

O Sing to Me of Heaven: Preaching at Funerals

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When it comes to the idea of sermons at funerals, much confusion has raged in the church. Is a sermon at a funeral necessary? Desirable? If so, what is it supposed to be and do? What should be its basic content and aim? These questions have proved vexing and difficult to answer, and what are deemed to be the “correct” responses depend in large part upon where one stands in the stream of church history. As an example of how the funeral sermon has been something of a wax nose, bent first this way and that by the tides of history and fashion, consider Jacques Bénigne Bossuet (1627-1704), the most famous Christian funeral sermonizer in history.

Bossuet’s ornate, polished funeral orations are still admired and studied as fine rhetoric in French schools. Well-born, classically-educated, and possessed of a rich, sonorous voice and theatrical pulpit manner, Bossuet naturally made his way rapidly through the clerical ranks of French Catholicism, climbing finally to be chaplain to the court of the “Sun King,” Louis XIV. Bossuet clearly had what it takes to be a royal chaplain – polish, grace, charm, a gift for flattery – but mainly the man could preach a good funeral. What that meant at Versailles was that, among other things, Bossuet could sprinkle the fancy perfume of his oratory over the fetid moral lives of various deceased royals and cause them to smell like roses at their own funerals.

A particularly challenging example was the funeral of one Princess Anne of Gonzaga, a conniving schemer whose backstabbing tactics, hateful personality, and very public transgressions were the talk of Paris. Finding something good to say at her funeral would be, to put it mildly, difficult. To make matters worse, in a Jerry Springer-like move, Anne had, just prior to her death, foolishly and vainly published a ghostwritten memoir confessing all in shocking detail. How could even the redoubtable Bossuet handle this one? He rose to the occasion, however, first describing a Damascus Road conversion experience that had overtaken her highness late in life, a remarkable tale of personal transformation that had strangely gone unnoticed among her compatriots. It was, trumpeted Bossuet, “a miracle as astonishing as that where Jesus Christ caused to fall in an instant from the eyes of converted Saul the scales from which they had been covered. Who then would not cry out at such a sudden change, ‘The finger of God is here!’”

Having thus, with a waggle of his tongue, turned the princess from sinner to saint, Bossuet could then give the congregation what they wanted, extensive and titillating passages from her majesty’s own confessional, but now they served as evidence of the power of grace to provoke so dramatic a change. He ended with an evangelical flourish imitated by many subsequent funeral preachers, “I wish all souls who are far from God...were present here today. You, then, who gather in this holy place, and chiefly you, O sinners, whose conversion He awaits with such long patience, harden not your hearts....”¹

By all reports, Bossuet’s congregation at the funeral was moved by his oratory but dubious of his facts. The notion of the poison princess as a sudden hot gospeler was a bit much, and a skeptical Voltaire had a little sport with Bossuet’s account of Princess Anne’s deathbed flight to Jesus. “Bossuet told this as true,” he said, tongue-in-cheek,

“therefore he must have believed it. Let us join him in his belief, in spite of the raillery which it has occasioned.”

The point, however, is that Bossuet was not alone by any means in what he took to be the basic purposes of a funeral sermon. He was merely the most accomplished of a legion of clergy engaging in this sort of funeral preaching, namely rhetorically polished eulogies flattering the dead (and, generally speaking, the wealthier or more well-placed the deceased, the finer the eloquence and the more glowing the eulogy), with a moral twist at the end designed to summon the living to higher Christian obedience.

It was almost inevitable that a reaction would set in, and sure enough, one Christian reform movement after another began to condemn these class-based and flowery funeral eulogies. Perhaps the earliest, and certainly the most extreme, reaction came from the Calvinists at the Westminster Assembly. Having had quite enough of precious liturgies and windy, high blown eulogies at Anglican funerals, the Westminster divines decided that the less said and done over the deceased, the better. Since funerals, they said in the *Directory for the Publick Worship of God* (1644), “are no way beneficial to the dead, and have proved many ways hurtful to the living,” they should be avoided altogether. “When any person departeth this life, let the dead body, upon the day of burial, be decently attended from the house to the place appointed for publick burial, and there immediately interred, without any ceremony.” If a minister happened to be present and a sermon was desired, then the people could leave the graveyard after the burial and go to the meetinghouse for preaching. The preacher should keep it simple, not singing the praises of the deceased, but instead doing only what a sermon always should do: put the hearers “in remembrance of their duty.”

