Reader ministry in times of bereavement

A report by Judy Anderson, Reader, Church of Christ the King, North Gosforth, Newcastle Diocese, on a Durham Diocesan course at St John’s, Durham on the care of the bereaved and the conducting of funerals.

A number of Newcastle Readers 'crossed the river' to join with their colleagues from Durham in the course, which was co-ordinated by the Revd Dr Alan Bartlett of St John's College, along with Ralph Smith, the Durham Secretary for Readers.

In the first session, the Revd Dr Bob Fyall took us through the Biblical teaching on death and the after-life, covering an enormous amount of material from the Old and New Testaments in his allotted time. He pointed out that many people today know little or nothing of the Bible; we must be careful to put what we say in context for them. We must be able to present the message of the Resurrection to those who have no knowledge of the text.

Result of the Fall

The Bible sees death as the result of the Fall (Rom. 5:12): it is an enemy, an invader (1 Cor. 15). It is right to feel angry and grief-stricken about death, and we must help people to express these feelings.

While there is little in the Old Testament about life after death, it is not entirely silent on this matter. There are three significant passages. Job 19:25-27 expresses confidence in an after-life when we will meet our risen Redeemer, when we will see God with our own eyes. The prophecy of the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel 37 indicates that "these (who have been) slain will breathe again", and Daniel 12:2 tells us that "Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will be awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt". There are also indications of the after-life in many of the Psalms, such as Psalm 23:6: "I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever".

Hope of life after death

In the New Testament, St Paul looks in 1 Cor. 15 and 2 Cor. 5 to hope and material life beyond death. In Phil. 3:20-21 we read that "we eagerly await a Saviour ... who will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body". Dr Fyall pointed out that while Jesus raised three individuals (Jairus' daughter, a widow's son and Lazarus), these are not appropriate passages to use at a funeral, as we are not expecting a literal coming back to mortal life, but rather a going on to eternal life, a sharing in the life of God Himself.

Sheol and Hades

In the Old Testament, we encounter the word 'Sheol', which has a range of meanings: the grave itself, the world beyond the grave, the world of the dead. The equivalent New Testament term, 'Hades', literally means 'the unseen place'. Thus, both these words are neutral, and it is wrong to translate them as 'hell'. There are, nevertheless, passages which impart a more sinister meaning to the words, for example in the story of Dives and Lazarus (Lk. 16:19-31), where Hades is translated as 'hell', and Lazarus has gone to a higher place.

The Bible seems to speak of a definite division between the righteous and the unrighteous. This can be a real problem, particularly in taking the funeral of someone whom we know to have been an unbeliever, and we need to think through these difficult issues. Jesus and His disciples preached a doctrine of heaven and hell, but how can we reconcile this with the doctrine of a loving God? How could He send anyone to hell? In Adam all die, but in Christ we will live again. Thus it appears that an unbeliever is lost. Universalism is certainly much more attractive, but do we really expect to meet such people as Hitler or the Dunblane murderer in heaven?

Pastoral care

On the pastoral side, we need to be able to help people to cope when a loved-one has simply ceased to be. We need to be with people in their despair, to allow them to cry out in their agony. We must allow them to be angry with God.

At the funeral, we must be ready to talk about this life and about the life of the deceased. We need to preach the eternities, the significance of human life in relation to God. We must speak to the living: we are there to bring Christ into the situation.

Preach without passing judgement

We should preach the Gospel without passing judgement on the deceased. We should encourage open speaking: death is a reality we cannot ignore. After all, Jesus wept at the death of Lazarus. We must get things in perspective: for a follower of Christ, there is hope beyond death.

The second session, given by Revd Michael Vasey, a member of the Liturgical Commission, was entitled 'Making the most of the funeral'. He looked at funerals and the grieving process in other cultures as well as our own. Other cultures have not only a
different attitude to funerals, but a different attitude to death itself. Asian and African cultures, for example, are much more at home with death than is British culture.

**Solemn ritual**
A funeral is a solemn ritual, a formalised public act marking and accompanying a death. It has meaning for the departed, for the mourners, for the whole community, and for the Church. It is an interaction between Church and community, and is important in forming the community's understanding of death. Sadly, our culture seems to be losing any understanding of life after death; we have only to look at modern hymns, the majority of which seem to focus on this life, rather than that in heaven.

**The widow of Nain**
We looked at the story of the widow of Nain in Luke 7. In the Jewish community, when death is imminent the whole community gathers, prays and reads the Scriptures. At death, the body is washed, people wail and express their grief in various ways, and the funeral is held as soon as possible. The whole community walks with the body to the burial place, recites psalms and prayers, and helps to fill in the grave before walking back to the family home. In this way, the whole community expresses sympathy, solidarity and support. Many other cultures treat death in similar ways.

What a contrast with our practice in the modern Christian Church! The whole thing is handled by professionals - doctors, undertakers and clergy. Up to a month's communal mourning is replaced by a 20-minute service in the impersonal surroundings of a crematorium.

**What about the future?**
So what about the future? To a great extent, death has been silenced in our culture, but it is beginning to find its voice again. The organisation 'Cruse' and the hospice movement have meant that death is no longer unspeakable. The advent of AIDS has led to a great deal more thought and discussion about death by articulate, younger people. The life-centred funeral, established in Australia and North America, in which a secular person leads a celebration of the life of the deceased is likely to lead to a secularisation of the whole process. The Roman Catholic Church in the developing world has helped to re-integrate funerals into the community by having trained lay people to conduct pastoral care and even the funeral itself.

