hell as being a place still within the grasp of God could have a profound and comforting message to those who are in pain or who mourn the loss of loved ones. Oakes comments that the church may still not be ready to accept the full implications of von Balthasar's theology here, but perhaps a full appreciation of its context of writing after the horrors of Nazism and communism, there will come a time when his words will be more appreciated.²⁴⁶

²⁴⁴ Thomas Joseph White 'On the Universal Possibility of Salvation' *Pro Ecclesia* XVII: 3 (2008) p270

²⁴⁵ *Mysterium* p168

²⁴⁶ 'Internal Logic' p199

Nor is Balthasar alone amongst theologians in seeing Holy Saturday as a place of redemption for all humanity. In his commentary on the Apostles' Creed, the Protestant theologian, Wolfhart Pannenberg, describes Hell as the absence of God rather than in physical terms. He suggests that the power of the phrase, 'He Descended into Hell' is the acknowledgement that redemption is now available to all, and, as the early church father Origen acknowledged, Adam himself is rescued from hell on Holy Saturday as the representative of all humanity.²⁴⁷ Pannenberg's interpretation would seem to provide for an emptier Hell than that with which Balthasar would be comfortable, yet it is clear that the Catholic theologian had allies for his interpretation of Holy Saturday.

4. Easter Day

The final chapter of *Mysterium Paschale* is devoted to 'Going to the Father: Easter'. Having poured so much of his emotional energy into his exposition of Holy Saturday, Easter Day could seem like something of a necessary coda to the main theme. However, Balthasar avoids this error. He starts his chapter with the affirmation that 'the whole New Testament is unanimous on this point: the Cross and burial of Christ reveal their significance only in the light of the event of Easter'²⁴⁸. Once again, the Resurrection must be understood in Trinitarian terms. Just as on Holy Saturday, the Trinity was revealed in the separation of Father and Son, though kept together through the bond of the Spirit, so now on Easter Day there is union once again. The preaching of St Peter on the Day of Pentecost, where the Holy Spirit is revealed to God's people, keeps this event within the

²⁴⁷ Wolfhart Pannenberg *The Apostles' Creed* London: SCM Press, 1972 p93

²⁴⁸ *Mysterium* p189

Trinity. According to Acts 2.24, it is God the Father who raises Christ from the dead – the Son, having been separated from the Father, the Father is able to reach down through the Spirit, into the furthest regions of Hell, to raise him from the dead.

Balthasar affirms the Resurrection as an event without analogy, as one ‘which pierces our whole world of living and dying in a unique way’,²⁴⁹ but as a unique event it is one that provides definition and meaning for the life of all Christians. And, just as the appearances of the Risen One always issue in mission in the New Testament, so we find our meaning within the Resurrection in mission. Again, the Trinitarian context for this is important, as the giving of the Holy Spirit in John 20 makes clear. Jesus acknowledges that he has been sent by the Father, and so in his turn sends the disciples: he then breathes on them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (John 20.21f).

The place given to the Virgin Mary and Peter in the Passion accounts and Resurrection appearances – particularly in Jesus’ reinstatement of Peter in John 21 – provide the identity of the Church. Balthasar balances the institutional role given to Peter with the place of love as exemplified by Mary, and indeed the Beloved Disciple. Balthasar’s allegorical reading of John’s gospel does sit uneasily with his academic scholarship, and it is no doubt for readings such as these that he is described as the most traditional of twentieth century theologians. However, when he goes on to talk about the mission of the church, it is easier to find common ground with him. The founding of the Church cannot be an end in itself: it must

²⁴⁹ Ibid p194

always be open to the world. If the whole world is reconciled to God through the Cross and Resurrection, it must always be the task of the church to proclaim this message. His concluding words in the book sum up the place of all Christians within the *Mysterium Paschale*:

Since we stand under the law of the risen One, he places us on the way of the Cross, and we travel our way of the Cross only in his power, and his hope, who, as the Risen One, has already won the victory. That is why the Church, and Christians, can occupy no determinate place within the *Mysterium Paschale*. Their place is neither in front of the Cross, nor behind it, but on both its sides'.²⁵⁰

D. Conclusion

It should not be a difficult task to find a theologian who has given extensive treatment to the death and resurrection of Christ, so that their thinking could be used in the pastoral context of working with the bereaved or conducting a funerals ministry. However, Balthasar does provide particular riches. His theological aesthetics are a reminder that theological beauty, or the glory of the Lord finds its true definition in the Cross, a place where few others would seek to look for beauty. Further, his theo-dramatics is eminently helpful in practical theology, because it allows us to be participants in the story.

In *Mysterium Paschale* and especially through his treatment of Holy Saturday, there is much that can be drawn upon by the practical theologian for funeral ministry. In

²⁵⁰ Ibid p265f

speaking of standing on both sides of the cross, the purpose of the church is brought into focus. To move straight from passion to resurrection is to ignore the wait of Holy Saturday, the day of darkness, of death, of silence. To make this day a day of triumphant entry, or victorious harrowing is to remove its distinctive witness and to rush on too soon to the joy of Easter Day.²⁵¹

From the perspective of English theologians, the work of William Vanstone seems immediately applicable. He does not refer to Balthasar in his two principal works, *Love's Endeavour*, *Love's Expense* and *The Stature of Waiting*, yet he draws on some of the themes of which Balthasar speaks. In the former work, written in 1977 – a decade or so after *Mysterium Paschale* – Vanstone heads one of his chapters The Kenosis of God, and links that kenosis back to creation itself²⁵². He does not push it back as far back as Balthasar, but nonetheless has a useful perspective on it. Vanstone's later work offers many parallels with the 'in-between time' nature of Holy Saturday. Vanstone points out that from the time of Gethsemane until his death on the cross, Christ is passive. He is 'done to' rather than the instigator of the action – and yet, it is at this moment of his life that our salvation is wrought²⁵³.

By waiting with Holy Saturday, other theologians have also found rich tools for their own theological projects. Rambo uses Balthasar's theology to underpin a theology of remaining in the midst of trauma. It is her claim that in trauma studies a trauma is described as an encounter with death: to this encounter, theology must speak.

²⁵¹ Rambo *Spirit* p64

²⁵² W.H. Vanstone *Love's Endeavour*, *Love's Expense* London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1977 – see particularly pp55ff

²⁵³ Vanstone *The Stature of Waiting* London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1982 – particularly pp88ff

Indeed, Christians do speak confidently of death and life, and point to the Easter hope of resurrection. However, in speaking too soon of resurrection, theologians fail to address the realities of traumatic suffering. 'Trauma disrupts this narrative (of death and life), turning our attention to a more mixed terrain of remaining, one that I will identify as the 'middle'.'²⁵⁴ Rambo identifies this 'middle' with Holy Saturday, and finds in there a theology that allows for remaining in that space, before moving on to Easter resurrection. In that middle, the fragile, wounded Spirit, which Rambo identifies from *Heart of the World* speaks to the trauma victim and reminds them that between death and life there is a testimony to Spirit 'to a love that survives and remains not in victory but in weariness'.²⁵⁵

It is startling that a Christian theologian should not want to press on to Easter victory, but in the context of providing space for victims of trauma, a recognition of the place of remaining in the 'middle' is pastorally wise. Holy Saturday can equally give space to those who have experienced bereavement and are coming to terms with the death of a loved one. As Alan Lewis points out 'the Good Friday scene, when observed from the first Easter Saturday (sic), is intrinsically unbearable',²⁵⁶ and this is the viewpoint that the world to which the church is called observes. We know that the cross leads onto resurrection but the middle day keeps the two events apart, not simply as an in-between day, but as an empty void –a nothing, shapeless and meaningless. Lewis continues:

Perhaps we are on the way to some insight into the meaning of Christ's cross and resurrection if and when we can stand – as, intriguingly, so few in

²⁵⁴ Ibid p6

²⁵⁵ Ibid p80

²⁵⁶ Lewis *Between Cross and Resurrection* p41

history seem consciously to have done – at the ambiguous, invisible and apparently insignificant boundary between Good Friday and Easter Day. Where better than at the Easter Saturday (sic) grave to see with clarity the vivid contrast between the humiliation of the crucified Christ and his glorified exaltation? Where better to find the wisdom which can unite cross and resurrection inextricably and discover truth in such foolishness as presence-in-absence, powerful weakness and life-giving death? Where better to hold in equilibrium the first-time hearing of the gospel story and its constant retelling by the people of faith? ²⁵⁷

To stand here is to stand in the place of so many mourners who call upon the Church for assistance as they plan the funeral of a loved one. It well behoves us to know the ground well ourselves that we might provide a guide that leads on to Easter.

²⁵⁷ Ibid p42

Chapter 5: Balthasar's impact on funeral ministry

A. The power of Holy Saturday

A practical theology of funerals should be able to use Balthasar's work on the triduum and see how it applies to the content and structure of the service. In particular, if we accept Oakes' claim that Balthasar's work on Holy Saturday is the central innovation of his thought, it should have the potential to speak to this ministry: it is on Holy Saturday that the Saviour assumes the same state as those who are the focus of the funeral, that is the dead. Sheppy suggests that a Christian funeral is primarily 'a remembrance of this person's death in the context of the Easter event';²⁵⁸ he would no doubt concur with Balthasar in remembering that it is not just Easter Day that is impot but also Good Friday and particularly Holy Saturday.

This chapter will analyse the content of the funeral service to see where it speaks of the three days of Easter, but before it does that, it considers the question of for whom and for what purpose is the funeral carried out. Balthasar's work on Holy Saturday, along with his insights into the kenosis of God, both are particularly pertinent to these questions.

²⁵⁸ Sheppy *Death Vol 1* p8

The question of whether the funeral is for the dead or for the bereaved has not had a straight forward answer since the sixteenth century. The Protestant insistence that there was nothing that could be done for the dead shifted the emphasis of the funeral away from praying that God would accept his faithful departed servant, to exhorting the faithful – or indeed faithless – living to turn to God. As church ministers have grown less confident about preaching a message of repentance at funerals, the function of comforting the bereaved by remembering and giving thanks for the deceased has come to the fore.

However, Balthasar's insistence that it was on Holy Saturday that the ultimate moment of redemption was wrought challenges Protestant funeral theology. Jesus' identification with our humanity is not now with the living but with the dead: the funeral then can be for them, rather than just for the living. Furthermore, if Jesus preaches to the dead spirits in hell, as Balthasar maintains in his exposition of I Peter, he addresses the dead in funerals too. Following Irenaeus, Christ assumed the state of death that those who are dead might also be offered the opportunity of redemption.

The purposes of the funeral as stated by the 1965 Liturgical Commission allow for the fact that the funeral is for the dead as much as for the living; as do the opening greeting of the minister, as will be seen below. However, the practice of a private committal prior to a Service of Thanksgiving directly challenges this viewpoint and also undermines the reality of death by removing the body from view. Given that only immediate family will attend the first service, most people do not even see the

coffin. The underlying reasons given for this tend to be that the family want a service of thanksgiving, and the presence of the coffin will only emphasise the grief felt. Convinced Christians also articulate a wish to emphasise strongly the resurrection hope that accompanies a funeral: somehow the presence of a dead body is seen to undermine this. Thomas Long rails hard against clergy who collude with this: 'pastors who would never imagine that a celebration of Holy Communion would somehow be 'more spiritual' without the signs of the body, the bread and the wine, seem often ready to banish the dead from their own funerals'.²⁵⁹

It is at odds with a theology that takes the death and burial of Jesus as seriously as we proclaim his resurrection: the presence of the body at the funeral reminds us of Good Friday and the need to go onto Holy Saturday before we can reach Easter Day. Long's plea for the dead to be welcomed again to their own funerals²⁶⁰ appears to be falling on increasingly deaf ears.

The presence of the coffin as a reminder of Holy Saturday should also give the minister reason to ponder on the extent of the gospel proclaimed to the dead. At the heart of Balthasar's vision of Christ in death is the light of God extending to all even in the nether chambers of Hell: there is none who are beyond the possibility of God's redeeming light. Given that the Church of England's funeral ministry frequently takes place amongst those who have no expressed faith and little other church contact, a reminder of the place of Holy Saturday can provide theological

²⁵⁹ Long *Accompany Them* p32

²⁶⁰ Ibid p35

succour to those who wish to offer hope to mourners that their loved ones can still see the light of God in death.

Long's reasoning for the funeral being for the dead, as much as for the living, is shaped by Protestant theology, rather than Balthasar's Catholicism. He argues that ministers have been shaped too long by therapeutic and psychological categories: the purpose of the funeral is not just to comfort the bereaved, or even simply for their benefit: it is also to tell the gospel story and reaffirm the baptismal identity of the one who has died. He dislikes intensely the practice of holding a private funeral service and subsequent public memorial service. Long concludes:

One of the clearest and most needed reforms in the funeral practices of many Christian communities is the honouring of the bodies of the deceased. The Christian dead should be welcomed once again to their own funerals. If they cannot be literally there in bodily presence, then we must summon every gift of language we have to establish their embodied presence in our memories and imaginations. How else are we going to experience the blessed burden of carrying them to the waiting arms of God, singing as we go?²⁶¹

It is notable that the key texts for him, such as the Apostolic Constitution from which he takes the quotation for the title of his book, come from the Patristic period: he deliberately draws on the earliest Christian practice to shape modern funeral rites.

Balthasar's insights are also helpful when considering the question as to the purpose of a funeral. Tony Walter states this most bluntly when he says that psychologically the main purpose of the funeral is to remind people that the person

²⁶¹ Ibid p35

is dead: we must know Good Friday in order to see the joy of Easter Sunday.²⁶²

Liturgically, this means that we must respond to death with lament, as much as we are able to respond with thanksgiving for the hope of Easter Day: the substance of this chapter and the next will examine how these themes come through.

