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Preaching in the Face of Death

*On that day
God will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
Mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
For the first things have passed away (Rev 21:4).*

Of course that day has not yet come. There is still both “a time to be born and a time to die” (Eccl 3:2). Death continues to enter our lives in ways both expected and unexpected. In the past year, it came to Mary Lou and Bruce, both eighty-five years old, who died thirty-two days apart; it came to fifteen students at Columbine High School, and to a sixteen year old girl and her friend whose car hit a tree while driving home from a party. It came to a father who discovered his daughter’s body in the backyard, a suicide; and it came to a family whose last child was stillborn and who then lost another infant to crib death.

Whenever and however death comes, it is rarely welcomed. But neither can it be ignored, and the community of Christian believers acknowledges death’s presence by coming together and celebrating the various rites found in the *Order of Christian Funerals* (hereafter, *OCF*). The heart of the Church’s response to death usually occurs in the funeral eucharistic liturgy, and a pivotal moment within this rite is the homily. It is not the only time when preaching is possible during the period of mourning. Through a series of questions and responses, this article will reflect on the nature and purpose of the preaching that takes place when death comes to a member of the community.

WHAT IS PREACHING “DOING” WITHIN THE FUNERAL RITES?

The General Introduction of the *OCF* begins by saying that “in the face of death, the Church confidently proclaims that God has created each person for eternal life and that Jesus, the Son of God, by his death and resurrection, has broken the chains of sin and death that bound humanity” (#1). The purpose of preaching in this particular setting is to make a proclamation of faith in the face of death. This proclamation affirms before the community that our God is the Creator God who has made us so we might have life and have it in abundance, and that our God is the Redeemer God who has brought about our salvation through the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ. Under the

shadow of death, the Church proclaims the presence and power of the living God.

But this proclamation must never lose sight of those to and for whom it is made. In a funeral liturgy the preacher gives authentic voice to the human struggle to come to grips with the very present reality of suffering and death. In the presence of the body of the deceased or the cremated remains, words are offered to the living. The function of this proclamation is to bring comfort and evoke hope in the hearts of those gathered. Once again it is helpful to take our cue from the *OCF*. In speaking of the homily, it calls on the preacher to “dwell on God’s compassionate love and on the paschal mystery of the Lord,” but then goes on to say that the homilist should do this in a way that the gathered community understands their own participation and that of the deceased in these realities. Thus, “the homilist should also help the members of the assembly to understand that the mystery of God’s love and the mystery of Christ’s mysterious death and resurrection were present *in the life and death of the deceased* and that these mysteries are active *in their own lives* as well” (#27).

WHAT DO PEOPLE WANT FROM PREACHING AT A FUNERAL?

When the preacher begins the homily at a funeral or memorial service, the faces in the assembly often reflect a strong sense of expectation, sometimes almost a desperation, to hear something that somehow interprets the death experience of their loved one through the eyes of scripture and the Christian tradition. Even those who have been devoutly practicing their Christian faith throughout life often find themselves more deeply invested in the paschal mystery at this time. In the grieving process, people sometimes experience a spiritual darkness that is filled with doubt and fear. They may be searching for a way to integrate this experience of death into the fabric of the faith in which they have wrapped themselves for most of their lives. While preaching in the face of such need may seem daunting to the preacher, it also offers an opportunity for honesty, compassion and a true sharing of faith.

