



Funeral Hymns

Short Guide No 22: Funeral Hymns

Christian funerals take place either in a church or at a crematorium or cemetery chapel. While the circumstances are different the issues surrounding the picking of hymns are similar. Hymn singing at funerals is in decline, so even greater care needs to be taken in using hymns to enhance the hope of a funeral, rather than increase the discomfort.

The funeral service today

As with all of the occasional offices Christian ministers are asked to conduct, the funeral has changed in recent years; the traditional service conducted by the 'duty' priest at which 'Abide with me' is sung, is now a thing of the past. There is much more choice, and personalisation, secularism and 'celebration of life' are making their mark, meaning that a Christian funeral is now a conscious decision rather than a default position, and the funeral 'industry' is now a competitive marketplace. Those who lead Christian funerals need to understand and respond to this. However, the 'recipe' has hardly changed: readings, music, tributes and prayers are still very much present, and the Christian funeral presents hope founded on the resurrection of Jesus Christ, as ever: no-one can compete with that! What has changed, though, is what people sing and the music and songs they expect to hear.

Music and readings at the local crem.

Most crematoria have an electronic organ (and duty organists to play them) and a sound system. This has led to a situation in which hymns can be accompanied on the organ, but compact discs or tapes of songs selected by the mourners can be played instead or as well. Also 'downloaded' music, such as the 'Wesley' system provides, makes almost any piece of recorded music readily available, and the issues of copyright and Performing Rights are dealt with simultaneously. It is a clever and strong response to growing trends, but has the downside of often providing poor renditions of classical music, and mistakes are easily made. The tendency to play recorded music, usually at the entry procession and at the end as the mourners leave, also promotes the temptation to fade out a piece of music once the movement it covers has taken place. Mourners do not therefore always get to hear the whole of whatever piece they have chosen, especially if the timetable is tight.

More significantly, what mourners choose is often inappropriate or irrelevant to the Christian content and flavour of the liturgy. A funeral is an act of worship after all, and the notion of ending the service with Frank Sinatra's 'My Way' (one of the most popular choices) contrasts with the notion that life is a gift, that 'the Lord giveth and taketh away', and that when we die we submit to God's way. Some of the popular poetry often chosen has similar discordances with Christian doctrine too (ironically, such as Canon Henry Scott Holland's 'Death is nothing at all'), and the minister has to navigate a vessel of hope through these rocky waters of contemporary sentimentality. Death is not 'nothing at all', and most deceased people did not in fact live or die 'my way', even if they desired or tried to. Nevertheless it can be hard to displace choices such as these, though the sermon provides an opportunity to comment on them positively.

Many ministers would want to insist on a Bible reading and some prayers, including the Lord's Prayer, at any Christian funeral. Secular or humanist funerals do not necessarily exclude opportunities to pray, and so the lines really are blurred between what a Christian minister and a secular celebrant actually say and do at a funeral or celebration of life. A secular service, liturgically speaking, owes a lot to the Christian funeral heritage, and to many seems to be a 'funeral with God taken out'. Taking God out invariably means no hymns, although 'Jerusalem', 'I vow to thee' and 'All things bright and beautiful' seem to occupy a category all to themselves in modern Britain: hymns so well known that no-one pays any attention to the words. All three have little specifically Christian reference, and are chosen because they might be all that is known, and have well-known and popular tunes. The problem is not quite the same as with weddings: people may not, and certainly do not have to, get married, but everyone dies, and the body must be disposed of, which invariably involves some kind of funeral (notwithstanding the possibility of not having any formal event at all). Even though music is by no means compulsory (some eschew it), it is included in the price and most people find it helpful on some level, and through it they can personalise the occasion. Singing a hymn or song can be a step too far: it is not unusual for even those organising Christian funerals to ask for no hymns because they do not know any, or feel that they will not be able to sing them for emotional reasons, or that the attendance will be poor. Put bluntly, the practice of singing hymns at funerals is declining, a fact compounded by the rise in funerals at which hymns would not be included for doctrinal reasons.

The congregation and what to do with them

Just as there have always been those of little faith, no faith or other faiths at Christian funerals, there are often Christians at 'secular' funerals. If a friend or neighbour dies, at the very least one goes to remember them and to support the family. It is

now unquestioned that the funeral is for those who are left, not the deceased. Given that the other mantra cited under funereal circumstances is 'it's what (s)he would have wanted', there is a certain discrepancy here. It means that you can choose what happens at your funeral even if you know that everyone present will hate it! But it is worth remembering that in many legal systems a body is the property of the next of kin, who can dispose of it as they wish, and honouring a deceased's wishes about their funeral hymns is a matter of honour and goodwill, not law.