However, it is also possible to look at the funeral from an anthropological point of view and see how Balthasar's notions of kenosis can inform the service. Arnold van Gennep in his seminal work *The Rites of Passage*, published in 1905, points to a threefold division within rites of passage between rites of separation, rites of transition and rites of incorporation. He also refers to these as pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal rites.²⁶³ Funeral rites worldwide are dominated by rites of separation and rites of transition. Anthropological studies of other cultures emphasise the use of lament to underpin this separation and transition.²⁶⁴ It is self-evident that the chief emotion accompanying these rites is grief: what is extraordinary about many modern funeral rites in this country is that it is precisely this grief which is suppressed. Whilst there has been an increased awareness of the human mind and emotions over the last one hundred years which has stressed to society the importance of expression of grief at the time of death there has also been a popular move to suppress grief in the chief rite of passage that accompanies death in this country.

²⁶² Walter *Funerals* p125

²⁶³ Arnold van Gennep *The Rites of Passage* London: Routledge & Paul, 1965 p11

²⁶⁴ See for example Loring M Danforth *The Death Rituals of Rural Greece* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982, pp12ff for examples of how lament is expressed by bereaved families.

The pain of separation that accompanies bereavement is echoed in Balthasar's understanding by the separation at the heart of the kenosis of God. It is remarkable that when Balthasar speaks of the 'abyss-like depths' that the Father experiences, he is speaking not of the Passion, or even the Incarnation, but the very begetting of the Son from all eternity. At the heart of the relationship of love within the Godhead is separation – even whilst there is also the union of love. This separation is stretched to its furthest limit in the depths of Hell on Holy Saturday yet the union is never broken. Because separation is never absolute, there is the possibility of transition back from that point of separation to a close union with the Father again.

What might this mean for the dead and bereaved? Union and separation can be seen in relationships of love: as the Genesis account tells it, man and woman join in one flesh in marriage. However, there is also separation, because union does not mean identity. Clearly most relationships will not be as close as the ties of marriage, so the separation within love will be more readily acknowledged. In death, the separation between loved ones is stretched to its furthest limits, and yet it is also possible to say that it is not broken because of the hope of resurrection. The Christian doctrine of the Communion of Saints reminds us that there is still connection between the living and the dead.

It is extraordinary then to claim that the funeral is not for the dead, because the deceased is one of the covenant partners within the relationship of love going through separation. If the deceased person is absent from the service itself, there

is an unhelpful asymmetry to the rite of passage undergone. When Balthasar speaks of kenosis as being central to an understanding of God, it demands a response from the church in how it conducts its worship: a God who suffers with us and empties himself on behalf of his beloved will point mourners to a God who is with them in their grief. It also means that the funeral does something for the one who has died in acknowledging his or her separation and entrusting them in their transition to the Communion of Saints.

Sheppy describes the exegesis of the descent myth as offering 'a theological and pastoral basis for future liturgical experiment'.²⁶⁵ It is certainly that part of the three days of Easter which is most ignored in forming our liturgies. Key questions are:

- how far does the funeral allow expression for mourning and grief as well as thanksgiving?
- does it acknowledge the pain of separation as well as the transition for the deceased towards the hope of glory?

In looking at these themes, it will be important to look at the personalised texts as well as the structured liturgy: most funerals now conducted by Church of England ministers will have tributes from the family, poems read and favourite pieces of music played, as well as the Common Worship framework.²⁶⁶ There is a move towards 'Services of Thanksgiving' where those attending are asked not to wear black: the emphasis is away from marking the sorrow of the occasion to giving

²⁶⁵ Sheppy *Death Vol 1* p84

²⁶⁶ I am aware that in addition to informal content, there has been an increase in symbolic actions at a funeral, such as the release of a dove or balloons after the service, or the distribution of flowers or candles. These, along with symbolic actions that encompass more formal liturgy, such as the censing of the coffin, are beyond the scope of this thesis

thanks for a life well lived. Undoubtedly, on the death of a loved one, there are many reasons to give thanks which can well be articulated at a funeral service, but nobody would ever suggest that grief is not also present: the key question is how that grief should be expressed as part of the service. If all the texts used in the service deny the presence of death, or focus only on the hope of Easter Day, then that psychological purpose is undermined.

There is one important pastoral consideration which must be acknowledged first. The move towards personalised funerals over the last twenty years has meant that families will nearly always come to the planning of a funeral with ideas of songs and readings to use: often, these items will not be religious pieces. As noted in an earlier chapter, there is a tension for the officiating minister in allowing a family their desires for saying their farewells to loved ones, whilst not obscuring the Christian message which should be central to those funerals taken by the Church's ministers. To appear intransigent and insensitive will obscure the Christian message far more effectively than Eva Cassidy singing 'Songbird' as the coffin is brought in. The tension between a family's desire to pay tribute to their loved one with the priest's role to ensure that the gospel is preached is felt most acutely: it is very difficult for any sensitive clergyperson to suggest that a particular piece of music or poetry is not appropriate, or that it may be unhelpful for the committal to take place before the main service. Doctrinal and liturgical purity is nearly always trumped by pastoral sensitivity.

B. Person-Centred funerals

When Tony Walter made the argument for ‘person-centred’ funerals in 1990 in *Funerals and How to Improve Them*, he had to go to Melbourne, Australia to find good examples of this in practice. He would not have that problem today. Most funerals in Britain today embody the hope he expressed in that book – not least because of Walter’s influence on clergy and in his training of civil celebrants. However, despite the formal liturgy of the Book of Common Prayer, the personalisation of funerals is not a new phenomenon. Long points to the seventeenth century French courtier, Jacques Bossuet, who made a career of giving funeral orations in praise of the deceased, and no doubt Britain had his equivalents.²⁶⁷ In the 1549 prayer book, there is the permissive instruction following the reading of I Cor 15: ‘there may follow the sermon’, and orations in praise of the deceased would no doubt have featured on occasion. This instruction is removed in the 1662 prayer book – no doubt as part of the reaction to over-flowered tributes by men similar to Bossuet.

Theological support for personalised funerals can be found in Balthasar’s theological aesthetics. Notions of beauty may seem to be far removed from the content of a funeral, yet if we take seriously Balthasar’s comment that ‘beauty is the word that shall be our last’,²⁶⁸ rooted as it is in the love of God revealed in the cross of Christ, then there is reason to think it can be helpful. Whilst it is undoubtedly true that one of the driving forces in making each funeral unique and distinctive is a desire for each of us, even in death to be able to make a unique

²⁶⁷ See Long’s article ‘O Sing to me of heaven: Preaching at Funerals’ *Journal for Preachers* 29: 3 (2006) p21

²⁶⁸ Balthasar *Glory* Vol 1 p18

statement, love is not completely absent either. The bereaved want the funeral of the deceased to be unique and distinct because it is seen as a way of expressing their love for that person. Frank Sinatra's 'My Way' may sum up the desire for individualised funerals, but it would take a very cynical commentator to suggest that it was not also the offering of love for the deceased by his or her family. And whilst the love of humanity is a pale reflection, there is the opportunity for the officiating minister to point beyond that love towards the love of God in Christ. The accompanying notes to the funeral service regarding the sermon ring true: 'the purpose of the sermon is to proclaim the gospel in the context of the death of this particular person'.²⁶⁹

Similarly, Balthasar's notion of theodramatics offers fertile ground for contemplation of the funeral order. Using the contrasting genres of epic, lyric and drama, it does seem as though traditional religious funerals relied much more on the epic voice to proclaim the gospel truth. The long reading from I Cor 15 proclaims in detailed argument the hope of the resurrection of the body, but in language which has become increasingly unfamiliar to people today. This is not simply a matter of putting the words in modern English: the thrust of Paul's argument is not straightforward and there are references to practices such as baptism for the dead which make little sense today. There are of course glorious truths contained in the passage – Paul's cry of 'O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?' encapsulate in ringing and memorable words the heart of the Christian gospel. It is notable, however, that this passage from I Cor 15 is

²⁶⁹ Common Worship *Pastoral Services* p291

very rarely used in funerals today, although it remains one of the recommended options in *Common Worship*.

Drama brings together the objective voice of epic and subjective voice of lyric, and is a helpful way into modern funeral rites. As the theodrama unfolds from creation to incarnation and redemption, so we are drawn into it, through the Holy Spirit. This means that our lives become part of the story of the gospel: it is in our lives, that we see God's grace made real. Balthasar's insistence that the Incarnation of Christ reveals the grace and love of God as much as the Passion should also provide confidence to the Christian minister to speak of our incarnations as revelations of God's grace. The link between Incarnation and Passion also provides theological tools to assist families in their understanding of their loved one's own suffering. Funeral families are understandably reluctant to confront the pain and suffering of their loved one when speaking of them, and would prefer to dwell only on those aspects of their lives in which they were whole and vital: part of the Christian message is undoubtedly that God's grace became manifest in Christ's suffering, and can be seen also in the pain of their loved one's end.

Ewan Kelly's 'co-constructed' funerals as outlined in *Meaningful Funerals* could be seen as an attempt to take seriously the particular incarnation of the deceased. His starting point is that, whilst the resources a minister may draw upon 'may be informed by the liturgy of her religious tradition, they should not be imposed'.²⁷⁰ As part of his research for the book, he interviewed a number of families, on whose

²⁷⁰ Kelly *Meaningful Funerals* p2

behalf he had taken a funeral and his qualitative research forms much of the content of his book.²⁷¹

He actively engages with van Gennep's rites of passage and highlights a number of rituals, both before and after the funeral, which accord with pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal stages of ritual. He points to the rites of separation, transition and incorporation for both the bereaved and the deceased: the latter goes from the separation of death, the transition to the mortuary and through the rites of incorporation which the funeral itself brings, as the corpse is buried or cremated.²⁷² It is perhaps surprising that, as a Christian minister, Kelly says nothing of the person who has died being incorporated in a mystical sense into God.

Although the central chapter of the book is entitled 'Co-constructing funerals', at no point does he define precisely what is meant by this term – indeed on some occasions, he uses the synonym 'co-create'. However, his meaning seems to be that both minister and family have input into the content of the funeral. Stated thus, there is nothing contentious or even remarkable about this: it serves only as a reminder that the person taking the service should take time to get to know the family and find out what they would like to form part of the service. There is no doubting the pastoral skill and generosity of time that Kelly brings to his task: he is clear that no funeral should be put together as a result of a single encounter with the family, but at the initial meeting, the family should be left with numerous

²⁷¹ It is worth noting that sometimes the research took place very soon after the funeral. In one instance (p109), he spoke of a woman whose son had only died three months previously – given the traumatic nature of the events, this feels very soon afterwards, and may lead to justifiable questions of the merit of the responses given.

²⁷² Ibid p67ff

resources to look through, so that they can find poems and readings that resonate and at a second meeting, the service can be put together.

There is nothing wrong with this and his methodology is no different to the many civil celebrants who now take some 25% of all funerals in Britain today, as well as exemplifying good practice for clergy. What seems problematic in Kelly's argument is the place of the gospel narrative in the conversation. He quotes with approval a comment by Lynch and Willows who argue that 'in the utilisation of denominational liturgies or 'prayer book' funerals....stories from scripture or religious tradition can often be imposed on people's experience in a way that denies them an authentic voice'.²⁷³ The danger that is highlighted here must be acknowledged, but Kelly can appear guilty of the opposite tendency of suppressing the voice of Scripture or tradition altogether. His own background as a hospital and hospice chaplain may allow him to sit lighter to denominational resources than a parish priest would feel justified, but there are times in his book when it seems as though he wishes to move beyond any explicit mention of Christianity at all.²⁷⁴ When asked, as one funeral director did, 'do you find it hard not to mention the Lord?' his response is that it is sufficient that he as a representative of the church speaks implicitly of God, and the manner of the construction of the funeral underpinned Christ's pastoral and gracious encounters with people in Scripture.²⁷⁵ People want the minister to carry out the service because that is traditionally the minister's role – as

²⁷³ Quoted *ibid* p91

²⁷⁴ See the example given at p40 above

²⁷⁵ Kelly *Meaningful Funerals* p118

my own research into funerals in Hoddesdon over a five year period underlined.²⁷⁶

He quotes a poem by Anne Stevenson entitled 'The Minister', whose services are needed because he or she acts as a wordsmith: such a person has the skills to hold the service together, and there is nobody else who is able to do it.²⁷⁷

The changing scene of funerals in Britain today make it clear how precarious Kelly's justification is for his role. The minister may traditionally have been the wordsmith, but today there are just as many excellent civil celebrants who will happily carry out the task. In the blog, The Good Funeral Guide, there are many comments from such celebrants, who do not have any other work apart from constructing funerals and will not do more than two or three a week, in order to allow the process of co-construction to be fully thought through and to allow each funeral to be a unique celebration for the deceased's life.²⁷⁸ Most carry out their work without any religious perspective: can it really be said that the gospel is preached simply by the identity of the official taking the service, when an identical service conducted by a civil celebrant would make no such claim?

Kelly is right to identify the loss of the overarching meta-narrative of the Christian gospel and to recognise that many bereaved families would not recognise their place within that particular narrative. However, simply to abandon it, rather than engage with a dramatic process in which points of contact with the gospel are specifically made in the way that Balthasar may have envisaged, seems an

²⁷⁶ MFS study quoted p14 above

²⁷⁷ Kelly *Meaningful Funerals* p130

²⁷⁸ See for example the discussion that ensued the raise in Church of England fees for funerals – most celebrants set their fees in relation to the Church of England amount.
<http://www.goodfuneralguide.co.uk/2012/02/c-of-e-raises-funeral-fee-to-160/>

abdication of the Christian message. There is no doubting the pastoral power of Kelly's work: questions surely remain about its theological rigour.