No one expects that the preacher will have all of the answers. As theologian Alexander Schmemmann writes, “I do not know when and how the fulfillment will come. I do not know when all things will be consummated in Christ. I know nothing about the ‘whens’ and ‘hows.’ But I know that in Christ this great Passage, the *Pascha* of the world has begun, that the light of the ‘world to come’ comes to us in the joy and peace of the Holy Spirit, for *Christ is risen and Life reigneth*” (quoted in Sloyan, 1989: 121). Those who mourn are hoping for a homily that honestly addresses the mystery of death, and, in some way, names death from the perspective of faith. To do this, it can be helpful to turn to those wise men and women of the past, to the poets, prophets, and

apostles whose words can address our anxious hearts. Paul spoke of death as the “last enemy” that would be conquered (1 Cor 15:26), but that this conquest had already begun and that those who were baptized with Christ were baptized into *his* death, buried with him “so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life” (Rom 6:3-4). He also wrote that now death can be spoken of as being “at home with the Lord” (2 Cor 5:8), as “gain” (Phil 1:21), and that to die was “to depart and to be with Christ” (Phil 1:23).

In Luke’s infancy narrative Simeon refers to death as “being dismissed in peace” (Luke 2:29) and, many centuries later, Francis of Assisi offered the most comforting of all perspectives by calling on “Sister Death.” While Clement of Alexandria called it “the dragon before whom all had to pass,” Julian of Norwich could assert that “the worst is done and it has been mended, and all will be well, and all will be well, and all will be very well.” Closer to our own time, Emily Dickinson wrote that, when Death stopped for her in a carriage, it held “but just ourselves and Immortality.” Circumstances will dictate how the preacher names death in a way that is honest in the particular situation and to the community mourning the loss of a loved one, but this naming must always be done in light of the central person of our faith, the focal point for the people of God: Jesus, crucified Lord and risen Redeemer.

WHAT IS THE PLACE OF SCRIPTURE IN PREACHING AND ARE THERE ANY GUIDELINES FOR THE CHOICE OF THE BIBLICAL TEXTS?

“All preaching must be nourished and ruled by Sacred Scripture” (*Dei Verbum*, #21). The Scriptures are at the heart of all preaching, for they continue to proclaim the word of God to people in all circumstances. God “speaks” when the Scriptures are proclaimed and in the act of preaching. At a funeral God’s word can be understood to have a least three functions:

a) It makes Jesus present to the community. If there is one gift that the preacher can offer people who have suffered the loss of a loved one in death, it is the gift of the presence of Jesus, the Lord of life. This presence is experienced in the biblical texts themselves, especially the gospel, but it can be especially central to the homily. The preacher does this by giving prominence to the images and words of Jesus found in the biblical texts. The biblical text, most notably the gospel, can be the source for making Jesus present to the believing community if the preacher attends to it in its specificity. Whether it is the Jesus who has come at the request of family members only to find his friend Lazarus

has died and who then says to the dead man's sister: "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25), or the Jesus who has gathered his friends around him the night before his own death and gently encourages them with the words, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You have faith in God; have faith also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places . . . I am going to prepare a place for you." (John 14:1-2). Or the Jesus who promised a thief dying by his side, "I assure you: this day you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). By placing one of these images at the heart of the homily, the preaching is given the weight and power of Christ's explicit presence.

These are only a few of the possibilities found in the texts proposed in the *OCF*. The choice of the texts should be made in light of the circumstances of death and the needs of the present community (*OCF*, #16). Was the death sudden or at the end of a long illness? What is the psychological and spiritual condition of those who mourn? In light of these factors, Jesus is presented so that his presence is felt in an immediate way. There is a difference between, "Jesus *said* that. . . ." and "Jesus *says*" One puts Jesus back in the past; the other places him with us. And that difference becomes important within the funeral liturgy where we believe that God speaks *now* to a grieving community through the words recorded in the Scriptures. Today Jesus is speaking; at this moment the Lord of life addresses us. The homily witnesses to this reality.

b) The texts may also help to name the emotion that surrounds this death. Again, in the story of the raising of Lazarus when Martha goes out to meet Jesus, it is not difficult to hear both anger and hurt in her opening words to him, "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died" (John 11:21). Or to imagine the numbness of the widow of Naim who has lost her only son (Luke 7:11-17). Or to feel the abandonment and shattering emptiness in the words of Jesus on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me!" (Mark 15:34). The gospel can help to name the feelings of the community as they first come together, reflecting an understanding of where the congregation is. Often a community is not ready to hear death referred to as "Sister" or as "a bridge to eternal life" when a homily begins; they need to be met where they are and gently helped to move forward.

