

THE FUNERAL OF A BABY: ONE MINISTER'S EXPERIENCE

Paul Beasley-Murray

Recently I conducted the funeral of a baby boy, who died after just three hours of life. It was a deeply painful occasion - and all the more so in so far as Luke was the son of my colleague and his wife. With his parents' permission, I thought it might be good to reflect on that funeral, and in so doing perhaps offer help to fellow ministers who might find themselves in a similar position.

One of the first decisions we were faced with was the nature of the funeral itself. Such funerals are often almost private affairs, conducted perhaps in the hospital or crematorium chapel. However, in the case of Luke we felt that a church funeral was called for, to which not only family, but also the whole church should be invited. As a church we had been looking forward with great anticipation to this birth, with the result that Luke's death became the cause of major public grief. For good or ill the children of clergy are always the focus of great attention. A public rite of passage was therefore necessary. We agreed, however, that the service of committal in the crematorium should be private and should be limited to members of the family.

On the day there was a large congregation. Many of the mourners were young couples - babies' buggies were much in evidence. I found it a very difficult funeral to lead - the grief was almost tangible, tears were welling up in the eyes of many. Not that there was anything wrong with that - the absence of any emotion would have raised questions. However, I had to remain self-possessed, which in turn meant a good deal of self-control.

I normally begin a funeral by reading the words of Jesus found in John 11.25: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live". However, in the context of the funeral of a baby, those words with their emphasis on the need for faith seemed inappropriate. Instead I chose to read the heart-warming climax to Romans 8: "I am convinced that neither death nor height, nor life, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our

Lord" (Rom 8.38-39). To this great affirmation of faith I chose to read words which, with a slight emendation, I took from the *Book of Common Order of the Church of Scotland*, which has a most helpful "Order for the Funeral of a Still-born Child".

"We gather here on what is for all of us a sad occasion. We were looking forward to a time of joy and happiness, and now there are tears and grief. We are left with a feeling of emptiness. All that has happened seems futile and pointless. Our minds are filled with questions to which there appear to be no answers: So many things we do not know; so many things we do not understand. But there are some truths we do know. We know that the God who made us, loves us; that he loves us always; that, through his Son Jesus Christ, he has promised never to leave us nor forsake us. And we know also, as others before us have found, that his strength is available for us, especially at those times when we feel we have no strength of our own. My prayer for Mike & Deirdre, as indeed my prayer for every member of this congregation, is that you will experience that strength which God in his love wishes to offer to us all."

After an opening hymn of praise and a prayer, in which we asked God's blessing on the service, we had read several passages of Scripture. At every funeral service I take I always read John 14.1,2-6, in which Jesus calls us to place our hope in God; as also I Cor 15.20, 42-43, 54-57 in which Paul works out the implications of the resurrection of Jesus for us. I also always read from a Psalm. On this occasion Ps 139.1-6, 13-17 seemed very appropriate, with its reminder that God knows us even before we are born.

At a church funeral, I often select a fourth passage of Scripture on which to base my address. At a previous occasion, I read the story of Jairus' daughter (Mark 5.36-43 or Luke 8.49-56) where Jesus encourages the distressed parents to believe and assures them that their daughter is not dead but sleeping. However, at Luke's funeral we read instead Mark 10.13-16 which depicts the special love Jesus has for children.

After another hymn we moved into the address itself. My funeral addresses are fairly short at the best of times, but this was brevity itself. The sermon, which I had written out in full, came to just two paragraphs:

“It has been said: ‘Few things in life leave us more helpless, hopeless and faithless than the death of a child’. This certainly was true of baby Luke. We had been looking forward so much to his coming, but now our hopes have been dashed. We had thought we would have the joy of thanking God for the gift of a new life, but now we feel like crying out in our confusion, if not in our anger, ‘Why, God, why?’ When I walked into that room where Mike & Deirdre sat with Luke dying in their arms, I felt helpless - words failed me; tears came to my eyes. Yet in the midst of tears I was able to pray and to affirm our trust in the God who can work for good even in the most dire of situations.

Mike & Deirdre, today is not a day for many words. All I wish to do is to remind you of the special place children had for our Lord. ‘Let the children come to me’, Jesus said, ‘and do not stop them, because the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these’. As the disciples discovered to their amazement, children had a special place in the affections of Jesus. I believe that Luke too has a special place in the affections of Jesus. As Jesus welcomed those children of old, so Jesus now welcomes Luke too into his Kingdom. We can in faith entrust Luke to his loving care, knowing that the strong love of Jesus encompasses all those who die in tender years. Luke's life that was all too short in this world is now complete in Jesus. We can indeed praise God for his love.”

What more can we say in such a situation? One might well argue that the singing as a solo of the worship song "Faithful One, so unchanging" by the wife of our youth minister actually conveyed more help to the congregation.

By the time the solo was over people were quietly sobbing all over the church. With difficulty I moved into the prayers. Here too there had to be changes. I normally lead into three distinct prayers at this point: first we praise God for the comfort of the Gospel; then we thank God for the life of the loved one; and thirdly we pray for the family. Clearly, the thrust of the second prayer had to be changed. Furthermore, the family, had asked me to remember two grandparents who had died some years before. So instead of thanking God for the all that the loved one had meant to us we prayed:

“Father God, you have loved us from the moment when you shaped and formed us in our mother's womb. Today we give thanks for Luke Liam Barnabas. Lord, you know him and you love him, for

you created his innermost self. Help us as we now entrust him to you, knowing that he is safe in your care. As we do so, we think of those who have gone before him - of Myrtle, Mike's mother, and of Dermot, Deirdre's father, We bless you for the great company of those who you have brought through death to be with you forever in glory.”

From prayers we moved to a final hymn, and finished with the benediction based on Phil 4.7: "May the peace of God, which is beyond our utmost understanding and of far more worth than human reasoning, keep guard over your hearts and thoughts, through Christ Jesus our Lord".

The tiny white coffin was then taken out of the church. The bereaved parents stood at the door and greeted every member of the congregation. It must have taken courage. Still, it certainly will make life easier for them the next Sunday they are in church.

From the church we then moved on to the crematorium for the service of committal. There too I needed to modify considerably my standard format. The call to worship was taken from Isa 40.11, words which seem apt for a funeral involving a child: "The Sovereign Lord will take care of his flock like a shepherd,- he will gather the lambs together and carry them in his arms ". Then, after singing "The Lord's -my shepherd", I read two further Scripture verses, the one from Isa 66.13 is applicable on any and every occasion, but the words of Jesus in Matt 18.14 have a special reference to children: The Lord says "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you". Jesus said.- "Your Father in heaven does not want any of these little ones to be lost".

After the act of committal I concluded with the promise from Rev 21.4 and with a benediction based on those words of comfort: "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away": "May the love of God and the peace of the Lord Jesus Christ bless and console us, and gently wipe every tear from our eyes: in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

Clearly each funeral service demands the personal touch. Luke's funeral service was in every sense of the word 'special'. However, I have gone into some detail in writing about our experience in the hope that other ministers might derive some benefit, not least

when they too are called to conduct similar services. Few of us can create `ex nihilo'. Many of us, however, can be quite creative in adapting the material of others so that it then truly fits our situation. It is in that hope that this reflection is offered.

Paul Beasley-Murray is Senior Minister of Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford and Chair of Ministry Today