Stern stuff there, and while no major Christian denomination takes such a dim view of funerals today, the antipathy toward eulogies endures. The rubrics for the current Roman Catholic funeral mass expressly forbid them: “A brief homily based on the readings is always given after the gospel reading at the funeral liturgy and may also be given after the readings at the vigil service; *but there is never to be a eulogy.*”² In the Protestant world, the command of the Lutheran *Manual on the Liturgy* is typical: “The sermon may include a recognition of the life of the deceased, *but its purpose is not eulogy but a proclamation of hope and comfort in Christ.*”³

We know what these rubrics are after – preach the gospel, don’t preach the life of the deceased – but what seems liturgically desirable is often pastorally problematic. Most funerals, by far, include at least some reminiscences about the deceased that would fall within the range of the definition of a eulogy (literally, a “good word”), and it would seem cold and sterile not to include them. What, after all, is a sermon that includes “a recognition of the life of the deceased” but is in no way a eulogy? Surely it doesn’t mean that it is permitted to speak of the dead, as long as it is not positive. Strange indeed would be the contemporary American funeral in which mention of the life of the deceased is omitted. Small wonder pastors are unclear about the shape and aim of a funeral sermon.

Marching to Zion

The confusion about funeral sermons stems not only from a reaction against eulogies in our ecclesiastical past but also from a larger confusion about the nature of funeral itself. We have painted ourselves into a strange corner regarding contemporary

funerals. On the one hand, the shimmering ideal for many well-educated clergy (Protestants especially) is a reverent service of worship in which there are joyful hymns and a powerful, upbeat “witness to the resurrection.” Increasingly these ideal funerals are envisioned as memorial services absent the body (or the cremated remains), which would have been disposed of previously in a private way. On the other hand, the culture seems hell-bent on running in the opposite direction, turning funerals into open-mike events in which coaches, nephews, and neighbors flood the room with stories and jokes about the deceased. And so we have a tug-of-war between the quiet, but somewhat abstract, ideal of a worship service reflecting on the joy of the resurrection and the Oprah-esque carnival of anecdotes and memories, sort of lowbrow Bossuet.

Caught in the middle of this riptide, *The Companion to the [Presbyterian] Book of Common Worship* struggles valiantly to maintain propriety and balance when it says that “the sermon ought always to be a clear proclamation of the gospel, but may quite appropriately include grateful reference to the life of the deceased.” But it then gives a perhaps reluctant nod to the cultural realities by going on to say that friends and family may bring tributes of the deceased’s faithfulness, “but these should be brief and few in number,” and it would really be better if they were confined to the visitation service the night before the funeral.⁴

Actually both the clerical ideal of a funeral as a quiet reflection on the meaning of death and resurrection and the cultural propensity for open-mike services would be unrecognizable to our early Christian forebears. Woven out of strands borrowed from Jewish and Roman burial practices, distinctively Christian funeral customs had been firmly established by the fifth century, and they bear little resemblance to what we call a Christian funeral today. In brief, Christians would lovingly wash and anoint the bodies of the deceased, dress them in baptismal garments, and then carry them to the place of burial, singing psalms and hymns as they traveled. The dead were seen as saints traveling on to God. At the place of burial, the faithful would give the kiss of peace to the deceased, and with prayers, words of hope, and tears mingled with alleluias, they would bid farewell to those who had died.⁵ The fourth century document *The Apostolic Constitutions* describes the solemn but hopeful march to the cemetery this way: “In the funerals of the departed, accompany them with singing, if they were faithful in Christ. For ‘precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints.’”