c) Finally, the biblical text offers words that allow the faith of the Church to directly address loss. The strong proclamation of a particular biblical text can help the heart to move beyond the grief that weighs it down. Consider the words of Isaiah, "On this mountain . . . God will destroy death forever. The Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces" (25:6a, 7), or the words of Lamentations, "My portion is the Lord, says my soul; therefore will I hope in my God" (3:24). Some of the most

powerful words are found in Paul's letters. "What will separate us from the love of Christ?" (Rom 8: 35), the apostle asks in his letter and in a rapid sequence of images proclaims, "Nothing, nothing, nothing can separate us from the love of God revealed to us in Christ." Or his affirmation earlier in that same letter, "If, then, we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. We know that Christ, raised from the dead, dies no more; death no longer has power over him" (6:8-9). Or the book of Revelation's brief proclamation that "Death will die in God's eternal dwelling," or its potent, succinct dialogue, with a voice from heaven saying, "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on." "Yes," said the Spirit, "let them find rest from their labors, for their works accompany them" (14:13).

The use of Scripture in preaching at the time of death ranges from its ability to make Christ present, to name the feelings of the community, and to offer a solid witness of faith in a phrase both memorable and strong, healing and hopeful. The words of other writers, the poets and playwrights of past and present, might also serve, but they are secondary to that word we acknowledge as being "of God." When facing death, preachers can find the firmest ground in the imagery and thought of the biblical texts.

But before rushing to any one biblical text that has proved to be comforting, or that has "worked" in the past, the preacher should look and listen to those directly concerned and to the circumstances surrounding this particular death. Understanding how a family is hurting comes from listening to them. Scripture is most healing when it speaks to these needs. Well-meaning ministers can sometimes project their own feelings onto a situation, recalling how they felt at the time of a particular death. Such projection can function as a barrier to understanding how the present mourners feel. Taking time to listen can also lead to involving them. The funeral rites can be the final gift of family and friends to the deceased. They can be invited to select the Scriptures that will be proclaimed and to talk with the preacher about the meaning these texts hold for them or held for the deceased. To make this preparation possible, preachers could make available to families a copy of the texts in the *OCF*. Sometimes a family will say to the preacher, "You just choose everything." In rare cases, this may be the best alternative. Often, however, if the presider/preacher invites the family to fuller participation and, if a parish provides staff to assist them in doing so, they will gratefully accept this invitation.

WHAT ABOUT SPEAKING ABOUT THE DECEASED IN THE HOMILY?

The *OCF* is very clear in stating "there is never to be a eulogy" (#27) at the time of the homily. A eulogy is a classical speech form employed

at the time of a death in which someone “speaks well” (*Eu* = well; *logos* = word or speech) of the deceased. The statement of the *OCF* is concerned with safeguarding the role of the homily in liturgy. The homily is an integral part of the liturgy and has the purpose of bridging the liturgy of the word of God with what follows. At the funeral Mass, the homily functions so that “members of the family and community should receive consolation and strength to face the death of one of their members with a hope nourished by the saving word of God” (#27). And, as a eucharistic homily, it should always enable the community to celebrate the liturgy with faith (*Fulfilled in Your Hearing*: 18). At the funeral vigil “a homily based on the readings is given to help those present find strength and hope in God’s saving word” (#61).

Does this mean there is no room for any expression about what the deceased has meant to those who have gathered? Of course not; that would be pastorally insensitive, if not callous. The *OCF* explicitly notes two places where a family member or friend can speak in remembrance of the deceased: (1) during the vigil service, between the prayer of intercession and the blessing, or “at some other suitable time during the vigil” (#62); and (2) at the end of the funeral mass, between the prayer after communion and the final commendation (#170). There is certainly room for an expression of our appreciation of the person and his or her accomplishments in the course of their life, but that is not the primary purpose for our gathering and not the purpose of the liturgical homily.