Despite the limitations of Kelly's argument, there are good theological reasons for person-centred funerals and the process of 'co-construction' need not necessarily be problematic. Indeed, in his introduction, Kelly cites two examples from his own ministry which seem very explicitly Christian, and marry Scriptural resources with contemporary music and readings in a way that gave true expression to the Christian message in the context of the person who had died.²⁷⁹

There are three key elements to the informal texts which have abounded in recent times which can be considered from a theological point of view: the tribute or eulogy; poems or non-Scriptural readings; music (in this latter category, I am excluding for the time being hymns, which will be considered below). As far as readings and music are concerned, the pieces played are so diverse that it will only be possible to cite one or two popular examples to see how they aid or hinder the key themes of mourning and separation, thanksgiving and hope.

1. The tribute or eulogy

It has become increasingly common for a family member or friend to speak of their own memories of the deceased. Even when this does not happen, it is expected that the minister will give some outline of the person's life. Tributes are often humorous, and recount past tales which raise a smile or laugh amongst the

²⁷⁹ See Kelly *Meaningful Funerals* pp 4 – 9

congregation: when well-delivered, they undoubtedly bring the deceased to the mind of the congregation and enable all to give thanks for their lives. This accords well with the expressed purpose of the funeral stated by the minister in the introduction 'to give thanks for his/her life'.²⁸⁰ Such a purpose was absent from the 1965 Liturgical Commission's mind, and is a new introduction with Common Worship, yet undoubtedly seems to be an important part of what a funeral should do.

If the theological drama is played out in the context of the lived community, in the church and in people's lives, it seems justified in a funeral to set out the facts of that person's life, and the reasons why that person had an impact on our own lives. If the Incarnation is to be taken seriously, then it seems right that the particular incarnation of us all can be recounted and celebrated at our funerals.

The difficulty with many such eulogies is that they consider themselves bound by the social nicety not to speak ill of the dead. An aspect of grief that is very difficult to manage is that not all memories of the person will be happy ones: there will be occasions when the deceased failed his or her family and there will be occasions when family and friends failed the deceased. Similarly, if a person has died following long illness and painful death, those memories will be in people's minds and to ignore that period of a person's life altogether in favour of happier times seems to ignore the frailty of our lives which encompasses us all. Underpinning such eulogies is an attitude to life which wishes to deny grief, or refuse its

²⁸⁰ *Common Worship 'Funeral Service'* p260

expression in the central rite of passage connected to death. Whilst it may be difficult for those paying tribute to make reference to such painful things, it is important for the minister to find a way in the service to allow their expression.

The dilemma that is faced by the minister is that tributes and eulogies can be seen to take the place of the sermon. The Common Worship order provides that 'a sermon is preached'²⁸¹, which should underline the resurrection hope at the heart of the service but the prevalence of a personal tribute from a member of the family or a family friend can squeeze out the sermon altogether.²⁸² Certainly any brief analysis of orders of service prepared for funerals would suggest that the funeral sermon is often omitted: it may of course be that no mention is made of it in the order of service so as not to add to the despondency that the congregation already feel before the service starts.

2. Poems and readings

Even when the mourners do not feel that there is anyone who could give a tribute to the deceased, a poem is often read which has been sent to them in a condolences card, or was heard at another funeral. Diligent ministers may well provide a resources folder for the family to look through, not least to avoid having to listen to another rendition of 'Death is nothing at all' or 'Do not stand at my grave and weep'. Undoubtedly, there is a huge variation on the quality of these

²⁸¹ Common Worship 'Funeral Service' p263

²⁸² At a recent funeral carried out in my own church, there were seven personal tributes given. It was commented afterwards by one of the clergy present that, given that it was a funeral connected to the world of show business, each of the speakers performing a turn felt appropriate and in keeping with the service, but one wonders how anyone would have had the strength for a sermon from the vicar in addition!

poems: the purpose of this section is not to indicate a preference for the poetry of Christina Rossetti or Rabindranath Tagore to the sentiments of Hallmark Cards, but to see how the content of the poems accords with a Christian understanding of death and grieving.

a. Do not stand at my grave and weep by Mary Elizabeth Fry

Do not stand at my grave and weep
I am not there. I do not sleep.
I am a thousand winds that blow.
I am the diamond glints on snow.
I am the sunlight on ripened grain.
I am the gentle autumn rain.
When you awaken in the morning's hush
I am the swift uplifting rush
Of quiet birds in circled flight.
I am the soft stars that shine at night.
Do not stand at my grave and cry;
I am not there. I did not die.

This is undoubtedly one of the most popular poems to be read at a funeral. It could be said to offer hope to the family: its central message is that death is not the end for the deceased and there is life beyond the grave. The nature of that life, however, seems extraordinary: taken literally, it suggests a kind of pan-anthromorphism, where on our deaths we melt into nature and become part of all around us. Taken figuratively, it need only mean that the wind and the stars and quiet birds act as triggers to flood our minds with memories. Whilst people find it increasingly difficult to believe in an orthodox Christian understanding of life beyond the grave, this poem colludes with a very different vision.

More troubling, perhaps, however, is its attitude towards death. The opening and closing couplets both attempt to deny the reality of death, which would suggest that there is no need to go through any rite of separation, or transition because

death is not real. Yet Holy Saturday reminds us that death is an actual state, experienced by the One who created all things and leads to distance and separation from those we love. It is a far cry from 'O death, where is thy victory? O Hell, where is thy sting?' A poem such as Fry's undermines the validity of grief felt and appears to deny any separation.

b. The Ship by Bishop Charles Brent

I am standing on the sea shore,
A ship sails in the morning breeze and starts for the ocean.
She is an object of beauty and I stand watching her
Till at last she fades on the horizon and someone at my side says:
"She is gone."
Gone! Where? Gone from my sight - that is all.
She is just as large in the masts, hull and spars as she was when I saw her
And just as able to bear her load of living freight to its destination.
The diminished size and total loss of sight is in me,
not in her.
And just at the moment when someone at my side says,
"She is gone", there are others who are watching her coming, and other
voices take up a glad shout: "There she comes" - and that is dying.

This reading is sometimes attributed to Victor Hugo from his novel *Toilers of the Sea*, but is generally said to be written by Charles Brent, a nineteenth century bishop in the Philippines. It fits well with an understanding of the funeral as a transition rite of passage, and indeed death as the final part of our earthly pilgrimage from this place into the arms of God. It does not undermine Christian notions of the resurrection of the body, in the way that the first poem does, and speaks eloquently of a worldview in which the living and the dead are two communities, separate and yet alongside each other. Whilst it does not give full expression to the reality of grief in death, it does not diminish the reality of separation that death brings. Its vision has echoes of Hippolytus' understanding of the Communion of Saints, explored above.

There are numerous other readings offered at funerals and anthologies can be obtained which provide examples – as indeed can a glance through the internet. The danger with many readings is that they aim to offer comfort by denying reality. The Psalms offer a contrasting vision, where life can be lamented, whilst still concluding with thanksgiving and hope and the next chapter will consider the potential for using them in a more creative way in funerals.

3. **Music**

It is now customary for the family to choose a particular piece of music as the coffin is brought into church and as it leaves: sometimes there is also occasion for a piece of music to be played during the course of the service, to allow time for reflection and remembrance. In many ways, this does not do anything different from the voluntary that the organist would have played at the beginning and end of the service. Indeed, given that the music chosen will have been chosen with reference to the deceased person, it can be seen as a welcome development in that it personalises the service and reminds the mourners of that particular person. The variety of music played will often reflect the concerns and passions of the person who has died: a committed member of the local amateur dramatic society may go out to ‘I am the very model of a modern Major General’, whilst a patriotic Scot would prefer the bagpipes playing ‘Dream Angus’. Since one of the expressed purposes of the funeral is to give thanks for that person’s life, music that brings him or her to mind is to be welcomed as part of the service.

The power of music to evoke mood through use of key, melody and harmony can undoubtedly enable grief as much as joy and can be a welcome part of the service. Of course, stories abound of trying to mould a Christian service which includes 'My Way' as the key piece of music as the mourners leave, or strange choices such as 'Smoke gets in your eyes' to be played at the crematorium. Nonetheless, popular choices such as Andrea Boccelli and Sarah Brightman singing 'Time to say goodbye' with its explicit themes of leave-taking and sorrow, can give expression to the grief felt by mourners. Similarly, the popular choice 'Wind beneath my wings' speaks of being able to fly higher than an eagle: an image with scriptural resonances from Isaiah 40, which can be built upon by the officiating minister.

Thomas Long says that in a funeral, there is an intertwining of the narrative of life and the narrative of the gospel: this seems to be a better aim than the result of co-construction that Kelly desires. Long complains that the gospel narrative is often suppressed through the competing themes and music and maintains that the modern memorial service, whilst it may offer the drama of a liturgical event, often enacts 'a pilgrimage to nowhere'.²⁸³ He is troubled by lay contributions to funerals because they frequently enact a different story to the gospel, and yet it is possible to allow contributions which assist a Christian message rather than undermine it.

Fundamentally, what Long wants in a Christian funeral is to do the same thing over and over because 'it is important for our bodies to know their way home'.²⁸⁴ This is at odds with much modern funeral practice: the Institute of Civil Funerals' mission

²⁸³ Long *Accompany them* p84

²⁸⁴ Ibid p19

statement noted above, is generally interpreted by civil celebrants to offer unique and individually tailored funerals on each occasion. There seem to be few reference points and markers with this ideology: if each service is different, how can the body, let alone the mourners find their way home? If each story told is unique and told without reference to a bigger story, the sense of isolation in death is increased. It is possible, however, to offer a funeral service to a family where the narrative of life is interpreted within the narrative of the gospel and rather than the scriptural and liturgical stories being imposed upon people's experiences and denying them an authentic voice, they shine a light on them which makes sense of their grief and offers hope beyond the grave.

C. The Formal Liturgy of Common Worship

This section will focus specifically upon the Common Worship liturgy, rather than earlier versions. Whilst the order for the Burial of the Dead from the 1662 Book of Common Prayer is still an authorised service to be used, it is extremely rare – even at the funerals of church members who lived their lives devoted to the BCP, their funerals tend to be modern services, translated into archaic language.

Thomas Long traces the history of the Christian funeral through the centuries and points to the three key movements of preparation, procession and burial. With each element, the church prayed, chanted Psalms and sang hymns over the body.²⁸⁵ Whilst modern funeral rites have developed a long way from ancient practices, what lies at the heart of these movements is a willingness to engage with

²⁸⁵ Long *Accompany them* p71

death itself. There is no denial that the person is actually dead or that the body should be removed from the sight of the mourners: death is real, but can be confronted with resurrection hope.

As noted above, *Common Worship* provides 188 pages of liturgical resources surrounding the funeral, though this chapter will focus only on the funeral service itself. Indeed, apart from the liturgy for the burial of ashes, most ministers would never use any of the other services suggested. The rites available before the funeral often cover the rites of preparation that Long identify as key – in particular, the ministry at the time of death. This picks up on the themes from the Last Rites, with confession, absolution and anointing. The dying person is commended on his onward journey. Liturgically and theologically, these resources are rich and full of imagery and language that takes seriously the death of the person and their onward pilgrimage towards God. However, the problem with them is that they are very rarely used. As Walter points out, as soon as the Reformation decided that people did not need the last rites before they died, the seeds for the marginalisation of the church at the time of death were sown: indeed he goes further and says that ‘in death as in life, Protestantism paved the way for secularism. Protestantism helped dig its own grave, in more senses than one’.²⁸⁶

1. Opening Sentences

The funeral rite itself begins at the procession as the coffin is carried into church. No doubt Long would approve of those occasions when it is not borne by

²⁸⁶ Walter *Funerals* p95

professional pall bearers, but by family and friends: it is something that the family can do for their loved one at the end. Whilst the coffin is carried in, the minister reads sentences from Scripture. What is immediately striking about these words is that they set the context for resurrection from the start. Jesus' words from John 11.25f make this clear: 'I am the Resurrection and the Life... everyone who lives and believes in me will never die'. To the untrained ear, these words could be said to deny death altogether. They are followed by St Paul's declaration from Romans 8 that nothing can separate us from God's love and a number of others, concluding with John 3.16. The mood offered is unequivocally hopeful. There may be a recognition that grief is present – as for example in the words from the Beatitudes 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted' – but there is no articulation of that grief. Easter Sunday is proclaimed from the start with no recognition of the place of Good Friday or Holy Saturday. Perhaps the modern funeral rite has become the death-denying service of thanksgiving that it so often is, because the official rite offered only a hope in resurrection which people find hard to accept. When the official service gave no place for the articulation of grief, it is hardly surprising that people have not looked for informal resources to put it in.

One of the alternative opening sentences given comes from Ps 130 – 'Out of the depths have I cried to you, O Lord'. Out of 21 alternative verses given and 7 in the main text, it is the only verse offered that expresses some doubt and fear: yet these emotions will surely be felt by many of those present. If there is Scriptural justification to utter them, the Christian minister should surely give voice to those emotions.

In the succeeding words from the minister, the reasons for the funeral are given. The text makes clear that it is for the deceased as much as the living – to commend him or her to God and commit the body to be buried or cremated – but there is no place for mourning within the service. It is there to give thanks for the life and to comfort those who mourn, but not specifically to mourn. This denial of grief seems to have ancient roots in the Christian church: Sheppy points to the dictum from St John Chrysostom forbidding the use of professional mourners at funerals, and to St Augustine's suppression of outward expressions of grief at his own mother's funeral.²⁸⁷ He points out that in the Eastern church, in traditions such as the Chaldean and Mozarabic rites, grief is uttered more expressly – for example through the recital of Ps 42 as the coffin is brought in²⁸⁸. However, the focus is still on the dead having passed from death to life, so that any grief should be tempered by that knowledge – the question remains of how the utter awfulness of death should be expressed within a Christian funeral. Perhaps there were other rites that allowed grief to be expressed, such as the Last Rites: where there is no other ritual occasion when the church encounters and ministers the dead and grieving, apart from the funeral, God's presence is not explicitly offered in the time of mourning.

