

EXPLORING CHRISTIAN FAITH

No. 14

THE LONGEST JOURNEY
- preparing for death.



A practical guide

THE LONGEST JOURNEY

Introduction

Planning for journeys can be a daunting prospect. Once you know where you have to go – or want to go – there are so many matters that need attention. Itineraries to plan; which travel company to use; decisions about what to take – maybe immunisation to arrange. Then one needs to inform friends and relatives, cancel papers and so on. And, lastly, what to pack! If you're like me, you are tempted to put it all off to the last moment. But there's always the danger you will forget something. The horror of finding out that one's passport has expired!! Two weeks holiday can take forever to sort out. But the joy of thinking about where one is going can make up for the cost involved.

Many people seem to have such an attitude in respect of planning for their final journey into death. Perhaps the very notion can also be off-putting and there will be some who feel that they might be tempting fate! But, of course, that's foolish. For, unless we plan for *this* journey, it can mean that those who are left behind have the very difficult task of trying to make sure that the final act of acknowledging your life is what you would want. And the decisions they are left to make on your behalf will, probably, be made at a time of personal grief and confusion. So, *now* is the time to plan for that journey.

Planning for the final journey

What do you need to consider as you make your plans? Well, firstly, they should be written down. This can be easily done and, to help you, there is a format at the rear of this booklet. And, remember, your plans can be changed at any time. This little form should be kept with your personal papers in a place where your next-of-kin knows where to find them.

This small booklet isn't meant to deal with making a Will, although it gives details of where you can find help over that matter. Rather it concerns the religious aspects that need to be taken into account. So, let's begin by thinking about the funeral.

The Funeral

Many funerals these days are brief affairs at a Crematorium. But, for Christians (especially practising Anglicans) such a service hardly does justice to the life of the one who has passed away, nor does it make use of the rich tradition developed by the church for the benefit of its members. So let us think about how the church has developed a fitting way of remembering and celebrating the life of its members. After all, this is the *most* important occasion in your life, and one that can't be repeated!!

Practising Anglicans would normally, at St. Andrew's, be given a **Funeral Mass**. Such a Mass, for those who may not have experienced one, is similar to every other Mass, except the focus of the celebration is – you. You and your being-in-God. So, what happens?

Preparing for the Funeral Mass

It is an ancient and pious custom for the coffin to be received into the church the night before the funeral. Undertakers are quite familiar with this ancient tradition. It will be welcomed at the door of the church by the priest who will sprinkle it with holy water. After it has been led into the church it will be placed in front of the altar where the short *Office of the Dead* will be celebrated by all who attend. This Office comprises psalms, readings and prayers and anyone may come and stay until the church is locked for the night. It is not normal for the coffin to be open, but some especially ask for this.

The Funeral Mass – some questions answered:

If the coffin has not been received into the church on the previous evening, this will happen at the beginning of the Mass. It will be greeted at the door by the priest, sprinkled with holy water and led into the church. Holding a place of honour in front of the altar the Mass begins as usual, with the collect and readings recalling the promises made by God to the faithful departed. There will probably be a homily (which may be delivered by anyone, but usually by the priest) but no Creed or intercessions. After the Peace has been exchanged the Eucharistic Prayer is offered and Communion given. This is the heart of the Mass and the departed person is very much at the centre of our thoughts prayer and actions. As someone has written: 'At every Holy Mass, we enter into the timeless reality of the perfect and acceptable Sacrifice of love made by Christ to the Father for our sake. And

from that Sacrifice, graces flow for all and especially for those for whom the Mass is being offered. This is particularly the case for the deceased to prepare them for the joy of heaven. We can offer the Holy Souls no better comfort and solace than to attend a Mass for them, or have Masses said for them.' (*Fr. Joseph Gob OFM*)

After all have received and the altar has been cleared it is time to turn our attention once again to the departed person. We often forget that sin separates us from God and one another (not that God separates himself from us but that we, through our thoughts, words and deeds, have prevented the full grace of God operating in our lives) so the final act in the church is to absolve the person of their sins. This is done through the moving *Rite of Absolution* when the priest circles the coffin, sprinkling it with holy water (and, at a Solemn Requiem, with incense) whilst he offers the 'Our Father' in silence. The following prayer, or one like it, is then offered:

N or M, our companion in faith and *brother/sister* in Christ,
we entrust you to God who created you.

