

Sermon Easter 5 2022

During this season of Easter tide, holy mother church continues to provide us with a feast of delights in the serving of sacred scripture. Part of the reason for this rich diet is that there are so many aspects of resurrection faith that need to be unpacked. One of those aspects that need to be unpacked is *there are implications* for the resurrection. There are repercussions for assenting to the truth of the resurrection. The resurrection is not just a moment in history, not just an idea to give assent to. The resurrection is also something that is to shape our lives. In other words, faith in the resurrection *has practical consequences*. Resurrection faith 'looks' like something. For this reason, in part, we hear every day during Eastertide a portion from the Book of Acts. The Book of Acts tells of the practical outworking of the resurrection. The apostles accept the consequences of faith in the resurrected Christ, and so carry that truth to the world, first to Judea, then Samaria and to Antioch, then throughout the Mediterranean, and finally to Rome. Those ripples out from Jerusalem give concrete expression to one aspect of resurrection faith: that this good news is for all peoples.

One further consequence of resurrection faith that ought to shape and direct Christian life is how we approach and understand our deaths. For the Christian, our deaths are understood in the light of Christ's resurrection. After more than a dozen years in ordained ministry, however, one of my reflections is how poorly prepared most Christians are for their death, and how poorly resurrection faith shapes our approach to this. So, we all need reminding that one of the gifts of faith is that it enables us to look forward to our demise and death with confidence and hope. But at the heart of the culture we inhabit is a complete denial of death's existence, or if it is acknowledged, it is done so with dread and terror. One of the healthiest and most useful things Christian faith offers is a capacity to talk openly and honestly about death.

Even if many of us will live longer than previous generations, the truth is that *death can come upon us at any moment*. It is our solemn duty that we all make good provision for that eventuality. Among the important preparations you can undertake is to make known your funeral wishes, along with what you want done with your mortal remains, and how you wish your estate to be dispersed. Having a frank discussion with your loved ones and family members about your funeral wishes is an act of kindness. It can save those you love a lot of trouble if you make your wishes clear. It will prevent a lot of stress and ambiguity if they do not have to guess what you wanted.

How you wish your funeral to be celebrated is an important conversation to have with your next of kin and family members. Now, oftentimes they will discourage this conversation. So, it may be enough to say, 'I have written down my wishes. It is with my papers, and I have let my priest know.' But, it is important, then, that your wishes *are* written down! To help in this, from next week, I will be sending out a letter based on this sermon, with a form in which you can outline some of your wishes for your funeral. In the form, you will see simple options are provided, and in the letter I will offer some guidance on these options.

Somewhat against contemporary cultural trends, a Christian funeral is not principally a 'celebration of a life.' It is an act of worship. And the one whom we are celebrating is Jesus Christ, whose life and death gives meaning to our life and death. Because a Christian funeral is an act of worship it really is unsuitable to include non-biblical readings, and music that is secular or profane in nature. But thinking about bible readings and hymns you *do* wish to have included in your funeral can be an important, prayerful, and devotional activity as, before God, you prepare for your own death.

It is also important to express clearly to your next of kin and loved ones what you wish to happen to your mortal remains. Christian faith teaches that the remains of the deceased are to be treated with honour and respect. This is what Christian theology of Creation teaches, what Christian theology of the Incarnation teaches, what Christian theology of the Resurrection teaches. But it is not uncommon to hear (even amongst Christians), something along the lines of, *well when I'm dead it's just an empty shell, I don't really care what happens*. This is not a Christian position! Our bodies were created and invested with eternal dignity by God, and are temples of the Holy Spirit! The Christian tradition, then, broadly permits two options for disposing of mortal remains: burial or cremation. It is important to note that the church does not envisage cremated remains remaining in the home of a relative or loved one. Neither does the church envisage the 'scattering' of ashes. Instead, reverently interring ('burying') cremated remains into the earth of a consecrated space (such as a dedicated memorial garden or cemetery) is *the* appropriate way of respecting the dignity of the deceased.

Once you have completed the form I'll be sending out, please make three copies. 1. Keep one for yourself and put it with your papers in an easy-to-find, obvious place, or lodge a copy with your solicitor. 2. Pass a copy to your next of kin. 3. Give a copy directly to me or the current vicar of the church who will put it on file. Now, I say all

this because (I am afraid to say) you cannot presume your next of kin will understand your wishes simply because you go to church. If you have not written your wishes down *you must presume* your wishes will be ignored. Often, family members will say, *Oh mum or dad wouldn't like any fuss* which becomes shorthand for, *not too much religious stuff, please*. Oftentimes those closest to you will occupy a completely different worldview to you, a worldview which is effectively neo-pagan and gnostic.

Sentimentalism, misguided intentions, or even overt hostility to an individual's faith – even hostility from within one's own family - is not a good way to either respect you or more importantly respect your faith. But even faithful believers, (even faithful members of this church!), have allowed their thinking about their death and about their funeral to be shaped more by the popular culture surrounding us, or by outright gnostic heresy, rather than their faith! But instead, your death and your funeral *can be* a final act of evangelical witness to your family and loved ones! The readings, the hymns, the reverent disposal of your remains, the form of service, can be your chance to say *this is my faith, this is what mattered most, this faith is what gave my life ultimate meaning*.

In the process of considering your funeral wishes, please also consider how it is your Christian duty to make some sort of provision in your will for the work of the church after your death. Personal financial contribution to the church's work is a Christian obligation while you are alive. It makes good sense to make a contribution to the church's work, then, at your death. Your gift can have a significant and lasting effect even after you have gone to your rest!

Finally, please request of your family that when your final illness comes, they notify the priest. It is a great gift of the church to both the dying and their loved ones that the prayers and sacraments of the church are offered. It can be a real sadness when a faithful Christian is denied the graces of the sacraments for their final journey.

The reading from Revelation today gives us further insight into how resurrection faith shapes our approach to death: *our faith gives us hope*. In Christ, the conqueror of death, we find the One who will wipe away every tear, whose victory means that death and mourning and sadness do not have the final word. Rather, the final word goes to the One who sits on the throne, *Behold, I have made all things new*. I encourage you now to all make good provision for how your death can witness to this hope. Amen.