2. Prayers of Penitence

Common Worship provides for prayers at penitence after the opening hymn – either by the recital of the Kyrie Eleisons (as was provided for in the Book of Common Prayer), or by way of a prayer of confession said by the minister alone.

²⁸⁷ Sheppy *Death Vol 1* p90

²⁸⁸ Ibid p93 also Vol II p46

The prayers of penitence are rarely used, yet the experience of those ministers who do so is that there is always good reason for them. They provide an important counter-balance to the eulogy and recognise that there will be painful memories and unacknowledged guilt that often accompanies bereavement. The prayer offered is fairly prosaic and unremarkable: much better are the prayers offered in the Scottish Episcopal Church liturgy:

Forgiving God,
in the face of death we discover
how many things are still undone,
how much might have been done otherwise.
Redeem our failure.
Bind up the wounds of past mistakes.
Transform our guilt to active love,
and by your forgiveness make us whole.
Lord, in your mercy,
Hear our prayer.

God our Redeemer,
you love all that you have made,
you are merciful beyond our deserving.
Pardon your servant's sins,
acknowledged or unperceived.
Help us also to forgive as we pray to be forgiven,
through him who on the cross
asked forgiveness for those who wounded him.
Lord in your mercy
Hear our prayer.²⁸⁹

Psychologically, guilt and mourning are closely linked, and it seems appropriate to offer confession in a funeral service. Theologically, if a funeral service is a re-enactment of the Easter event, it would be strange to omit the confession, with its ensuing promise of forgiveness – what, apart from the Eucharist (also normally omitted at funerals) could remind us more of Christ's death and resurrection than an acknowledgement of our own need for forgiveness before God?

²⁸⁹ Scottish Episcopal Church *Revised Funeral Rites* 1987

3. Hymns

Often the experience of those who attend humanist funerals and those led by civil celebrants is that they miss singing the hymns. Given how few hymns are still known by much of society today, this may seem curious, and yet the chance to sing at a funeral is often a chance to allow grief to be expressed: there is safety in weeping that is not heard above the sound of singing. Undoubtedly also, a hymn can express the power of resurrection hope far more effectively than the spoken word: a funeral that concludes with an uplifting hymn such as 'Thine be the Glory' or 'How Great Thou Art', or even 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic' witnesses eloquently to the resurrection hope that Christians have. Similarly some of the evening hymns such as 'Abide with Me' or 'The Day thou gavest' can be understood metaphorically to speak of the time of death and mourning.

There are two main problems that ministers face over hymns at funerals. The first is that the hymn books offer a very poor selection specifically on this theme: in *Hymns Ancient and Modern Revised Standard*, for example, there is only one hymn listed in this section, entitled 'Jesu, Son of Mary, fount of life alone', which it is noted, is translated from the Swahili. A tiny fraction of regular church goers would know this hymn, let alone those who make up funeral congregations. However, most ministers do not expect a specifically funerary hymn to be sung at funerals: they are relieved if the family know any hymns, which is the second problem. When the only hymns known are 'All Things Bright and Beautiful' and 'Morning has Broken', it is difficult to construct too much theological significance from the words

expressed. What is often expressed by families is that they want 'cheerful' hymns – they do not want to sing 'Abide with Me' or anything too mournful.

4. Psalms

The rubric to the funeral order of service provides that a psalm should be said after the first Bible reading. It is extremely rare for there to be more than one Bible reading, so ordinarily if there is a Psalm used, it comes after the opening welcome and prayers. The notes to the funeral service provide that a psalm can be used in a metrical or hymn form: this has invariably meant that, if a Psalm is used, it is Psalm 23 in its metrical version to the tune 'Crimond'. However, as 'The Lord's My Shepherd' has become so closely connected with funeral hymns, there has been a reaction against it and those families who do not want anything mournful, will frequently include this hymn as belonging to that category.

The saying of a Psalm can be extremely helpful when the funeral is very small: families reluctant to sing because there will only be a handful of people present at the funeral are more willing to say a Psalm together at that point. Psalm 23 is the most popular option, but Common Worship provides a choice of thirteen Psalms that can be used. A number of these specifically acknowledge pain felt: Psalm 38 complains that 'my friends and companions stand apart from my affliction'. Given the isolating sense that bereavement often brings, these words may ring true for the mourners. Similarly other Psalms lay their complaint with God: Psalm 6 opens

‘O Lord, rebuke me not in your wrath: neither chastise me in your fierce anger’, and goes on to say that ‘My eyes are wasted with grief’.

Since the work of Claus Westermann, it is generally accepted that the Psalms all fall into the categories of either Psalms of Praise or Psalms of Lament:²⁹⁰ unsurprisingly, the selection made for funerals come from the latter category. He identifies over one third of the total number of Psalms as either being individual or communal Psalms of Lament²⁹¹ and they offer rich resources which will be considered in further detail in the next chapter. The difficulty with using these Psalms is undoubtedly their unfamiliarity and the starkness of their language, which is at odds with a desire for ‘nothing too miserable’ that dominates current funeral planning. Psalm 23 does overcome both these difficulties well, however. Having identified a number of key features to the lament psalms, Westermann identifies Psalm 23 as being the confession of trust from a lament, expanded into a whole psalm. With its recognition of ‘walking through the valley of the shadow of death’, it is of course eminently appropriate.

5. Bible Readings

The notes to the Funeral order make it clear that there must always be at least one Bible reading,²⁹² and offers a selection of twelve readings from the Old Testament and Apocrypha, and twenty-eight readings from the New Testament, suggesting a further eight readings as being specifically appropriate for the funeral of a child. Of

²⁹⁰ Claus Westermann *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1981, p11

²⁹¹ Westermann *The Living Psalms* Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989, p65

²⁹² *Common Worship Pastoral Services* p291

this wide choice, the full text is provided for eight of the New Testament readings, and no doubt, it is from these that most readings come. It is notable that the most frequently used Old Testament reading - Ecclesiastes 3.1 – 8 ('For everything there is a season') is absent from the suggested list. The vision offered by that reading undoubtedly falls short of the resurrection hope that is encompassed in passages such as John 14.1 – 6 or Revelation 21.1 – 7, but it does offer an ordered universe at a time in people's lives when chaos may threaten to overwhelm them. Furthermore, it acknowledges a time to mourn and a time to weep: this can give recognition to what is felt.

However, if the funeral is to point towards Easter, it may be easier to do so following a Bible reading which proclaims that hope. It is a time to speak, rather than a time to keep silent, and if the Bible readings offer the hope of resurrection, they will provide ample text for the minister in the sermon which should follow.

6. Prayers

It is in the prayers through the service that there is the greatest acknowledgement of the grief that is felt by those present. Of the two alternate opening prayers, one asks God to 'look with compassion on your children in their loss' whilst the other requests that God 'turn the darkness of death into the dawn of new life, and the sorrow of parting into the joy of heaven'; the ensuing collect also asks God to 'hear our prayers and comfort us'.²⁹³ The prayers of intercession seek to encompass most of the purposes of the funeral set out in the introduction: to give thanks for

²⁹³ Ibid p260, p262

the deceased's life, to commend him or her to God and to pray for those who mourn. Where a service has taken place which has focused exclusively on thanksgiving without acknowledgement of frailty or fear, or which has not used the Confession, the prayer to 'heal the memories of hurt and failure' seems particularly important.

What comes through in the prayers through the service is that they allow the minister to say on behalf of the mourners those things which they fear to articulate for themselves. There is recognition of grief and pain which a service which focused exclusively on thanksgiving would marginalise. The danger is that some of these prayers would ordinarily be omitted so as to prevent the funeral seeming like a wordy concoction, spoken chiefly by the minister, with little participation from the congregation. The inclusion of the Lord's Prayer does counter-balance this: though the rubric in Common Worship merely says that it 'may be said',²⁹⁴ it is hard to imagine a situation in a funeral following a Christian liturgy when it would not be used. Indeed, one of the expressed benefits of funerals led by civil celebrants over humanist funerals is that the Lord's Prayer can still be said. It is still familiar enough to most people to give mourners the chance to articulate a prayer to God which they know and therefore can offer comfort. Although Common Worship offers the traditional and modern translation, pastoral experience suggests that it can cause real hurt when familiar words are replaced by a modern translation.

7. Commendation

²⁹⁴ Ibid p266

The commendation in Common Worship sets out boldly the resurrection hope:

God our creator and redeemer,
by your power Christ conquered death
and entered into glory.
Confident of his victory
and claiming his promises,
we entrust *N* to your mercy,
in the name of Jesus Christ,
who died and is alive
and reigns with you,
now and for ever'.²⁹⁵

The notion of Christ conquering death picks up undertones of the harrowing of Hell: Christ is the conquering hero, marching into death's domain. Clearly the commendation is not a time to undermine the resurrection hope, yet the boldness of the prayer seems stark. One of the alternative prayers of entrusting and commending given uses the language of the Orthodox Kontakion prayer, which recognises human frailty and the grief of the occasion:

Give rest, O Christ, to your servant with your saints, where sorrow and pain are no more, neither sighing, but life everlasting.
You only are immortal, the creator and maker of all:
and we are mortal, formed from the dust of the earth, and unto earth shall we return.
For so you ordained when you created me, saying, 'You are dust, and to dust you shall return.' All of us go down to the dust;
yet weeping at the grave we make our song:
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.
Give rest, O Christ, to your servant with your saints, where sorrow and pain are no more, neither sighing, but life everlasting²⁹⁶

It is suggested that this prayer should be used at the time of death rather than at the funeral service: however, there is no reason why it would not be as powerful in the funeral service. It emphasises resurrection hope and the communion of saints,

²⁹⁵ Ibid p267

²⁹⁶ Ibid p377

in the midst of human pain and sorrow: precisely what the whole Christian funeral should be doing!

There are a number of rich liturgical resources that follow the commendation, including the Nunc Dimittis (though familiarity would probably demand it was said in its BCP translation rather than that offered by Common Worship), the prayer from the Sarum Primer that begins 'God be in my head' and Cardinal Newman's prayer beginning 'Support us all the day long of this troublous life'. All these prayers are evocative and helpful in a funeral context: all are frequently omitted in the interests of time and balance to the service.

8. Committal

When the main funeral has taken place in church, there is the inevitable feeling about the committal that it is a kind of addendum to the main service, and almost over by the time it starts. It does offer family and close friends a chance to come apart from the main body of mourners to say their own farewells: as a rite of passage, it would seem to work most effectively, when the family has the chance to say their own goodbyes, either by placing earth or flowers on the coffin after it has been interred in the grave, or by acknowledging the coffin in some way at the crematorium. The reality of death and its impact is thereby acknowledged by those affected the most by it.

The liturgical words offered are very brief. There are two alternative opening prayers: in addition to updated translation of the words said at the graveside in the

BCP, an alternative prayer is offered taking words from Pss 145 and 103. The BCP prayer is very stark reminding the mourners that in the midst of life, we are in death and that God is justly angered by our sins: there is a strong emphasis on being spared from the pain of eternal death. Unsurprisingly, an alternative prayer was offered that stresses much more the mercy and compassion of God, whilst continuing to acknowledge the frailty of humankind. Following the opening prayer, the body is committed to the ground or to the fire and then there is a final word of blessing. The asymmetry noted by Davies between cremation and burial, renders the former committal process somewhat inadequate, and the lack of ritual used at the time of disposal of ashes seems only to emphasise this.²⁹⁷

9. Holy Communion

A separate order of service is offered in Common Worship that incorporates Holy Communion. This is rarely done. According to the 2009 statistics, there were some 91,000 funerals held in a Church of England building following a total of 461,000 deaths. It is safe to assume that the further 86,000 funerals conducted by parish priests entirely in crematoria or cemeteries would not have been Eucharistic, so the number of services where the Eucharist was an option was less than 20%. Even in church, the celebration of the Eucharist has become very rare, except in Anglo-Catholic churches.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁷ Davies *Theology* p142

²⁹⁸ In my own ministry over fifteen years, I have probably conducted about 500 funerals: at less than 5 of these has the Eucharist been celebrated

The loss of the Eucharist from Church of England funerals has come about as a Reformation reaction to the Requiem Mass, yet there is surely a case for its inclusion. As was noted in a previous chapter, early Christian funeral services were suffused with the symbolism and rites of every day Christian worship, including the celebration of the Eucharist. If a funeral is to be a remembrance of the deceased person's life, set in the context of the Easter event, as Sheppy maintains, then an inclusion of the Eucharist only underlines the importance of Christ's death and resurrection. There are of course real practical difficulties with administering Holy Communion at a funeral. The context of Anglican funeral ministry in England means that, even when the service is held in church rather than just at the crematorium or cemetery, the deceased may not have been a regular church goer. Even if he or she was, the family may not be and it is likely that many in the congregation will not attend church regularly. Since the Eucharist has come to be seen as a sacrament for insiders, it is clear that many would feel uncomfortable about receiving communion. This is in contrast to the Roman Catholic church, for whom funerals will generally only take place for baptised Catholics.