Making the most of the situation

It is in this context of rarer hymn singing that ministers now operate, and sometimes even find themselves almost as soloists leading the singing. Furthermore it is difficult for pastoral reasons to veto or decline a choice that someone makes. Hence ministers are often forced to lead an act of worship, the ingredients of which they have not chosen, nor have they been put together coherently by those requesting them. Beginning a funeral with 'Jerusalem' is like being a goal behind at kick-off: there is much ground to be made up; and concluding with 'My Way' is like having a penalty awarded against you at the final whistle. It can therefore be tempting to ignore the hymns completely, sing what is asked for and proceed with the prayers and address (over which the minister has some control) and concentrate on communicating God's love and mercy through these.

Many ministers would admit to having been daunted by the narrow range of choice for funeral hymns and to simply going with the flow, focusing their energies elsewhere. In a church service the prospects for influencing decisions and making sensible recommendations are better, but it is a brave minister who suggests for a crematorium funeral that 'All things bright and beautiful' be substituted with 'Be still my soul', for example. Both (and many others) are in the blue (formerly green) book that most crematoria leave in the pews. To be fair, 'Abide with me' is a wonderful hymn, even if it is picked because of footballing associations it has acquired over the years. Very few people think of the road to Emmaus when they sing it, but this is a dimension that can be picked up by a preacher and turned towards resurrection hope. If singing 'Jerusalem', one might contemplate whether Jesus walks among us still. Even inappropriate readings and hymns can prompt words of comfort and hope if handled sensitively.

Church funerals

Nowadays most church funerals are held for those who had some association with the church, because either they or their relatives are worshippers, however irregularly. The notion of a church being 'our' church, if only for weddings, baptisms and funerals ('hatch, match and dispatch!') is still prevalent. On the other hand, the palaver of going to the church and then the crematorium (which may be miles away) often rules out the church part, but at least what happens at the crematorium can be conducted like a church funeral. In such cases, the picking of hymns moves up from singing 'the only hymns they know' to a better level of the deceased person's (or the family's) favourites; or, eminently the best level, where the minister assists the family in choosing hymns that actually say something about death, resurrection, hope and glory (and which can be sung by the congregation too). Sometimes ministers have the good fortune to have such a conversation with someone planning their own funeral.

Help from the hymn book

In any event, everyone turns to the hymn book, and sections variously designated 'Funeral', 'Bereavement', 'Death', 'Judgment and Eternal Life' and 'Grieving'. The New English Hymnal has 5 such hymns, listing 11 other suggestions. Common Praise has 3, listing 16 others before sliding into the 'National' section, which, coincidentally begins with 'Jerusalem'! Singing the Faith has 10 hymns, and Laudate has 15 suitable for Requiems. Ancient and Modern has 5 hymns and Church Hymnary 4 has 11 hymns and 12 suggestions. Exclusively among those are Priscilla Owens' 'Will your anchor hold', Colin Ferguson's 'Hear me, dear Lord, in this my time of sorrow' (LONDONDERRY AIR); John Ellerton's 'God of the living, in whose eyes' (TYNEMOUTH) and Fred Kaan's 'Today I live, one day shall come my death' (ROBERT). While editors' interpretation of what is suitable varies more than for baptisms and weddings, the most popular hymns chosen for funerals do not appear in the funeral sections, but more often in a general section. The alphabetically-arranged Anglican Hymns Old and New offers a 40-strong index of possibilities, including the increasingly popular 'Going home' by Michael Forster, written for the tune of the slow movement of Dvořák's 'New World' Symphony. There are two hymns intended for use at the funeral of a child: John Bell's 'We cannot care for you the way we wanted' (JENNIFER), and Bill Wallace's 'Through the rivers of our tears' (BUCKLAND). These two are so powerful and moving that actually singing them in a state of grief could well be impossible: in some cases it may work to have the words read over the tune or sung as a solo.

Last things

Avoiding the hackneyed, sometimes inappropriate, but potentially valuable choices is difficult, and there is little opportunity to learn new funeral hymns except at a funeral, when it is likely to be unrealistic to try them out. In extremis people stick to what they know. Rather as with weddings, obscure tunes will deny good words airtime, unless perhaps sung by soloists or a choir, which is a perfectly acceptable solution.

Gordon Giles – May 2016 – © The Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland

Ref HSSG122. For more in this series, see the web site below.

Opinions expressed in this paper are not necessarily those of the Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland.

For anyone who enjoys, sings, plays, chooses, introduces, studies, teaches or writes hymns ...

The Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland. Visit www.hymnsocietygbi.org.uk for more details.