

A GOOD FUNERAL
January 9, 2014

The final line of tomorrow first reading at Mass, from the First Letter of John, is the quite familiar verse: "I write these things to you so that you may know that you have eternal life, you who believe in the name of the Son of God." "Have"--present tense, and not "will have." This has, of course, an entirely orthodox and important meaning: in some very real sense, what awaits a genuine disciple of Christ after death is not totally and completely different from what the disciple already enjoys here on earth. As I hope to show, however, there is also prevalent today an understanding of this verse that represents a rather stark and harmful deviation from the earliest Christian understanding of death. If this seems like an unusual topic for a conference when we are still in Christmastide, I can only say that it was suggested to me by a very interesting book review that I came across recently in *The Christian Century*.¹

I'll begin with a personal anecdote. About a month ago I got a somewhat frantic call from the director of a funeral home in a nearby suburb asking if I could possibly officiate at a service there the next day. The deceased woman had once been an active member of a local parish but had then lived in North Carolina for several decades, only to move back to this part of the country when her husband died and she became so frail that she could no longer take care of herself, so she lived more or less homebound with a daughter's family and no longer had a connection with any parish in our archdiocese. The funeral director had tried in vain to find a priest available for a service and was almost out of possibilities when he phoned here. I was able and willing to help. When I arrived at the funeral home the next morning, a lot of people were already there, milling around and conversing. The coffin was closed and off to the side, with no one seemingly even aware of its presence. During the ceremony, the two daughters and one son asked me to say some prayers, after which about eight persons spoke about their memories of the

woman who had died, most of them telling funny stories about her various idiosyncrasies. In my opinion, only the final speaker, an adult granddaughter, had anything really worthwhile to say.

We then drove some distance to a cemetery for a brief ceremony at the graveside.

I say this not to criticize the family of the deceased but to point out that this kind of service is becoming more and more common and that it does have some regrettable aspects. Before pointing them out, consider what was a fairly standard funeral in the early Church. The body of the deceased would be washed, clothed in garments representing baptism, and then taken in procession to a church, where the congregation would recite various prayers, listen to readings from Scripture, and hear a homily from the celebrant, who would celebrate the Eucharist either there or at the gravesite. The latter would normally be so near the church that the body of the deceased could be taken in a further procession to the cemetery, where more prayers would be said before the coffin was lowered into the grave. The whole point was to allow the faithful, with a mixture of grief and joyful hope, to accompany a brother or sister to the place of union with God, the funeral being the last phase of a lifelong journey toward God. Happily we are still able to retain most of this here at the abbey since our monastic cemetery is within walking distance, just like the cemeteries still to be seen in the churchyards of many rural parishes both in this country and abroad.

This is obviously quite different from what has become the norm in many denominations, where there is often a memorial service rather than a funeral, a highly personalized service with the focus not on a minister but on a number of speakers who regularly tell humorous stories about the person who had died, all of this leading to what Thomas Long, a professor of homiletics at a school of theology in Atlanta, calls not a way of accompanying the dead in their migrating to God but rather a way of helping the living move from sorrow to stability.²

In asking why the change has come about, Professor Long suggests two major reasons: First, the horrible carnage of the Civil War, by far the mostly deadly of any war our country has ever been engaged in, led many Americans to redefine or even reject their faith in a benevolent and responsive God: How could a loving, merciful God permit such slaughter? The notion of heaven was not altogether abandoned, but was revised and domesticated to be a place much like earth. As one late-nineteenth century devotional essay put it, the dead "will at last discover ... that while on earth, without knowing it, they had already been living in heaven." This is what I referred to earlier as an impoverished understanding of what even now having eternal life should mean for a follower of Christ.

A second reason, which probably can't be helped because of space restrictions within cities, is that most cemeteries are now located at a considerable distance from churches rather than in an adjacent churchyard. The regrettable effect is that a previously unified ritual is now usually divided into two discrete parts: the funeral in the church, and burial at some very different location, often done later in a private ceremony so that those present at the funeral need not drive some miles to the cemetery. As a result, the funeral service itself is no longer clearly a journey from the church to the place of burial but simply a stationary event in a particular building.

As I said already, we here at the abbey have the wonderful advantage of having our own cemetery nearby. It allows us, among other things, more easily to keep in mind St. Benedict's injunction to keep death daily before our eyes. We do so in other ways as well, such as the remembrance of each deceased member of our community on the anniversary of his death, as we did yesterday for Fr. Columba both at Mass and with the material that Fr. Michael posted on our bulletin board. If nothing else, these reflections might help us all be mindful that at every

Eucharist there is an important commemoration of the dead. If, beyond that, it leads any of us to pray from time to time in our cemetery itself, I think that would be a very appropriate practice.

¹ William H. Willimon, "The body in question," a review of *The Good Funeral: Death, Grief, and the Community of Care* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), *The Christian Century*, Oct. 30, 2013, pp. 36-37.

² Thomas G. Long, "The Good Funeral," *The Christian Century*, Oct. 6, 2009, p. 20. All further references to Long's points are from this article, which runs from pp. 20-25.