However, there should surely be scope for recovering the importance of the Eucharist at this time. Sheppy, a Baptist minister, ponders on the revival in some form of the *viaticum*:

In all this revision one ancient tradition has not been revived. The custom of placing a coin in the mouth of the dead for the payment of the boatman across the river of death (the *viaticum*) was, at an early stage in Christian practice, replaced by Eucharistic bread. The practice is no longer universally observed: and yet Christ, who is the bread of life, is the Word made flesh,

who brings us across the stream of death and provides us with bread for the journey²⁹⁹.

He suggests, that, where a Requiem mass is not appropriate, it may be sufficient to incorporate references to Christ, the bread of life in the prayers. However, given that symbols and symbolic gestures speak more powerfully than words, a creative liturgist could find an actual use of the Eucharistic host in the funeral service, even if this does not mean the offering of communion to all worshippers present.

D. Conclusion

There is little doubt that the formal text of the Common Worship funeral order keeps the resurrection of Christ at its heart. From its opening words from John 11, to the entrusting prayer of commendation, the language is suffused with hope and certainty of life beyond the grave. If the task was to understand how the funeral could be read in the light of Easter Day, the formal words at least would provide ample evidence of this being done.

However, Balthasar's work underlines that the distinctive contribution the Church offers is not simply grounded in Easter Day: the message of Holy Saturday brings its own lens to funeral ministry. An acknowledgement that Christ was with the dead on that day provides identity with the deceased, not just with the mourners, and it is a vital reminder that the funeral is for both living and dead. Furthermore, Balthasar's notions of the kenosis of God provide a framework of understanding of relationships which speak theologically to the psychological and emotional bereavement that is felt by those gathered.

²⁹⁹ Sheppy *Death Vol 1* p98

The funeral does not simply consist of the formal words of the liturgy. The input of the family in wanting the individual life of the deceased celebrated undoubtedly colours the overall message and tone of the service. Commentators are agreed and surely right to maintain that the funeral should be about the person who has died as much as it is about the gospel message. The criticism of the old BCP service that it was too impersonal need not simply be read as a sign of our times, where every individual must make his or her mark and that mark be noted in death: if God has created us as unique individuals, that uniqueness can be noted at least. The particularity of the Incarnation means that each person's life is important as part of the playing area, in which God's drama is enacted. Long's 'intertwining of the personal and gospel narratives' seems to be a better outcome than Kelly's 'co-construction' or even Walter's 'person-centred funerals', but all can be seen as an improvement on a service which made no acknowledgement of the individual who had died. The dilemma for the Christian minister is where the family stories speak so loudly and dominantly that there is no room for the gospel story to come through. In that scenario, the role of the minister is reduced to being the wordsmith, and if a civil celebrant does that job better, it is no surprise that people will increasingly use them in death. Indeed, unless the church has something distinctive to offer, there is no reason why our role should be safeguarded.

Alan Lewis suggests that it is important to be able to look at Good Friday from the perspective of Holy Saturday, not just from Easter Sunday: 'the sight is melancholy,

terminal, disastrous'³⁰⁰. Yet this is the view that most mourners observe when a loved one dies: to rush on too quickly to Easter Day in the proclamation of hope undermines the reality of what is felt by mourners. Perhaps in previous times, the church would have been intimately involved in the process leading up to death, and would have been able to give theological expression to mourners at an earlier time to the funeral. Ritually then, the funeral could focus much more on resurrection hope, because grief and lament had been offered to God at an earlier stage in the process. As Walter points out, the Church's role at death is now vestigial:³⁰¹ the question should surely be asked whether the shape of the funeral liturgy needs to be changed to account for the lack of involvement at other points in the dying process.

There are a number of resources within the Church's liturgical armoury which could be used to much greater power within a funeral service. As has been seen in chapter 3, so much of the faith is death-centred and there has never been any fear at looking death in the face. Certainly, the reconnection of the Eucharist and the funeral rites would emphasise the death and resurrection of Christ in a living way. In the Psalms – particularly the psalms of lament – there are rich resources which have become increasingly neglected in Church of England worship, but which could help give voice to many of the emotions that are felt at a funeral, whilst still maintaining a focus of thankfulness and hope that a faith rooted in the Resurrection must maintain. The next chapter will consider further the place of lament and the Psalms in Christian worship and how their use in funerals could assist.

³⁰⁰ Lewis *Cross* p42

³⁰¹ Walter *Revival* p9

Chapter 6: Lament as a Liturgical Response to Grief

...please: don't say it's not really so bad. Because it is. Death is awful, demonic. If you think your task as comforter is to tell me that really, all things considered, it's not so bad, you do not sit with me in my grief but place yourself off in the distance from me. Over there, you are of no help. What I need to hear from you is that you recognize how painful it is. I need to hear from you that you are with me in my desperation. To comfort me, you have to come close. Come sit beside me on my mourning bench.³⁰²

A. Introduction

Nicholas Wolterstorff's elegy to his son, written after his death in a skiing accident, aged 25, is a vital reminder to the Church and to society of the awfulness of death. It may be unfair to characterise the church's response to death in the funeral liturgy as saying 'all things considered, it's not so bad', yet if the first words spoken proclaim the resurrection and say that believers 'will not die', it could be accused of placing itself at a distance from the mourners and their grief. Allen Verhey complains that 'even our funeral liturgies rush to talk about the life and the light that death and darkness cannot overcome'.³⁰³ This is not to undermine the truth of the resurrection hope that should suffuse all Christian funerals: merely to suggest that the Church must also find liturgical resources to sit beside the bereaved on their mourning bench.

Wolterstorff's title of his book is significant. Lament implies a liturgical response to grief – it is not simply an expression of sorrow. Danforth places lament at the centre of the death rituals of rural Greece, giving multiple examples of songs used

³⁰² Nicholas Wolterstorff *Lament for A Son* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996, p34

³⁰³ Allen Verhey 'The practice of prayer and care for the dying' in ed John Swinton & Richard Payne *Living Well and Dying Faithfully Christian practices for end-of-life care* Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2009 p99

as laments in funerals and on the exhumation of bones of loved ones.³⁰⁴ In using laments in this country, there are a number of criteria that they should fulfil if they are to speak with authenticity at a funeral:

- Do they offer words for grief as well as the possibility of hope and thanksgiving?
- How can they be incorporated into the Christian meta-narrative of the Cross and Resurrection?
- How can they be incorporated into the individual stories of those facing bereavement?

The application of Balthasar's thinking in *Mysterium Paschale* and his *Theodramatics* have direct relevance to the second and third of these objectives, reminding the minister of the place of Christ's death as the central defining story of our faith, as well as the need to engage with our own stories to see how the gospel is played out.

This chapter draws particularly on the Psalms of lament to meet these objectives and provide a liturgical counter-weight to Balthasar's kenotic theology. Lament in Scripture of course is not simply about the expression of grief: it is more of a formal complaint against God for those times when the Psalmist feels abandoned. Nonetheless, it is useful to see how the notion of lament can be applied to the situation of grief, whilst recognising the broader understanding of the term as used in Scripture. One of the most common experiences of grief is a sense of abandonment – by community, by everyday mores, by God himself.

³⁰⁴ Danforth *Death Rituals* p57ff for example

The chapter uses the analysis of Claus Westermann and Walter Brueggemann as the basis for the argument that in those Psalms are resources which can and should be introduced again to the church, not just in funerals, but more generally into worship, that they would be more widely known and drawn upon in times of need. The Old Testament story of the Exodus, which inhabits many of the Psalms can be augmented in Christian tradition by the gospel story of the Cross and Resurrection as a lens through which to read the Psalms. Stephen Ahearne-Kroll argues that the Psalms of lament imbue much of Mark's passion narrative³⁰⁵: if there is an obvious link between them and Jesus' death, there is even more justification for using them at the rites of passage around our own deaths too. An exploration of the place of the Psalms in worship today will then provide a platform from which their place in funeral liturgies can properly be considered.

Westermann traces the history of laments in Scripture, pointing to narrative passages in Genesis, such as Gen 25.22 where Rebekah enquires of the Lord concerning the struggle within her womb, of her twins Jacob and Isaac.³⁰⁶ At this stage of development, the lament is not so different from a prayer of petition, expressed within a time of need and hardship. Expressed thus, it is probably the most common form of prayer still uttered today. Following such simple pleas come funeral dirges, such as the song David sings on learning of the death of Saul and Jonathan in II Samuel 1.19 – 27. This song is unremittingly mournful – it is characterised by an absence of hope, or thanksgiving, and expresses only sorrow.

³⁰⁵ Stephen Ahearne-Kroll *The Psalms of Lament in Mark's Passion* Cambridge: CUP, 2007

³⁰⁶ Westermann *Praise & Lament* p195

In contrast, the defining feature of the lament psalms is the move from petition to praise: in the context of funeral liturgy, they do not undermine the need for hope to be expressed.

Dorothee Soelle said that all true theology begins in pain³⁰⁷ - she writes with reference to feminist theology, but the insight seems particularly apposite to a good theology of funerals. Balthasar's insistence that we take seriously the loss and bereavement of Good Friday and the hopelessness felt on Holy Saturday gives a context to that pain. Brueggemann quotes a couplet from the WB Yeats' poem 'Crazy Jane talks with the Bishop': 'But Love has pitched his mansion in /the place of excrement'³⁰⁸: it is in this place that the loved ones of the deceased feel themselves to be. The task of the church is to find words to express the state of being in this place.

Over the last fifty years, systematic theologians have found those words in the death of Christ. The willingness of many theologians to root their understanding of God in his death, and Balthasar's insistence on kenosis as expressing the heart of God, give voice to those who wonder where God can be in their suffering. The irony of the situation, however, is that the living church seems to be in danger of moving away from the Scriptural resources that could provide liturgical expression to such theology. The American poet and Benedictine oblate Kathleen Norris, quotes a Benedictine monk who says that 'God behaves in the Psalms in ways in

³⁰⁷ Quoted by Walter Brueggemann *Israel's Praise Doxology against Idolatry and Ideology* Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988 p127

³⁰⁸ Quoted *ibid* p129

which he is not allowed to behave in systematic theology'.³⁰⁹ The tragedy of today's church is that the voice of the Psalms is suppressed in modern popular worship, even as systematic theologians allow the daring thoughts of the Psalmist to apply to their understanding of God.

B. The Psalms of Lament

Modern critical studies of the Psalms are generally dated back to the work of Hermann Gunkel and his 1926 commentary on the Psalms, followed by his pupil Mowinckel. Gunkel divides psalms into hymns, songs of thanksgiving, laments of the people and laments of thanksgiving. This division is taken up by Claus Westermann in the 1970s, but he argues that there is no categorial difference between songs of thanksgiving and hymns: he prefers to speak of declarative and descriptive songs of thanksgiving.³¹⁰ As has already been noted, the Psalms are all essentially either Psalms of lament or Psalms of praise. Laments are still subdivided into laments of the individual and laments of the people, with the former category forming the largest group within the Psalms. Although commentators talk of individual Psalms of lament, they are also clear that the context for reading and praying the Psalms is a communal one: whilst Mowinckel is now criticised for positing an exclusively cultic understanding for the Psalms – in particular to the royal enthronement ceremonies³¹¹ – the Psalms were written to be used in corporate worship.

³⁰⁹ Kathleen Norris *The Cloister Walk* New York: Riverhead Books, 1996, p91

³¹⁰ Westermann *Praise & Lament* p22

³¹¹ *Ibid* p21

Westermann outlines a number of key features to the Psalms of lament. They are similar for a Psalm of the people's lament and for an individual lament.³¹² They begin with a plea to God to hear: so Ps 102: 1 begins 'hear my prayer, O Lord; let my cry come to you'. In many of these Psalms, there are three parties in mind: the Psalmist, God and the enemies. In the second part of the lament Psalm, any or all of these parties form the subject of the complaint: thus in Psalm 102, the complaint addresses all three parties. Firstly, his enemies taunt him all day long (v8), secondly, God's indignation and anger has caused him to be lifted up and thrown aside (v10); thirdly, his days have become like the evening shadow and he withers away like grass (v11).

The next section of the Psalm offers a theological counter-weight to the expression of misery. Even though in Ps 102, the Psalmist puts some of the blame for his situation on God in v8, there is still a confession of trust in v12: 'You O Lord, are enthroned forever; your name endures to all generations'. Indeed in Psalm 102, this expression of trust continues to verse 22 and provides confidence to the Psalmist to present his petition to God: 'O my God', I say, 'do not take me away at the midpoint of my years'. Westermann emphasises that the Psalmist often provides a motive for his petition: so here, in verses 25 – 28, the Psalm records the everlasting nature of God with the implication that if God is from age to age, he can have pity on his servant not to cut his life off short.

³¹² Cf ibid pp 52, 64

The central movement of the Psalm generally comes after the petition, when the mood changes from petition to praise. In Psalm 102, this move has already come as part of the declaration of trust: in other Psalms, there is a more striking contrast on either side of this movement. So in Psalm 6, for example, the Psalmist is racked with grief in v7 and comments that his eyes waste away: however, having demanded that his enemies depart from him in v8, he is immediately able to go on in verse 9 to say that God has heard his supplication and the context is now one of praise. There is a hiatus at this point in the Psalm which seems to sit uncomfortably, yet liturgically and theologically it performs an important function in keeping praise and lament tied together in the single Psalm.

The only Psalm which does not move from lament to praise in this way is Psalm 88, where the lament persists to the final verses: Brueggemann describes this, along with Psalm 109, as a 'problem Psalm' for the Christian community 'an embarrassment to conventional faith... (which) has its pastoral use, because there are situations in which easy, cheap talk of resolution must be avoided. Here are words not to be used frequently, but for the limited experiences when words must be honest and not claim too much'.³¹³ The pain it expresses may well be echoed by the bereaved: however, it will be important to ensure that the bleakness of the message does not overwhelm any sense of hope within a funeral service.