Let me put the matter clearly: what we now think of as an optional appendage to the funeral – the journey to the cemetery carrying the body of the deceased – was, for early Christians, not just part of the funeral. It *was* the funeral. Moreover, this image of the great drama of walking to the cemetery with the deceased allows us to reframe what we are doing when we preach at funerals and gives us new insight about what funeral sermons ought to be. Despite appearances, the funeral sermon is not some prompt to meditation for mourners gathered quietly in a chapel. It is rather a word spoken in the middle of a march, spoken to pilgrim people who are in the middle of a pilgrimage to the place of farewell, singing the songs of Zion and bearing the body of a saint as they travel.

Leaving the Powers of Death Behind

When the Christian community symbolically accompanies the dead with singing

as it moves toward the cemetery, this journey is a recapitulation of the baptismal pilgrimage. Baptism is, of course, not merely a ritual for joining the church; it is a change of citizenship, a turning away from the powers of darkness toward the saving power of God. In a moving sermon addressed to candidates for baptism, Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428) describes what will happen in the baptismal service and what it means. He tells the candidates that they will shout out a renunciation: "I renounce Satan and all his angels, all his service, all his vanity, all his worldly enticements." Then, the candidate will turn and behold a marvelous sight:

[T]he bishop comes over to you. Instead of his usual clothes, he is wearing a delicate, shining linen vestment. He is wearing new garments which denote the new world you are entering; their dazzling appearance signifies that you will shine in the next life; its light texture symbolizes the delicacy and grace of that world.⁶

In baptism, then, the power of sin and death is left behind, and the one who is baptized begins a lifelong journey toward the dazzling light of God, and this forms a powerful and important theme for funeral preaching. The power of evil continues to attack, of course, and the Christian pilgrimage, which begins with the grand turning of baptism, proceeds through daily acts of repentance.

The power of sin and death shows up for the funeral, too. At a funeral, there is always another preacher present: capital "D" Death, not death as a biological process, but Death as a power that always seeks to claim us. Death's sermon is always the same: "Damn you all! I win every time. I destroy all loving relationships. I shatter all community. I dash all hopes. I have claimed another. I always win." Funeral sermons that spend all of their time on gentle themes of comfort and pastoral care miss both an opportunity and the point. Death is running after the pilgrim throng, pointing gleefully at the lifeless corpse and trying to out-shout the gospel. It is the great privilege of the funeral preacher to shake a fist in the face of Death, to shout again the renunciation of baptism and the cry of Easter triumph, "O Death, where is your victory?"

For All the Saints

The image of bearing our dead to the cemetery, singing as we go, not only represents the baptismal journey, it also represents what Acts calls "the Way," the Christian life, moving together in pilgrimage toward God, singing praises along the path. The funeral sermon is an intensification of the conversation of the Christian community, the expression of memory and hope, that characterizes the discourse of pilgrims.

In a sermon preached years ago at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City, the poet Wendell Berry described the tobacco harvest in Kentucky. When the tobacco is ready to glean, he said, the harvest must be done quickly, and there is an air of urgency, even emergency, about getting the crop out of the field and into the barn. Everyone, young and old, is summoned to the labor, and as children play around the edges, the rest of the community is at work, moving methodically across the field. As they work, there is plenty of time for storytelling, and many of the stories, Berry said, are about those who once worked the harvest but who have now passed away. "The problem with most of the jobs that people have today," Berry said, "working at

computers and telephones, is that they cut us off from children and the dead.”

The funeral liturgy, and with it the funeral sermon, refuses to cut us off from the dead. As we walk to the cemetery with the one who has died, we tell stories of this person. We tell them because Christians believe that death changes, but does not destroy, the communion with this saint. We tell stories of the one who has died because we can see through the prism of this life, both in glad and sorrowful memories, refractions of the grace and love of God. We tell stories of the deceased while carrying, at least symbolically, their body, because the Christian faith is not just an idea or a sentiment, it is a Way, an embodied form of living, and what we do with our bodies counts. What the deceased did in the embodiment of his or her life matters. It is this kind of faithful storytelling that the contemporary liturgical books have in mind when they say things like, “The sermon may include a recognition of the life of the deceased, but its purpose is not eulogy but a proclamation of hope and comfort in Christ.”