The Roman Catholic Church in this country has brought out two publications, a book for lay leaders involved in both the preparation for dying and in the funeral, and a book with guidance for the bereaved in planning for the funeral.

If we could de-clericalise the funeral, at least to some extent, we could take prayer back into the home. Older people could be involved both in counselling and in the liturgical aspect. With crematorium time at a premium, some aspects of the death and bereavement process need to be addressed in the home. We need to think beyond the funeral which is, after all, only a small part of the larger process of coming to terms with a death.

**A sociological viewpoint**
The speaker at the third session, entitled 'Death in a post-modern age', was Revd Judith Hirst, the Bishop of Durham's adviser on pastoral care and counselling, who is also a curate in a local church and a lecturer and counsellor at Cranmer Hall. We spent a fascinating evening looking at death from a sociological viewpoint, and seeing how attitudes have changed in the course of the 20th Century.

Nowadays, we felt, we can put off death because of medical advances. Many young people have not been touched by death at all. Death has somehow been sanitised, with the body generally kept at a funeral parlour rather than in the home. People tend not to wear black or to draw their curtains, and there seems to be no respect from people in the street when a funeral goes by. Far more people are cremated nowadays, and it is more common for children to go to funerals, though it is only comparatively recently that women in Scotland have attended. Although some people are more open about death now than, say, 20 years ago, and death is talked about, people feel that they have to apologise for it: "Death, and talk about it, is one of the great taboos of our age" (Radio Times, 1990).

**Five leading writers**
We looked at the writings of five leading sociologists on the subject. One has referred to the 'pornography of death'. The sheer volume of death in the First World War meant that people simply could not mourn each one, and this led to psychological problems. Our culture is death-denying. We cannot control it. It threatens the order of our culture. By and large, now that people no longer die in their prime, death does not leave such a huge gap in a family.

**Tragedy of young death**
While it is sad when an elderly person dies, it is not such a tragedy as with a younger person; though, in contrast, premature death is now much more shocking as it is much more unusual.

With the loss of community in society as a whole, there is little or no community support in bereavement, hence the need for organisations such as Cruse. "Death is hidden, not forbidden - it is simply irrelevant to most people most of the time.

We went on to discuss the funeral itself, and to consider what makes a good or bad funeral. In the Protestant Church, the funeral has traditionally had three main functions: to warn against damnation (this had largely disappeared by 1900), to proclaim the Christian hope, and to thank God for the life of the deceased. The Church of England must produce an appropriate
and relevant liturgy - while the ASB is fine for the funeral of a Christian, it is much less suitable for that of a non-believer. The Church's message is vital and unique, and we must communicate it clearly.

**Shortcomings of bereavement care**
We considered some of the shortcomings of the kind of bereavement care offered by the Church at present. It is quite unrealistic, for example, to expect a Parish Priest to conduct 100 or more funerals in a year and produce an inspiring and personalised service, as well as providing follow-up visits and pastoral care, while at the same time ministering effectively to his regular parishioners, and running a church. The clergy play a vital role in providing the Christian framework, but more people need to be brought into bereavement care if we are to offer real support.

**Boundaries and definitions**
Birth and death give boundaries to our living, defining our experience. We must proclaim the confidence of the Christian message. It is the key to an understanding of both life and death.

The speaker at the final session, 'Caring for the bereaved', was the Revd Dr Alan Bartlett of St John's College, who had co-ordinated the whole course.

Firstly we considered why and how we care for the bereaved. Dr Bartlett reminded us that we visit the bereaved not just as caring professionals but as Christian ministers, and so we go in the name and strength of Christ, not ourselves. Our aim is to bring to them the constant loving mercy of God. We are not alone in trying to support the bereaved through the trauma of loss - there is still an element of community and of the extended family, perhaps more so in some parts of the country than others.

**Stages of grief**
We looked at the normal stages of grief - denial, grief-work and finally resolution - and were reminded of our vital role as listeners. We must be sensitive to the language of grief, and we must, at all costs, avoid platitudes and pat answers. Empathy is essential if we are to be effective counsellors, as is compassion. We can draw on the wisdom of others as well as our own experience. Our faith is the most important thing - trust in God is much more important than, for example, a detailed theology of the after-life. As listener and minister, we travel a crucial part of the journey with the bereaved, and this is an enormous responsibility. They may rely on us to get them through.

Dr Bartlett went on to give us some excellent practical advice on taking a funeral, from the initial call from the funeral director right through to the follow-up after the service. He also took us through the 'mechanics' of the service itself, which was of particular value to those of us who have not yet taken one.

**Breaking the bonds of love**
Death is a separation which breaks the bonds of love and causes immense pain. The bereaved must be allowed to grieve. Only God knows the secrets of a person's heart, and it is not for us to judge them. A Christian funeral is a celebration, a rejoicing that the deceased is with Christ. As Christians, we are assured of life after death through our Lord and Saviour.

The course proved to be most stimulating, and provided plenty of food for thought, both for Readers already involved in conducting funerals and in bereavement counselling, and for those who may be called upon to exercise this ministry in the future.