Not every aspect of a lament is present in every Psalm: Westermann suggests that in some of the later Psalms, the complaint section is absorbed into petition, so that

³¹³ Brueggemann *The Message of the Psalms* Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing house, 1984 pp78, 81

there is little voice for complaint still heard. This seems particularly true of the laments of the people. Similarly, there are Psalms where the confession of trust is expanded out to form the entire Psalm. Psalm 23 is the obvious example, yet the context of the Psalm still speaks eloquently of a place of pain – its references to the ‘darkest valley’ emphasise why this is such a helpful Psalm within funeral ministry.

One of the uncomfortable aspects to the Psalms are the imprecations called down upon the Psalmist’s foes: Psalm 109 for example is generally omitted from church lectionaries because of its lengthy section in vv 2- 19 in which curses are called down upon the enemy and his children that they may be orphans and beggars, with no-one to pity them. Similarly, Psalm 137, so well known for its opening verses of lament ends on an extremely dark tone, when blessing is sought on those who take the enemy’s children and dash them against the rock. Again, these last words are generally omitted when recited in church, but it raises the issue of how the Psalms should be used in today’s context.³¹⁴

The rawness of the Psalmist’s cry may give permission to vent a similar level of emotion today but the stakes for the Psalmist were different from those of the Christian. Throughout the Psalms there is frequent reference to the fact that the dead cannot praise God – see for example Pss 6.5, 30.9, 88.10. The theology of the Old Testament maintains that the dead go down to the place of Sheol where God is

³¹⁴ They seem similar to Phyllis Trible’s *Texts of Terror* which she argues have been used to subjugate women through the ages, and which she believes should be excised from the Scriptures (see her book of the same name)

not present.³¹⁵ The hope of resurrection is a later post-exilic development, so if the Psalmist is killed by his enemies, his praise of God will cease: there is a strong sense of the eternal stakes of ‘him or me’ being played out. Similarly, Ps 137 is set in a context of exile, when it was thought that God resided in Jerusalem, so once again God is not present. However, the context for Christian worship is different: as Balthasar makes clear, Sheol is replaced by the New Testament notion of Hell. Holy Saturday reminds us that even Hell is not beyond the light and presence of God. Furthermore, there is opportunity for redemption and the possibility of resurrection for the whole world, so curses against other people, for whom Christ died, now have no place. It is easy to mock the ‘bowdlerisation’ of Scripture in which passages which sit uncomfortably with today’s norms are omitted, yet the change in theological outlook brought about by the death of Christ should be acknowledged when reading the Psalms.

Included amongst the Psalms of Lament are the prayers of penitence, which the church has generally recognised as Pss 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 143, 130. Psalm 51 is the best known of these – not least because of its link in the superscription to the story of David’s adultery with Bathsheba, but also through musical settings such as Allegri’s *Miserere*. The link between penitence and grief has already been made in the previous chapter, and these Psalms could serve as a useful resource for funerals to express sorrow and regret.

³¹⁵ Ps 139.8 ‘If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there’ is an exceptional verse which says the opposite: however, there is no other parallel to the verse in the Old Testament and the general attitude is as outlined above

In *The Message of the Psalms* Brueggemann accepts Westermann's division of the Psalms but builds on the work of Paul Ricoeur in suggesting that they can be read through the lens of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation. Although Westermann makes the link between the two types of Psalm clear, suggesting 'there is no petition, no pleading from the depths that did not move at least one step...on the road to praise'³¹⁶ (though presumably Psalm 88 is an exception to this), they still remain as two separate categories. Brueggemann deals with the Psalms under the three headings of orientation, disorientation and new orientation. This has the advantage of recognising both headings in the single Psalm – for example in Psalm 27 which moves from new orientation to disorientation.

The move from a place of orientation, expressed in confident Creation psalms such as Psalm 8 ('O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth'), to one of disorientation is 'a painful, anguished, articulation of a move into disarray and dislocation'.³¹⁷ The settled certainties of life are undermined by events that confront an easy faith, and demand an answer beyond the simple declaration of an awesome Creator God. The history of the twentieth century forced systematic theologians to address the issue, but the Psalmist got there first. For the Christian theologian, Brueggemann maintains, the Jewish embrace of and articulation of disorientation is decisively embodied in the crucifixion of Christ: so if theology, rooted in the cross of Christ is to be lived out and 'prayed out' in the Christian community, recourse must be made to the Psalms of Lament.

³¹⁶ Westermann *Praise & Lament* p154

³¹⁷ Brueggemann *Message* p20

What must be emphasised in using the Psalms is a recognition that our underpinning story is different from the story that inspired their creation and which underpins a Jewish understanding of them. Westermann reminds the reader that, as the story of the Exodus is so fundamental to Old Testament theology, we must expect to see its echoes throughout the Psalms.³¹⁸ And indeed, so often the move from petition to praise is triggered by a reminder of the events of the Exodus – this can be seen in the people’s laments such as Psalms 78 or 80. Similarly, many of the Psalms of Thanksgiving, which Brueggemann characterises as Psalms of Re-orientation, recite the Exodus story – Ps 136 is an obvious example. But the story of the Exodus is not simply a story of delivery of the people into their own land: it is the story of rescue from pain and suffering. The story of the Exodus is recited in the midst of the Israelite experience of disarray and dislocation, because that too was a story of dislocation, and God remained faithful in the midst of it.

The story of the crucifixion operates in a similar way for the Christian reading of the Psalms. It is the event par excellence which undermines the settled order of creation: God himself is killed by the humanity which he created. But the drive within the Psalm on to praise can also find voice now through the resurrection: it is the hope of resurrection which enables the move from disorientation to new orientation, with praise of God rooted in the lived experience of the Resurrection.

The power of the lament Psalms lies not least in their dialogical nature. They are not merely a complaint into the unknown, or the resigned cursing of a man towards

³¹⁸ Westermann *Praise & Lament* p259

an unresponsive universe: they are directed to a covenant partner. Brueggemann likens the relationship to one between mother and child in which the mother dreams that her infant will grow into a responsible covenant partner who can enter into serious communion and conversation. So the faithful person need not simply accept the will of God without question: Brueggemann comments that 'where there is no lament through which the believer takes the initiative, God is experienced like an omnipotent mother'.³¹⁹ Laments are prayers in which God is always addressed as Thou, a dialogue partner. They are framed by a belief that God will act, rather than by resigned despair. The praise that follows on from the cries of lament is underpinned by the Christian category of hope which the Resurrection brings.

In case their usefulness in funeral ministry were not emphasised sufficiently, Brueggemann draws out specific parallels between the sections of lament and Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's stages of grief. The parallels between the two is striking: between anger and bargaining, which find their parallels in the complaints of the laments, with their underlying motivations, to acceptance, which is translated in the Psalms into praise. Just as striking are those points of contact which differ: so denial is replaced by protest, and there need be no space for depression for the Psalmist who is able to articulate hope in his covenant partner.³²⁰

C. The Psalms of Lament in the Passion Narratives

³¹⁹ Brueggemann 'The Costly Loss of Lament' *JSOT* 36 (1986) 61

³²⁰ See Brueggemann 'The Formfulness of Grief' *Interpretation* 31 (1977) 263 - 275

If the psalms of lament are to provide useful liturgical resources within a funeral, rooted in the death and resurrection of Christ, their use in the original passion stories aids our understanding and give further weight to the argument.

In his work, *The Psalms of Lament in Mark's Passion*, Ahearne-Kroll traces the influence of the Psalms, taken from the Septuagint, throughout Mark's narrative from the journey up to Jerusalem. He rejects the more widely accepted thesis that the background biblical figure in the Marcan passion narrative is best understood as the suffering servant of Isa 53, but rather points to the suffering David, expressed through the Psalms of Lament.³²¹ As Douglas Moo has pointed out, "David was universally considered to be the author of the Psalms in the time of Christ, and all the lament psalms appropriated in the passion sayings have in their titles 'A Psalm of David'".³²² If the link between David and the Psalms remains strong today, it was even more firmly fixed in the time of Jesus.

In addition to the Psalms themselves, there are particular parallels between David's life and the events leading up to the crucifixion. The evocation of David in the passion narrative begins immediately prior to the triumphal entry into Jerusalem with the healing of blind Bartimaeus in Mk 10.46ff. The cry of the beggar is to Jesus, Son of David (10.47) – Ahearne-Kroll points out that this is the only time in the gospel that this title is used of Jesus. Nothing has been made in Mark's gospel

³²¹ Ahearne-Kroll *Psalms of Lament* p39. He uses the LXX numbering of the Psalms throughout his thesis. Given that Pss 9 and 10 from the Hebrew Bible are given as Ps 9 in the LXX, thus renumbering most of the rest of Psalms, this can lead to confusion. I have used the numbering related to the Hebrew Bible throughout

³²² Douglas J Moo *The Old Testament in the Gospel Passion Narrative* Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1983, p299

at this point – unlike Matthew – of any bloodline back to David: the concern appears to be the beginning of the revelation of what this Messiah, recognised in Mk 1.1, will be like. Perhaps there is also a link between the mercy shown to a blind beggar by the son of David with the mercy shown by David himself to a lame beggar – Mephiboseth the son of Jonathan in II Sam 9 - though Ahearne-Kroll does not draw out this parallel.

Jesus' title as the Son of David and the one who will inherit his throne is emphasised in the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, which immediately follows on from the Bartimaeus story in Mark 11. The stress here is on the kingship of Jesus with Scriptural links back to Zechariah 9, and the coronation of Solomon in I Kings 1, though there are also echoes of the proclamation of Jehu as king in II Kings 9.13, where the crowds there also spread their cloaks on the ground before him.³²³ The triumphal, kingly aspects of the story are, however, not built upon: Jesus does not go to the temple from there to offer the sacrifice of a conquering hero but to upset the tables and cause conflict with the guardians of the cult. Those people who would expect to accept the authority of a king anointed by God question it, and at this stage, Jesus even seems to be at odds with the fig tree which he curses for its lack of fruit.

In chapter 14, Mark makes a number of links between Jesus' journey to the cross and Absalom's rebellion in II Sam 15. As David goes out weeping to the Mount of Olives to pray (II Sam 15.30), so Jesus weeps in the Garden of Gethsemane. The

³²³ Ibid 146

role of Judas Iscariot also has parallels with the character of Ahithophel, one of David's advisors, who betrays him and provides advice and support to Absalom. These two characters are the only two instances of suicide in Scripture, though it is Matthew in Mt 27.3ff, rather than Mark that recounts Judas' death. In his account of the Last Supper, Mark uses resonances from Ps 41 when Jesus says that one who has dipped bread with him will betray him: Ps 41.9 complains that 'even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread, has lifted the heel against me.' These words were interpreted in the light of Ahithophel's betrayal: Jesus now appropriates them to Judas' actions.

Echoes of the Psalms are found elsewhere too. Ahearne-Kroll suggests that Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane echoes the refrain of the Psalmist in Ps 42 and 43: 'Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?'³²⁴ Psalms 42 and 43 thus can become part of the substance of Jesus' Gethsemane, whilst Psalm 41 illuminates the journey that Jesus makes from the Last Supper to Gethsemane.³²⁵ The best known instance of a lament Psalm being used in the Crucifixion is the use of Psalm 22 in Mark 15. The mocking of passers-by in Mark 15.29ff and the division of clothing through the casting of lots in 15.24 both pick up on action in Psalm 22.7f and 18 respectively. However, it is the opening cry of the Psalm, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me', uttered by Jesus prior to his death that has caused the most comment, with commentators wondering whether this cry should be seen as one simply of sorrow, or whether the wider context of the psalm should also be considered. Psalm 22, whilst sounding the depths of

³²⁴ Ibid p67

³²⁵ Ibid p178ff

misery and abandonment, also turns to praise like the other Psalms of lament. From verse 25, the mood becomes one of thanksgiving with praise given in the great congregation. Ahearne-Kroll concedes that 'it is highly unlikely that a biblically literate member of Mark's community would not have thought of the whole Psalm when hearing this verse' and some scholars, such as Joel Marcus see in Jesus' words, not a cry of abandonment, but a reminder of the need to praise God even in the midst of pain.³²⁶ This approach does not seem dissimilar to funeral services, where the emphasis is only on thanksgiving and proclamation of hope, without acknowledging the need to express pain. Raymond Brown is critical of Marcus and this school of interpretation, believing it expresses 'almost the opposite meaning of what Jesus is portrayed as saying!'³²⁷ Mark's gospel emphasises the pain and abandonment felt through the passion, and whilst hope and thanksgiving can be called upon once grief is first expressed, there is no denying the underlying darkness that fills Mark's passion narrative.

John Reumann sees echoes of Psalm 22, not just in Mark's gospel or indeed the other synoptic gospels, but throughout the New Testament, seeing quotations, allusions and its influence in a number of the letters, including Paul's confidence and trust of Romans 5.5 as an allusion to the Psalmist's declaration of trust in 22.5, and the description of the Psalmist's enemy as a roaring lion in 22.13 picked up by I Peter 5.8 in his description of the devil. Whilst Luke may not call upon the language of Psalm 22 in the final words of Jesus, preferring 'Father, into your hands I

³²⁶ Joel Marcus *The Way of the Lord Christological Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Gospel of Mark* Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992

³²⁷ Raymond Brown *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave Vol II* London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994, p1050

commend my spirit' (Luke 23.46), this is itself a quotation from Psalm 31.5.³²⁸ What appears to be clear from the gospel writers is that they used the language and imagery of the Psalms, as well as specific quotations, to describe the anguish of Christ's death and passion - and indeed the other New Testament writers used them similarly to find words for their own arguments. It seems sensible then to see what use is made of them today as a resource in worship.