Liturgical theologian John Allyn Melloh accurately observes that much eulogistic preaching can be as impersonal as a résumé, then goes on to say that, “What is most deeply personal is that which we, as part of the human family, share in common—our deepest yearnings, our shared beliefs, our common attitudes . . . The homily should seek to discover the taproot of the deceased’s existence and the deceased’s life as a Christian” (42). In directing our attention to what is central to the deceased’s life as a Christian, Melloh echoes what the earlier revised *Rite of Funerals* (1969) proposed in its statement that “the homily may properly include an expression of praise to God for his (*sic*) gifts, particularly the gift of a Christian life, to the deceased person” (*The Rites*, #41). Within the gift of a Christian life are the unique gifts God has given a person for the common good. The preacher might acknowledge one or another of these gifts as an expression of how God has touched us through this person.

When the personal is closely linked to the biblical text, when a representative anecdote about the deceased flows from the biblical proclamation, there can be a satisfying balance of biblical proclamation and personal remembrance. The rites surrounding the death of a Christian allow for the necessary expression of the gospel message of hope to be

done in a way which acknowledges the irreplaceability of the person who has died. There is room for both kerygma and kindness.

IS THERE ANYTHING THAT SHOULD BE AVOIDED WHEN PREACHING DURING THE FUNERAL RITES?

Yes. There are always things to avoid. First, it is not helpful to the family or to the assembly to be told that the preacher did not know the deceased (“but I wish I had!”). It is always possible that the deceased may have been a member of this parish for his or her entire life, but confined to home or a nursing facility for the past few years. And so the preacher does not know him or her. Still, every effort should be made to learn about this person. Listen to family stories when they first meet with you to discuss the funeral; talk with family and friends at the wake; read the obituary in the paper. Learning about the deceased and his or her relationships will make it easier to interpret this life through the Scripture readings that have been chosen.

Secondly, avoid pious phrases and mindless platitudes (“we shall not see his/her like again,” “gone but not forgotten,”) as well as theological jargon and bromides (“Death is part of God’s salvific plan” or “God must have wanted N . . . to come home”). Instead the preacher should draw upon powerful human images, particularly those found in the biblical texts that touch the depth experiences of life. For instance, consider the analogy of death as a birth to new life. Anyone who has looked at the face of an infant as it is being born understands that the process of birth itself is painful for the infant. At the time of birth, a baby might well choose to remain within the warm security of its mother’s womb, where all of its needs are met. Yet, who among us would choose to have stayed there, given the joys and blessing that have come with life? Death may be viewed as just such a passage on the other end of life. Most of us would not choose death, if we could find a way to avoid it. Even Jesus prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me” (Matt 26: 39). Yet faith assures us that “eye has not seen, nor ear heard, what God has ready for those who love God” (1 Cor 2:9). Ponder the images and they may speak in fresh ways.

Do not tell all you know or have found out about the person. Be careful about going on too long, especially when you knew and loved the person. As already mentioned, the homily is not a personal salute. Neither canonize nor presume that everyone loved the person. Be respectful always, but don’t lie (which does not mean telling all that *can* be told). Let an appropriate biblical text guide the selection of personal material. Be careful about telling those present how they should feel (as distinct from reflecting how they do feel). Above all, remember the purpose of the homily is not to reduce us to tears, but to evoke heartfelt

praise and thanksgiving for what God has done and continues to do for all of us through the saving death and resurrection of Christ.

ANYTHING ELSE TO KEEP IN MIND?