May you return to the Most High
who formed you from the dust of the earth.

May the angels and the saints come to meet you
as you go forth from this life.

May Christ, who was crucified for you take you into his Kingdom.

May Christ the Good Shepherd give you a place within his flock.

May Christ forgive you your sins + and keep you among his people.

May you see your Redeemer face to face
and delight in the vision of God for ever. Amen.

The coffin is then led out of the church to be taken to the Crematorium of cemetery. There, a simple rite will be celebrated to commit the person to their final resting place.

What do I have to do?

It is clear that you need to make your requests known to your next-of-kin.

As mentioned before, there is a form at the back of this booklet to help you.

- ❖ You should specify whether you want your body to be *taken to church the evening before your funeral*.
- ❖ You should also make it clear that you want your funeral to be celebrated *within the context of the Mass*.
- ❖ You should also indicate whether you want any *special readings*.
- ❖ You can also chose the *hymns* you require (usually no more than three).

It may also be possible for your name to be included in any *'Book of the Departed'*. You can also specify this so that your name can be remembered on your Anniversary. A charge is normally made for this.

A Requiem Mass should be offered as soon as possible after your death before the actual funeral. This can be specified if you are not sure it would happen.

Finally ...

As people move away, and sometimes into residential care, it is good to specify your requests. It also happens that the priest into whose parish you move may not be familiar with these ancient customs. Remember, a *Funeral Mass with Absolution*, is the traditional and correct service: it is dignified and honours the departed in a very important way.

All this is not 'morbid', but a sensible and practical approach to the moment when our families, friends and congregation wish to speed us on our final journey to the Beatific Vision. What passes as a 'normal' funeral service does little to honour the departed and does not allow for them the privilege's to which they are entitled as practising Christians.

PREPARING YOUR WILL

Whatever your age, you really should make a will so that you can be confident that you leave your possessions to those people you choose, as well as leaving money to charities/good causes etc..

If you ever change your mind, you can always make a new will and cancel your existing one. If you don't make a will, a Government department will most certainly decide how to divide up your possessions (called your estate in legal jargon), possibly in a different way to the way you would have wanted, and it will be easier for the Inland Revenue to get a percentage of your estate, through inheritance and other taxes.

All this can be avoided by making a will, preferably using a local solicitor (some solicitors offer a special deal if two wills are made by a couple at the same time). It can be a false economy to buy a 'do-it-yourself' will from a shop. All you have to do is decide beforehand who you would like to leave your Estate to and the solicitor will convert this into a legal document and then all you have to do is sign it; someone at the solicitors' office will normally witness it for you.

Also, as officialdom nowadays seems to want to know more about people's affairs and 'red tape' is on the increase, it will almost certainly pay you to appoint the solicitor to be your EXECUTOR at the same time as the will is being prepared. You have to choose an executor any way when you make a Will (an executor carries out your wishes which you have made in your will). If you don't want a member of your family to be an executor at an already difficult time with such awkward things like probate, tax, pensions, savings, loans, insurance, property etc., as well as the legal formalities which have to be undertaken soon after death, a solicitor will do it all for you, normally far quicker than anyone else, the cost being taken off the final amount of your estate due to your loved ones.

To enable the solicitor to do this, when you make a will with a solicitor you will normally be given a simple form to record, in general terms, details of your assets and liabilities and where the documents etc. are – you can keep this in a safe place or let the solicitor store it – it will be only used to sort out your estate in the quickest way possible.

Postscript

In reading accounts of old Wills, it is impossible not to be struck by the way so many of the testators set down a solemn declaration of faith, which was not just a pious formality or a convention of the time. It would be unusual to do this nowadays, but why not? This might be something we can learn from the past. Based on those old Will preambles here is a modern version:

“I die in the Holy, Catholic and Apostolic faith of our Lord Jesus Christ as it has been received and taught in the Church of England. I commend my soul to almighty God and, trusting in his mercy, implore forgiveness of all my sins. I beg forgiveness of all whom I have injured and I freely forgive those who desire forgiveness of me.”



Jesus said: “I am the resurrection, and I am life, says the Lord. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.” (The Gospel of St. John 11:25)

Some additional notes on coping with Death, Grief, and Loss

What is Grief?