C. The Use of the Psalms in Modern Worship

One of the unforeseen consequences of the parish communion movement in the middle of the last century in the Church of England has been the marginalisation of the Psalms in worship. In Morning and Evening Prayer, a Psalm is always said or sung. However, there are fewer and fewer parish churches which still maintain a regular pattern of Sunday morning or evening prayer, and where they still occur, it is likely that the numbers of attendees are far fewer than for the Eucharist. This means that most regular worshippers in an Anglican church do not have regular exposure to the Psalms as previous generations would have done.³²⁹

The lectionary does provide for the saying of a Psalm at the principal service (generally the Eucharist), so it is possible to see how Psalms of lament are used within a weekly pattern of worship. However, whilst an analysis of the Psalms used in the principal services is important, it should be stressed that in many parish

³²⁸ John Reumann 'Psalm 22 at the Cross: Lament and thanksgiving for Jesus Christ' *Interpretation* 28:1 (1974) 43

³²⁹ I am restricting my comments here to the Church of England. It is of course possible that other denominations make much greater use of the Psalms (though evidence for this is not immediately apparent) but that is beyond the scope of this thesis

churches, they are not used at the Eucharist, due to a lack of time. Provision may be made for an Old Testament, Psalm, New Testament and Gospel reading: however, most churches would simply have the gospel reading and one, or possibly two others – the Psalm is always the first to go. One consequence of this is that for many regular church-goers, Psalms are simply never used in worship, and unless they are read at home, they may be extremely unfamiliar to many Christians.

Where they are still used in public worship, it does seem as though Psalms of lament are included in the cycle to be read. Over the three year period of the lectionary, provision is made for fifty-five Sundays – the surplus can be accounted for by the varying date of Easter which will mean that more or less Sundays will be used before Lent or after Trinity Sunday. In addition, the principal services at Christmas Day, Epiphany, the Presentation, Ash Wednesday, Mothering Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Ascension Day and All Saints Day form part of the regular pattern of worship in many church-goers' lives. This total provision for sixty-four Sundays or feast days amounts to 192 readings over a three year cycle. Unsurprisingly, Psalms of lament feature on occasions like Good Friday where Psalm 22 is set, or Ash Wednesday where the penitential Psalm 51 is used. In all, of the 192 occasions, there are 58 settings of penitential passages, which amounts to a little under a third. In Lent and Advent, they feature on nineteen out of thirty-nine occasions, but they also feature regularly during ordinary time, and indeed, even in the Easter season – in Year A, for instance, the Psalm set for Easter 5 is Psalm 31 and Psalm 4 is read on Easter 3 in Year B. Those churches then which still use the

Psalms in Eucharistic worship provide their worshippers with regular access to the Psalms of lament: the problem is that there are very few churches which do so.

This of course does not tell the whole story. Whilst the Psalms may not be recited verbatim, it is possible to point to verbal references in many hymns: throughout the ages, the Psalms have been a source of inspiration to Christian poets and hymn writers. To get an accurate picture of their place in worship, consideration should be given to this topic. This paper will consider the collection of hymns from one hymn book only: *Anglican Hymns Old & New*,³³⁰ published in 2008. Whilst it cannot provide a comprehensive picture of hymns – it is likely that ten different collections could not do that – it does have the merit of being a large collection (858 songs in total) and is from a group of hymn books that are widely used in Anglican churches. Arranged alphabetically, it begins with ‘A Brighter Day is dawning’, a setting of a 16th Century German melody, and ends with ‘Zip bam boo’: its claim to incorporate old and new songs does appear to be justified! Across the whole book, about 45% of the songs have been written in the last fifty years.

One of the indices at the back of the book provides scriptural references to all the songs and it is clear that the Psalms are the greatest source of influence on songwriters. There are over 480 references cited in the index to specific verses from the Psalms throughout the hymn book, with its influence seen on modern and traditional hymns. However, when the verses used are considered and placed in context, it does seem as though the overwhelming majority of those references use

³³⁰ *Anglican Hymns Old & New* (HON) Stowmarket: Kevin Mayhew Ltd, 2008

the Psalms of praise and thanksgiving, rather than the laments as the source for inspiration. This seems to be particularly true for modern hymns. A notable example of the use of a Psalm of lament is by Isaac Watts in his hymn, 'Be Thou my Guardian and my Guide'³³¹. His cry to be saved from the snares of hell in verse 2 picks up on Psalm 18.5: 'the cords of Sheol entangled me, the snares of death confronted me'. This Psalm is used to very different effect by modern hymn writers. In 18.2, God is described as a rock which is used by Brian Doerksen in a hymn of trust and commitment, 'Faithful One'³³² which includes the line 'You are my rock'. David Fellingham uses words from this Psalm of lament to write a praise song, 'Shout for Joy and Sing'³³³ acknowledging God as 'my deliverer'. Whilst Psalms of lament always conclude with a note of thanksgiving, to turn only to these words as inspiration in modern hymn writing does not give voice to one of the Psalms' greatest contributions to worship, their ability to cry out to God in pain.

However, it does appear to be part of a larger pattern within Christian worship. Westermann wonders why it seemed that from the earliest days of Christianity, the Psalms of lament were excluded. They clearly are present in the minds of the New Testament writers as has been shown above, but then their use became much more marginalised. He argues that the lament almost completely vanished from Christian prayer, because it embodied a negative way of speaking which was unfit for address to God.³³⁴ St Paul's injunction to rejoice in sufferings (Rom 5.5) and St

³³¹ HON 65

³³² HON 165

³³³ HON 656

³³⁴ Westermann *Living Psalms* p67

James' instruction to be patient in the midst of suffering (James 5.7 – 11) offer an approach to suffering in which lament has little part.

However, recognition of the pain of the world should surely lead the church in its worship back to a place of lament, if only for the world's pain, rather than its own. Brueggemann observes that it is a curious fact that in a world that increasingly experiences itself as disoriented, the church continues to sing songs of orientation: indeed, with the rise of 'praise songs' and the modern worship movement, it seems as though the preference for praise over acknowledgement of pain is ever-increasing. He concedes that this may be an act of bold defiance in which psalms of praise are hurled at a disordered world: however, his suspicion is that it is much more redolent of a 'frightened, numb denial and deception that does not want to acknowledge or experience the disorientation of life.'³³⁵ An illustration of both attitudes can be given by reference to the song 'We are Marching'.³³⁶ Written originally in the South African language, Xhosa, it can be seen as an act of defiance when sung by a black congregation in the original setting of apartheid South Africa. However, when sung by white middle-class congregations in Britain, it takes on an air less of defiance and one more of comfortable complacency. Brueggemann concludes that a church that goes on singing happy songs in the face of raw reality is doing something very different from that which the Bible does.

This appears to be at the heart of the difficulty with much Christian worship. Of the 480 references to the Psalms in *Hymns Old & New*, only about 28 pick up on verses

³³⁵ Brueggemann *Message* p51

³³⁶ HON 789

relating to pain and suffering. At about 6% of the total number of references, this does not appear to be a fair representation of the overall concerns of the Psalmist! Of these 28 references, only 8 appear in hymns written in the last fifty years. The songwriter, Graham Kendrick picks up themes of communal lament from Psalm 12 in his song 'Who can sound the depths of sorrow'³³⁷, and Matt Redman echoes the words said in the funeral service ('you give and take away') in his song 'Blessed be your name'.³³⁸ The most consistent hymn writers to tackle themes of pain and suffering are John Bell and Graham Maule from the Iona Community: song collections such as *Enemy of Apathy*³³⁹ offer many resources which tackle issues of injustice as well as individual pain and suffering. However, these are notable exceptions to the general focus on praise which excludes the enunciation of sorrow. Indeed, Kendrick has been instrumental as a worship leader and song writer in focusing the church on praise, through the use of praise marches in the 1980s and 1990s as a weapon of spiritual warfare.³⁴⁰ Whereas hymns of a previous generation focused on discipleship, with an acknowledgement of 'the steep and rugged pathway'³⁴¹, or indeed, the moment when each Christian must 'tread the verge of Jordan'³⁴², the emphasis today is on unremitting praise of God. There are very few Christian worship songs indeed written in the last fifty years which speak of impending death and the fears that must be faced at that time. Brueggemann summarises his argument by saying that 'it may be suggested that the one-sided liturgical renewal of today has, in effect, driven the hurtful side of

³³⁷ HON 829

³³⁸ HON 76

³³⁹ Ed John Bell & Graham Maule *Enemy of Apathy* Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 1998

³⁴⁰ See Pete Ward *Selling Worship* Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005 ch 8 'Marching to Intimacy'

³⁴¹ 'Father hear the prayer we offer' HON 169

³⁴² 'Guide me O Thou Great Redeemer' HON 275

experience either into obscure corners of faith practice, or completely out of Christian worship into various forms of psychotherapy and growth groups'.³⁴³ Although he wrote these words nearly forty years ago, the direction of liturgical renewal has only emphasised the one-sidedness of which he speaks.

John Swinton gives eloquent witness to the problems the church faces when it excises the psalms of lament from its regular worship. In August 1998, the Real IRA detonated a bomb in the town centre of Omagh, County Tyrone in Northern Ireland. Twenty-eight people were killed and 220 injured. Swinton went to church that Sunday, wanting to acknowledge the tragedy in some way in the course of worship, but it went unmentioned: he comments that 'because we had not consistently practised the art of recognising, accepting and expressing sadness, we had not developed the capacity to deal with tragedy'.³⁴⁴ He argues that the Psalms of lament provide us with the liturgical tools to do this and when we are familiar with them in times of ease, they can be summoned in times of hardship.

It is not that the Psalms of lament fail to provide inspiration for modern songwriters, but rather that it seems the focus is almost entirely on those sections within the Psalm which speak of trust in God or praise. The strength of the Psalms for Christian worship is that they contain those passages, but they are set amidst a recognition of individual and communal loss and injustice. In the same way, the power of the African-American spirituals, written in the time of slavery, lay in their

³⁴³ Brueggemann 'From hurt to joy, from death to life' *Interpretation* 28 (1974) 4

³⁴⁴ John Swinton *Raging with Compassion Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil* Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2007 p93

willingness to confront the pain of the situation in which they were originally sung, and still find words in which to praise God. The best of Israel's praises, Brueggemann writes 'is not self-congratulation, nor is it resignation. It is hope kept sharp by pain still present'.³⁴⁵ Some worship today can feel too much like self-congratulation, because there is no acknowledgement of the painful stories. When painful stories at a social and personal level dominate the minds and imaginations of our neighbours, a concentration on praise of God to the exclusion of lament can feel simply like escapism and a refusal to stand alongside a broken world.

A recovery of the Psalms of lament would assist in the task of connecting again with the world's pain. If, as Brueggemann maintains, they can be understood from the Christian perspective within the metanarrative of the Cross and Resurrection of Christ, they give words to human pain, whilst offering hope of resurrection alongside. When brought into funeral ministry, they offer liturgical meaning to an individual death in the light of Christ's representative death.

E. The Psalms of Lament in funerals

After his son died, Nicholas Wolterstorff commissioned the writing of a requiem to commemorate him. The words for the Requiem are taken from Psalms such as Psalm 88 and 130 in which the complaint of the Psalmist gives voice to Wolterstorff's demands.³⁴⁶ However, the requiem moves beyond this complaint to a reminder of the place of Christ as the one who bears our griefs and carries our sorrows (Isa 53.5) and ultimately to a place of trust and thanksgiving enunciated in

³⁴⁵ Brueggemann *Israel's Praise* p153

³⁴⁶ Wolterstorff *Lament* p107

Psalm 17.15: 'In justice I go to behold your face: I shall find joy in your likeness when I awake'. The movement within the requiem is from enunciation of pain and anger towards trust and praise for the God who redeems and brings hope.

In the light of this, the question must be asked again whether the balance of the Funeral order allows the expression of pain sufficiently alongside the declaration of hope. This chapter will highlight three points in the service where a greater use of the lament Psalms could help achieve a greater balance.

1. Introductory sentences

The opening words at a funeral service from John 11.27 have been present in every authorised funeral service in the Church of England since the first English Prayer Book in 1549: to change the mood of that sentiment would require an act of considerable liturgical courage! However, there are precedents, even within the Anglican Communion to give succour to the need for a greater recognition of the pain of death and the presence of grief at this point. In Rite II of the Episcopal Church of the United States of America, for example, there is the option to say the words of the anthem *Vita media* 'in the midst of life we are in death': words that Cranmer included in his order for the burial of the dead at the point of committal.

The use of Psalm 130.1 is already an option to be used as an opening sentence, as has already been seen: 'out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord, Lord hear my voice'. If the church is to take seriously the need to mourn at this point in the service, it should be recovered from the supplementary texts hidden in the depths of the

book to the main body of the Funeral Order. There are many other verses from the Psalms which could be used at this point, some of which have already found their place within Christian funeral liturgies:

In you, O Lord, I seek refuge; do not let me ever be put to shame; in your righteousness, deliver me. (Ps 31.1)

Revive us again, O God, that the people may rejoice in you. Show us your steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us your salvation. (Ps 85.7)

I, O Lord, cry out to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you. O Lord, why have you cast me off? Why do you hide your face from me? (Ps 88.13f)

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and there we wept. How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? (Ps 137.1, 4)

These words will be familiar to some people, though this could be a two-edged sword: if the words of the last verse quoted simply put people in mind of a pop tune by the 1970s glam rock group, Boney M, this may not be helpful at a funeral! Despite this, its resonances of being in a strange land will echo with many people's experience of grief.