Coming to terms with the death of a loved one is often a long-term process. The wisdom of the *OCF* takes this into account when it considers three distinct moments at the time of death: the wake, the funeral service, and the committal. This is properly called a rite of passage. While the vigil service has received more attention in recent years, it is still not always recognized for its pastoral potential, particularly its offering another opportunity for the word of God to comfort and console. Recent studies are also looking at the theological and psychological values found in giving more attention to the preparation of the body and its committal to the earth (See Larson-Miller, *Liturgical Ministry*). The difference between a funeral liturgy with the body of the deceased present and with the cremated remains also is receiving attention (see Rutherford, *Liturgical Ministry*).

Beyond the immediate time of the funeral and its accompanying rites, the former custom of having some additional kind of commemoration offers opportunity for ongoing ministry. Having a service thirty or forty days after the time of the funeral can help to navigate that period when the initial shock and numbness have begun to wear off and the awareness of loss and loneliness as an ongoing reality is beginning to sink in. Family and friends could be invited once again to gather to remember the deceased in prayer and to comfort one another.

Preparation for dealing with death is not solely at the moment it occurs. The great feast and season of Easter calls us to reflect on the reality of Christ's saving death and the new life won for us and what this means when facing death in our lives; feast days like All Souls Day, the Assumption, and various celebrations of the saints and martyrs call us to live in the awareness of the communion of saints living and deceased and the hope they offer us. Beyond the calendar of the saints, there may also be a pastoral need to recognize those deaths which people grieve alone without the benefit of a community: miscarriages, abortions, executions in our prisons, deaths by violence in our streets and across our world, deaths of the homeless in our cities. It can be a powerful expression of Christian compassion to gather during the month of November to lament these deaths sometimes overlooked liturgically.

Finally, we must not forget that preaching at these times is a particularly privileged moment, not only permitting us to minister to the community of believers with the compassion of Christ, but allowing others who normally do not hear the gospel preached to come into contact with it. Funerals and memorial services provide great evangelizing

moments for the Church. People who would never choose to enter a church will come to pay their respects to a deceased family member, friend, or colleague. If they are met at these moments by powerful and well-prepared liturgy, inclusive and welcoming preaching, and a caring and sensitive presider, this experience may encourage them to consider—or reconsider—the role that the Church might play in their present life.

ARE THERE ANY RESOURCES THAT ARE HELPFUL IN THIS AREA?

Several come to mind. A few deepen our understanding of the *OCF*; others offer material that might inform our preaching at the time of death:

1. William Cieslak's *Console One Another: Commentary on the Order of Christian Funerals*, Washington, D.C.: Pastoral Press, 1990.
2. *Liturgical Ministry*, "Death and Dying," vol. 7, Winter, 1998.
3. *The Living Pulpit*, "Death," vol. 7 no. 3, July–September, 1998.
4. Peter Phan's *Response to 101 Questions on Death and Eternal Life*, New York: Paulist, 1997.
5. *Preaching on Death: An Ecumenical Sourcebook*. ed. by Virginia Sloyan, Blair Gilmer Meeks and Hilary Hayden. Silver Spring, Md.: The Liturgical Conference, 1997.
6. Richard Rutherford's *The Death of a Christian: The Order of Christian Funerals*. With Tony Barr. Rev. ed., Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1990.
7. *Sourcebook about Christian Death*. Compiled by Virginia Sloyan. Art by Linda Ekstrom. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1989.

IN CLOSING

In Robert Frost's poem "Death of the Hired Man," a wife says to her husband that the hired man who had in the past worked for them has "come home to die. . . ." The husband retorts: "Home! That's the place where when you have to go there, they have to take you in." And the wife, in turn, responds, "I should rather have thought it something you somehow haven't to deserve." People come home to die in different ways. When family, friends, strangers, or the estranged turn to the Church at the time of a death, it is to be hoped that what they will find there is not a place where "they have to take you in," but rather a place of gracious welcome and hospitality, befitting a people who have come to know God's unfathomable love, a place that "you somehow haven't to deserve."

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"One owes respect to the living; to the dead one owes only the truth."

—Voltaire