

Dear Friends,

Last week Sam wrote eloquently about Queen Elizabeth's life, and by the time you read this her funeral will have taken place. Like many of you, I will have watched the service on TV – in my case for two reasons. One is that (although I regard myself as neither monarchist nor republican) I want to honour someone who sought to live by the teachings of Christ in the public eye. The second is because these major national occasions often influence the requests people make for their own funerals, just as royal weddings affect wedding requests. (Ask your friendly local organist how often they were asked to play Widor's Toccata following Charles and Diana's wedding.)

This prompts me to reflect on the purpose of a funeral. A college tutor of mine said that your answer to the question, 'Who is the funeral for?' will show whether you are Protestant or Catholic. For Catholics, the primary purpose of the funeral is for the deceased, in praying for the repose of their soul. The service may bring comfort to the bereaved, but the primary focus is on the deceased, and there is a view that their eternal state can still be influenced.

Protestant Christians do not see it this way. In Reformation theology, our eternal destiny is sealed at death. Nothing can change it now. Scriptures such as Hebrews 9:27 come into play: 'people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.' In rejecting the Catholic approach, for a long time many Protestants didn't even hold funerals when one of their number died. When Peter Howson served in the old Woking and Walton-on-Thames Circuit, he remarked that until recent decades that had been the case in Scotland (where he ministered before coming here).

But we have come around to funerals. However, we answer my college lecturer's question by saying that the funeral is for the bereaved, not the deceased. It is to help us with our grief, and to enable us to give thanks to God for the life of the one we have lost.

In recent times the trend has emphasised more the thanksgiving than the grief. We see printed orders of service entitled, 'A service in celebration of the life of [the deceased's name]'. I think that's a mistake. I believe we have things out of balance. We need the mourning as well as the thanksgiving.

One of my favourite Bible verses when it comes to funerals is 1 Thessalonians 4:13. It first hit home with me twenty years ago when Debbie and I lost a dear friend in a congregation to breast cancer. Carolyn was only 41. As I struggled

for what to say in the funeral for Tim and her children (then both primary school age) this verse was part of a passage in the Lectionary for the Sunday beforehand.

Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.

Note that Paul doesn't tell the Thessalonians they shouldn't grieve, he tells them they don't need to grieve without hope.

We need to grieve. As the late Queen herself said, 'Grief is the price we pay for love.' It is what we do because we can no longer show love to the deceased person.

But we also as Christians have hope. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ prefigures our own. It is why at a funeral we commit the person's body to be buried or cremated 'in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.'

Do not be ashamed to grieve. But grieve in Christian hope. Hold grief and hope together in tension. This is the path of healing that Jesus has given us.

Your friend,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dave Faulkner". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping tail on the letter "n".

Dave Faulkner