In her commentary on the Common Worship funeral texts, Anne Horton quotes one Christian family who felt that the intercessions in the service focused too much on grief, whilst they wanted only a feeling of joy for their relative, an elderly Christian lady who was now free from pain and sickness.³⁴⁷ Such a family would no doubt feel that opening sentences which focused on grief, rather than hope would similarly be inappropriate. Nonetheless, there is a danger that a funeral can become too domesticated: whilst the increasing focus on the individual who has died is important, a funeral must remain more than that. It must also contain a theological statement about death. Using Thomas Long's categorisation of death in

³⁴⁷ R Anne Horton *Using Common Worship Funerals A practical guide to the new series* London: CHP, 2000 p 131

Scripture, the place of death as the mythic enemy should also be contained within the funeral service. To recognise that our initial response to death is to see it as the great enemy, which can then be spoken about as defeated through the resurrection of Christ offers an important counter-weight to popular readings, noted in a previous chapter, which minimise the impact of death.

2. The Psalm

Increasingly, the recital of a Psalm is omitted from a funeral service, whether it be in church or conducted solely at the crematorium or cemetery. This is despite the instructions contained in the notes to the funeral service in Common Worship that a Psalm should always be said. The full text of Psalm 23 is given in the main body of the service, but there are suggestions for twelve others which can also be used at this point in the service. It is worth commenting on aspects of some of these.

Psalm 6: the first of the penitential Psalms. Although there is a need to express grief and sorrow, the opening words that God would not 'rebuke me in your anger, or discipline me in your wrath' may strike the wrong note with worshippers. The Psalmist's complaint that 'every night I flood my bed with tears' may have resonances for those in grief.

Psalm 23: its familiarity will undoubtedly comfort at this point. Other helpful aspects to this Psalm have been noted above.

Psalm 27: here the lament and praise sections are inverted, and the opening words of hope will provide comfort, whilst the later words of complaint 'hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud', will give a needed voice to anguish.

Psalm 42: this Psalm will be familiar to many church goers and its final note of 'hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God' (v11) gives a vision of a future, different from the current reality, whilst acknowledging the present pain.

Psalm 90: this Psalm has been used at the burial service since 1662. Its reminder of a God who has been present 'from one generation to another' is pastorally helpful, given that funerals are often occasions when people remember past generations of family who have died.

Psalm 121: the familiarity of this Psalm of trust, like Psalm 23, will provide comfort for those who mourn.

The notes to the funeral service provide that the Psalm may be sung in metrical or other form: however, given the lack of usage noted above of the Psalms of Lament, it may not be so easy to find a familiar hymn to sing. However, Psalms of lament such as Psalm 130, 121 or 63 have remained a source of inspiration to the writers of requiems, and it may be that the use of non-congregational music as part of the service can incorporate the words of the Psalms effectively at this point.

3. Confession and prayers

The pastoral power of incorporating confession into a funeral service has been noted above. Any of the seven penitential Psalms could provide inspiration for this moment in the service – whether by listening to Allegri's *Miserere*, as a setting of Psalm 51, or by using the words of some of the Psalms round which to craft prayers. The well-known chant from the Taizé community, 'O Lord, hear my prayer' picks up

on the cry of the Psalmist in Ps 39.12 and elsewhere and could be used as a sung or said response to confession.

Similarly, a skilled liturgist could craft prayers of intercession round a particular Psalm of Lament. Psalm 27 could be used as follows:

‘The Lord is my light and my salvation, the Lord is the stronghold of my life.’ (v 1)

Let us give thanks for the life of x, for all they gave to us, for a life lived in the shelter and strength of God.’

‘Your face, O Lord, do I seek; do not hide your face from me’(v8)

Remember x in your love and mercy as we also remember him/her – may he/she know your peace and presence in death, as they knew it in life.

‘God will hide me in his shelter in the day of my trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent’ (v5)

We pray for those who mourn, remembering by name Be not far from them, our God and may they know your shelter in their troubles.

‘One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after; to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life’ (v4)

We ask for strength to live in the light of eternity, putting our trust in God who is from everlasting to everlasting.

Wait for the Lord, be strong and let your heart take courage: wait for the Lord (v14)

AMEN

F. Conclusion

In his article, 'Psalms and the Life of Faith: A suggested typology of function', Brueggemann quotes Martin Heidegger's aphorism, 'the poet is the shepherd of being'.³⁴⁸ He refers specifically to the power of the Psalms of lament to lead people into praise: the disjunction between the words of lament and thanksgiving may be felt initially but the words of praise lead the worshipper into a place of praise. In today's funeral rites, the Psalms could indeed take us to the darkest valleys, before shepherding us on to green pastures.

Whilst it is easy to be critical of eulogies and readings by relatives which speak only of happy times and good things, pastorally it must be recognised how difficult it would be for them to reflect on a darker reality. It is vital then that the liturgy provides a safe way of doing this. The Psalms of lament provide rich scriptural and liturgical resources to do this, and a recovery of their use within the funeral rites will speak of the reality of grief felt, whilst the move into thanksgiving reminds those present at a Christian funeral of hope that is inevitably linked to the service. In short, the Psalms of Lament offer liturgical power and expression to the theological insights that Balthasar gives us that we might express the sorrow of Good Friday and hopelessness of Holy Saturday, before moving on to the joy of Easter Day.

³⁴⁸ Walter Brueggemann 'Psalms and the Life of Faith: A suggested typology of function' *JSOT* 17 (1980) 17

Appendix One

An overview of the DThMin and subjects studied within it

At the point of enrolment on the DMin (as it was then) programme in September 2006, my main concern was little different from the other students on the course: to avoid being found out as a fraud on a doctoral programme! Having completed an MA in Christian Ethics and Moral Philosophy at Kings some six years previously, there undoubtedly remained an anxiety that aiming for a doctorate was pushing my hopes too far and it would not be long before I would be required to leave the course for lack of ability. The greatest relief I encountered in the first few weeks of the course was discovering that all my fellow students felt the same!

Another common factor shared amongst fellow students was the reason at the heart of embarking on the DMin programme, rather than a more traditional Ph.D. We acknowledged that an important attraction for us in the programme was the lack of necessity in specialising too early on. I started on the course having served as the parish priest in my previous parish for some five years and very interested by the ideas surrounding the theology of place, as expounded by John Inge in his work *A Christian Theology of Place*.³⁴⁹ However, I certainly did not feel confident that I would be able to complete a whole doctoral thesis on a related subject, and it was reassuring to be able to explore a number of differing ideas before needing to specialise in a particular area for the RBT.

It is interesting to look back now on the six essays completed in the first two years of the DMin and see how they influenced me in the writing of the RBT: what could have appeared as six random essays with little coherence between them, can now also be read as expounding differing aspects of a common theme which comes

³⁴⁹ John Inge *A Christian Theology of Place* Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004

through in the RBT. One of the main reasons for the subject matter of my RBT was the enjoyment I had in completing the MFS and the desire to build on that work, so it is no surprise that definite links can be made between the two longer pieces of work. It is more interesting to note areas of development of ideas from the shorter essays which affect the writing of the RBT.

1. Moral Theology: the Church and Immigration

In the first term's study, courses were completed in systematic theology and moral theology. Given that the RBT spends some time studying the work of the systematic theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, it could be suggested that I would have done better to have completed an essay in the first topic, rather than moral theology. The lectures themselves in systematic theology were a welcome reminder of some of what I had learnt in my first theology degree from Cambridge: it felt reassuring to find myself on familiar territory. However, as I had already done an MA in Moral Philosophy, it seemed more sensible to write my first essay on a topic where I could be reasonably confident about my own abilities and where learning had taken place more recently, rather than build upon earlier knowledge.

In considering how the thinking espoused in the essay on the church's attitude towards immigrants finds common ground with an analysis of funeral ministry in Britain today, there appear to be two areas of concern that remain constant. The first of these comes from a theology of place, aided by Benedictine notions of stability and how they affect parish clergy. The relative mobility of parish clergy today has undoubtedly contributed to the decline of clergy-led funerals – the phenomenon of 'repeat business' is universal amongst those who conduct funerals well, but if the

minister has moved on, the family with few other church ties will be less likely to ask a new minister to conduct the funeral.

The second link with attitudes towards immigrants comes from reflection on Luke Bretherton's work *Hospitality as Holiness*³⁵⁰. His concern is how Christians engage in moral debate with those from other religious and philosophical tradition, and points to hospitality as the key virtue that enables respectful listening. Hospitality could also be seen as a key virtue in the funeral ministry where the majority of clergy-led funerals are still for those with little other church involvement, and where clergy are increasingly being asked to allow non-religious music, readings and tributes. Many clergy struggle with this and wonder what place they should have in a Christian funeral. Although I have not explored this notion specifically in my RBT, it may well be that notions of hospitality as defined by Bretherton, would help find a way through.

2. Biblical studies: Narrative and biographical approaches to Scripture

Balthasar complains that biblical studies were often more concerned with textual analysis and literary readings, rather than engagement with the story itself. A key element of the RBT was of course a discussion of the Triduum and it ought to be that there were natural links with the biblical studies course from that. Given that one purpose of the DThMin course is to link academic theology with the everyday practice in parish ministry, it is to be expected that obvious links could be made with the biblical studies course and the weekly preaching that occurs from the pulpit. Perhaps it was the very familiarity of the subject that made this hardest – if Sunday

³⁵⁰ Luke Bretherton *Hospitality as Holiness Christian Witness amid Moral Diversity* Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006

by Sunday, the text is expounded and applied to people's lives, it is less easy to refer back some five years to the academic study of the Bible and make links.

3. Education: The Holy Spirit in Education

This essay opened with a quotation from Edward Farley claiming that the Holy Spirit is simply superfluous in the programme of Christian education'.³⁵¹ It is a reminder that too often the Holy Spirit is seen as the preserve of the Church and of not much relevance in its engagement with the world. The essay sought to undermine this view and highlight a theology of the Holy Spirit that could engage with and inform a Christian understanding of education in schools and throughout Christian ministry.

In order to allow the work of the Holy Spirit to be effective, it was suggested that traditional knowledge based educational methods should be complemented by sapiential learning: learning based on the building of character rather than simply the acquisition of knowledge. This certainly should inform the education of Christian ministers, and reinforced a concern, which came through in other essays too, of what sort of people clergy ought to be in their ministry. Thomas Groome quotes WB Yeats, who says that 'he that sings a lasting song/ thinks in a marrow bone',³⁵². It is this kind of thinking that may well aid clergy in negotiating the pitfalls of twenty-first century funerals.

The link between the Holy Spirit and the acquisition of wisdom also has an important part to play in the place of suffering. It is in suffering – often more than in

³⁵¹ Edward Farley 'Does Christian Education need the Holy Spirit' *Religious Education* 70 (Nov/ Dec 1965) 431

³⁵² WB Yeats 'A Prayer for Old Age' quoted by Thomas H Groome *Sharing Faith A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry* Eugene OR; Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1998 p7

joy – that we learn wisdom. The Church seems to be uncomfortable with its place in suffering, preferring to focus its resources on ‘happy ministry’ with children and young families, and writing worship songs of praise, rather than interpreting the Psalms of lament. A reminder that the Holy Spirit reveals himself in pain as much as in joy is an important reminder that the Church should consider.

4. Sociology: Islam and multi-culturalism in Great Britain and France

At first glance, this would seem to have little to do with the world of funeral ministry, but undoubtedly the sociology part of the course was one of the most significant for me in my own development – particularly in leading to the sixth essay and then the MFS, which fed into the RBT. Grace Davie’s work on religion in Britain and in Europe since the war makes a great deal of statistics on funerals and how they support an understanding of society where religion still has an important role to play. The importance of Muslims on the world stage is noted by sociologists such as Peter Berger in *The Desecularisation of the World*³⁵³ - it provides an interesting contrast with the world of funerals, where government policy introduced in 2003 to encourage the use of civil celebrants emphasises secularisation.

5. Church History: George Herbert

It might be too facile to make links between the work of the seventeenth century poet and priest, George Herbert and parish ministry in the twenty-first century, and my main consideration in writing this essay was the joy of writing about a literary hero. Yet his concern to be a pastor to his community still has resonances in today’s parochial ministry. He wants to ‘set down the Form and Character of a true

³⁵³ Ed Peter Berger *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999.

Pastour, that I may have a mark to aim at'³⁵⁴ – it is a mark at which today's parish priest could still take aim.

6. Research methods and MFS: the funeral today

It was the final 5000 word essay written at the end of the initial two year period, that I began to focus on funerals. It was motivated by an awareness that it was that aspect of my ministry for which I had been the least prepared whilst at theological college: we had a short course lasting three days at the very end of three years. Yet, when I moved to Hoddesdon in June 2001, it was not uncommon for me to conduct three or four funerals a week. There appeared to be an assumption that we would learn all we needed to know 'on the job', and there was little opportunity to find theological tools to underpin a funeral ministry, whilst at college. As I found funeral ministry enormously rewarding, I wanted to explore more fully what impact it had on the wider community. I was also aware that by July 2008, when I completed the initial essay, the number of funerals being carried out by clergy was on the decline and I wanted to explore some of the reasons for this.

In my MFS, my research question was 'why do people use the clergy to conduct funerals?' I conducted a survey of nearly 300 funerals over a five year period, all of which were carried out by myself or my colleagues in my parish in Hoddesdon. Most of the funerals were for families with little other church connection. Despite this lack of church connection, about one third of the respondents said that they wanted a Christian funeral, with one respondent talking about it being 'the right way to say goodbye'.

³⁵⁴ George Herbert *The Country Parson* p224 quoted from Ed F.E. Hutchinson *The Works of George Herbert* Oxford: OUP, 1941

Given the desire for a Christian funeral in the midst of changing sociological data which suggests that this sense is declining, I wished to explore in the RBT the theology behind funerals and what response the church should make to the changing nature of funerals – both in who takes them and the content of the funerals themselves. It is these issues that I have sought to address in this thesis.

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