But there is one more reason why we remember the deceased and tell stories of this one’s life and faith, a reason not reflected in most of the worship handbooks. We are carrying this one to God, and we are in effect shouting out a prayerful petition to God, “God, get ready! Here comes Elizabeth! Here comes Roberto! A sinner of your redeeming, and a lamb of your own flock. You have given her, given him, to us, and now with gratitude for that gift of life, we are returning them to you.” A funeral sermon is like the prayer after the offering, “We give thee but thine own,” except in this case the offering is not money but the life of one we have loved.

Songs of Heaven

Perhaps the most radical challenge of the image of bearing our dead to the cemetery, singing as we go, is the clear implication that this pilgrim march is headed somewhere. We are going to the cemetery, of course, but the cemetery is merely the near bank of a great river, and the dead will travel over to the other side.

There was a time when we could speak of this without embarrassment. As the 1840s folk hymn “Oh, Sing to Me of Heav’n” put it:

Oh, sing to me of heav’n,
When I am called to die,
Sing songs of holy ecstasy,
To waft my soul on high.

Then ‘round my senseless clay
Assemble those I love,
And sing of heav’n, delightful heav’n,
My glorious home above.

But over the last century and a half, many American Christians have lost touch with the power of the symbol “heaven.” In many ways, this is the result of a failure of the religious imagination, a consequence of having taken the notion of “heaven” too literally, until finally, the notion of a static heaven filled with the changeless dead simply collapsed under the weight of implausibility. By the late nineteenth century, even conservative Christians began to talk of heaven largely in domestic terms. Heaven would not be a surprise or a shock, the devotional of literature of that era said,

because heaven would simply be like the best of joys we already have here on earth. Heaven, as a symbol, got demystified, pulled from its proper place on the far shore and made into an intensification of the present tense, and the result was that the dead had no place to go. Many American Christians, without realizing it, have a quasi-Gnostic understanding of what happens to the dead. They don't travel anywhere; they simply vaporize into the eternal present. Their bodies decay while their immortal souls are absorbed into the always hovering Divine Spirit.

The Christian funeral sermon preached on pilgrimage, however, is bold to keep its eyes on the distant horizon and to speak of heaven. There is no arrogant attempt to describe what we cannot know, no silly pictures of harps or little children picking flowers for Jesus, but there is a willingness to claim the hope that we are traveling to God. As the feminist theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson says in her splendid book on the doctrine of the communion of the saints, *Friends of God and Prophets*, the biblical witness of heaven is not of some abstract and static reality, but instead,

[T]he scriptural images of final fulfillment are corporate, cosmic, and filled with joy. The vision of God itself entails "knowing" in the biblical, experiential sense, relating intimately to the unfathomable mystery of another in deeply mutual regard. And analogues in the human experience of loving in freedom, enjoying beauty, pursuing truth, and interacting in community have an absorbing and life-giving character that is the opposite of stasis. At root, heaven is the symbol of a community of love sharing the life of God.⁷

Where are we taking our dead? We are walking with them to the place of farewell, singing as we go, and giving them into the hand of the God we love and trust and know in Jesus Christ, confident that in ways we cannot fathom, but about which we can stammer and sing, they are moving to a distant shore and a brighter light, and entering that community of love that shares the life of God.

So preach as one who marches along with them, and sing the songs of heaven.

Notes

1. The account of Bossuet's funeral oration for Anne of Gonzaga is largely taken from Edwin C. Dargan, *A History of Preaching*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970 [original edition, 1906]), 91-98.
2. *Order of Christian Funerals* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing, 1989), 8. Emphasis added.
3. Philip H. Pfatteicher and Carlos R. Messerlu, *Manual on the Liturgy: Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing Company, 1979), 360.
4. Peter C. Bower, ed., *The Companion to the Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Geneva Press and Office of Theology and Worship, 2003), 241.
5. For a more detailed description of the development of a Christian pattern of funeral practices, see Thomas G. Long, "Whatever Happened to the Christian Funeral," *The Cresset: A Review of Literature, the Arts, and Public Affairs*, LXVIII/3 (Lent 2005), 11-17.
6. E.C. Whitaker, *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, 3rd Edition, edited by Maxwell Johnson (London: SPCK, 1970), 48-49.
7. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of the Saints* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 190.