Grief occurs in response to the loss of someone or something. The loss may involve a loved one, a job, or possibly a role (a student entering the workplace or an employee entering retirement). Anyone can experience grief and loss. It can be sudden or expected; however, individuals are unique in how they experience this event. Grief, itself, is a normal and natural response to loss. There are a variety of ways that individuals respond to loss. Some are healthy coping mechanisms and some may hinder the grieving process. It is important to realize that acknowledging the grief promotes the healing process. Time and support facilitate the grieving process, allowing an opportunity to appropriately mourn this loss.

Common Reactions to Loss:

Individuals experiencing grief from a loss may choose a variety of ways of expressing it. No two people will respond to the same loss in the same way. It is important to note that phases of grief exist; however, they do not depict a specific way to respond to loss. Rather, stages of grief reflect a variety of reactions that may surface as an individual makes sense of how this loss affects them. Experiencing and accepting all feelings remains an important part of the healing process.

Denial, numbness, and shock

This serves to protect the individual from experiencing the intensity of the loss. Numbness is a normal reaction to an immediate loss and should not be confused with "lack of caring". Denial and disbelief will diminish as the individual slowly acknowledges the impact of this loss and accompanying feelings.

Bargaining

At times, individuals may worry about what could have been done to prevent the loss. Some may become preoccupied about the way that things could have been better, imagining all the things that will never be. This reaction can provide insight into the impact of the loss; however, if not properly resolved, intense feelings of remorse or guilt may hinder the healing process.

Depression

After recognizing the true extent of the loss, some individuals may experience depressive symptoms. Sleep and appetite disturbance, lack of energy and concentration, and crying spells are some typical symptoms. Feelings of loneliness, emptiness, isolation, and self-pity can also surface during this phase, contributing to this reactive depression. For many, this phase must be experienced in order to begin reorganizing one's life.

Anger

This reaction usually occurs when an individual feels helpless and powerless. Anger may result from feeling abandoned, occurring in cases of loss through death. Feelings of resentment may occur toward one's higher power or toward life in general for the injustice of this loss. After an individual acknowledges anger, guilt may surface due to expressing these negative feelings. Again, these feelings are natural and should be honoured to resolve the grief.

Acceptance

Time allows the individual an opportunity to resolve the range of feelings that surface. The grieving process supports the individual. That is, healing occurs when the loss becomes integrated into the individual's set of life experiences. Individuals may return to some of the earlier feelings throughout one's lifetime. There is no time limit to the grieving process. Each individual should define one's own healing process.

Factors that may hinder the healing process:

- Avoidance or minimization of one's emotions.
- Use of alcohol or drugs to self-medicate.
- Use of work (over-function at workplace) to avoid feelings.

Guidelines that may help resolve grief

Allow time to experience thoughts and feelings openly to self.
Acknowledge and accept all feelings, both positive and negative.
Use a journal to document the healing process.
Confide in a trusted individual; tell the story of the loss.
Express feelings openly.
Crying offers a release.
Identify any unfinished business and try to come to a resolution.

Bereavement groups provide an opportunity to share grief with others who have experienced similar loss.

RECOMMENDED READING

On Death and Dying. New York: MacMillan, 1969 Kubler-Ross, Elisabeth
When Bad Things Happen to Good People. New York: Schocken Books, 1981 Kushner, H.S.

MY FUNERAL

I,
do request that, in respect of my funeral:

- ❖ it be celebrated in the Church of
- ❖ my body be brought into the church on the previous evening where the *Office of the Dead* should be celebrated by all who chose to attend;
(delete if not required)
- ❖ the funeral should be celebrated within the context of a *Requiem Mass* with *Absolution of the Dead*;
- ❖ a) the following *readings* should be used, or
b) I am happy for the priest to choose the readings; (delete as required)

New Testament.....

Gospel

Other.....

- ❖ I wish the following *music/ hymns to be sung*:

i)

(ii).....

iii).....

"I die in the faith of the Holy, Catholic and Apostolic faith of our Lord Jesus Christ as it has been received and taught in the Church of England. I commend my soul to almighty God and, trusting in his mercy, implore forgiveness of all my sins. I beg forgiveness of all whom I have injured and I freely forgive those who desire forgiveness of me."

Signed: Date: