



Fear and faith: reflections on ministry and death

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An experience of observing a cremation instigates theological reflection on the fear of death. Using Laurie Green's model of action to reflection, and then reflection to action, the article moves through three cycles of theological reflection, exploring first the author's response to the crematorium, then a subsequent encounter with a family during a funeral visit, and finally a conversation with colleagues. Each cycle produces further insights: the universality of death; the particularity of death; and a final glimpse of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Through this, the author explores the interaction between his fear of death and his faith.

DEATH • FEAR • FAITH • CREMATION • FUNERAL MINISTRY • BEREAVEMENT

An image

Perhaps the most striking thing was the *ordinariness* of the place: the white concrete-block walls; the bright, efficient lighting; the well-scrubbed floors; the polished stainless-steel doors; the neutral, institutional smell; the competent workers going about their tasks with a businesslike attitude. It could have been a high-tech factory, or a laboratory. Because I had never been to a crematorium before, my training incumbent, John, had the idea to show me the ovens. One was working, on its door a small white card with some details relating to the deceased, and through its window I could see, amid the raging flames and smoke, the distinct, charred ribcage of a human carcass in the process of its cremation.

Some background

Much theological reflection seems to want to answer questions of what one might have *done* or *said* in a particular situation, but here I want to explore what I *felt* and *believed*, more specifically, the interaction between my fear of death and my faith. Even speaking of a 'fear of death' makes me 'at best guilty of a simplification or of shorthand',¹ since there are at least four interrelated fears:

The fear of being dead.

The fear that one will die, that one's life is going to end.

The fear of premature death.

The fear of the process of dying.²

The image of the burning corpse forced me, then as now, to confront not only that multifaceted fear of death but, even more urgently, how that fear seemed an indictment of my faith – a faith that, as a priest, I would promise through my 'life and doctrine'³ to proclaim, a faith where God's 'perfect love casts out fear'.⁴ I approached my parish placement with a sense of trepidation over the inevitable funeral services in which I would be expected to participate; trepidation, but also the conviction that this was something I needed to face, both for my own selfish reasons in the certainty of my own inevitable demise, and also in preparation for the ministry I was seeking. Being able to minister around death is a key competency of the role.

So my reflection is twofold: what did I learn about myself, about the interplay between my fear and my belief? And how can what I learned make a difference to me as a priest? In this, I am conscious of the teaching of St Augustine that ‘the twin consequences of original sin, ignorance and weakness ... are epitomised in fear of death.’⁵

A method of theological reflection

I was able to participate in several funerals over the course of my ten-week placement, and, in reflecting theologically on them, I believe Laurie Green’s method to be the most useful. Its pattern comprises ‘looking intently ... moving on to explore analytically’ so that we can try to ‘perceive the important values’⁶ inherent in the situation; and then moving on to further reflection, where a second cycle occurs, that of paying attention to how ‘Christian heritage helps us look at the world ... but also that the world will in turn help us to look afresh at our Christian heritage.’⁷ This spiral, ‘which moves around continually from action to reflection and action to reflection’,⁸ works as it fuses the cycle of reflection with a sense of progress over time. It is what a thoughtful and self-aware person might do intuitively, but, crucially, it provides a template for organising the interplay of experience, teaching, thoughts and emotions. Furthermore, it implies – or at least asks the question about – growth. There were two specific incidents during my placement which provide the raw material for reflection: the episode described above and, weeks later, a conversation with a bereaved family. Between these two moments I had the opportunity – almost the need – to consider the theology. Thus, there was some preliminary reflection on the first incident which did indeed influence my approach to the second. Since then I have been able to reflect more deeply on both by sharing the experience with my fellow students, and have reached an understanding which will inform how I face these twin issues – of fear and belief – going forward.

The first experience

The visit to the ovens occurred after my first funeral. This was for Albert, a 70-plus retired lorry driver who had had a massive heart attack. John and I visited his widow, brother and sister-in-law in a tiny house in a rough part of town. I remember their strong Norfolk accents and sensed that these were hard-

working, salt-of-the-earth people: naturally reserved, close-knit and unlikely to share their feelings. They seemed to lack any religious belief whatsoever, more interested in the post-funeral arrangements. What was my role here? Was I interfering in some way? Would they be offended at being guinea pigs for a trainee priest? At the same time, I recognised the innate, easy power John had: here he was the expert, not only in matters of religion but in matters of the death ritual, including the practical, seemingly mundane arrangements – hymn selection, readings, choreography, etc. Without any real anchors in terms of relevant experience, social connection or a clear role, my fear of death, intermingled with my own awkwardness, became almost embarrassing.

When it came to the funeral itself, my main thought was how *non*-religious it all seemed, much more a civic, council-sponsored occasion, far from an event ‘to reaffirm the continuity in Christ of the living and the dead.’⁹ Even in the discussion with the bereaved beforehand, which formed the basis of the address, I was aware of the ‘tension’ between our need ‘to be consoled by narrative paradigms and our suspicion that they falsify a less comforting and more chaotic reality’,¹⁰ our need to smooth over the rough edges and paint a happy picture. During the funeral itself, I noticed a subtext of avoiding the confrontation of death: the crematorium modelled on an upturned Viking longboat, reflecting the history of the area and a rather romanticised version of sending people off; the tastefully landscaped garden of remembrance; the non-offensive but attractive bare brick walls inside; the order of service to ‘Celebrate the Life’, featuring a photo of ‘Bert’ in happier times. Even the undertakers seemed militaristic, not reverential, in the way they performed their duties, bowing at the coffin, clicking heels, marching in unison. The overall effect matched a ‘critique of the contemporary Western funeral as brief, austere, impersonal, professionalised, meaningless and poorly attended’.¹¹

At the crematorium, my role was to do the reading, my favourite, ‘I am the way the truth and the life.’¹² The words seemed hollow as I read them, trying to elicit a glimmer of belief from the tiny congregation during the pared-down service within the ‘required framework’ of the Church of England *Common Worship* guidelines.¹³ Because of the lack of the music, poetry, setting and community of my own tradition and experience, the proceedings seemed awkward, the Scripture pedestrian, the ritual mechanical; nothing within it to reinforce a faith which might have given me some insight or some strength with which to combat my fear. Once the mourners left, I made that uncomfortable visit to the ovens, and this became something of a turning point on my journey.

Exploration

My placement was in a 'suburban' parish outside a market town that served a population of 7,000 with an electoral roll of around 200. Led by an energetic vicar in partnership with his deeply committed wife and an enthusiastic curate, the parish seemed to approach death as a useful evangelical opportunity. The benefice Mission Statement, 'to create a Community with God at its heart' and specifically 'to take the gospel out into the community',¹⁴ made funerals a key manifestation of the church's perceived mission. My colleagues showed no signs of fear of death in their ministry, so that my own issues seemed both trivial and 'un-Christian'. While geographically close to my home, the parish was well outside my comfort zone, both socially and in terms of my own churchmanship. This exacerbated my anxiety. Nor was it particularly reassuring to be always introduced as someone studying to be a priest 'at Cambridge', as though that meant I might know all the answers. I worried constantly that I would say or do something to offend someone, but I genuinely wanted to help; and by widening my experience, I hoped I might have the opportunity to deal with my issues.

Certainly the sight of that burning corpse will always punctuate the memories of my time there, forcing me to acknowledge my fear of confronting death. Researchers describe this reluctance to face death as 'the idea of "successful avoidance" accompanying a system of taboos regarding all death related things'.¹⁵ Apparently I am not alone in this innate human response: 'Since fear has to do with risks of survival, it is natural that fear and death should be close partners'.¹⁶ My journal at the time suggests I asked myself the question, 'What is the fear?' Was it the multiple fears of the pain, the ultimate loneliness and the helplessness of the act of dying? Or was it the fear that Christ's promise that 'everyone who lives and believes in me will never die'¹⁷ was simply not enough for my feeble faith?

We don't really 'do' death in our twenty-first-century, secularised Western world. Not that we shrink from reports of natural disasters, terrorist atrocities and murders; or avoid death as a subject of films, fiction and even video games; but somehow, the more we watch it, the less we feel comfortable in discussing it. 'We cannot cope with death because we lack a set of images that tell us that "it is all right to lie down in good time to die, dependently leaving it to God to raise us up again".'¹⁸ So a variety of different, sometimes contradictory, approaches swirl about: 'few believe in a hereafter without God, but many believe in God without affirming a hereafter'.¹⁹ One study suggests, 'the

number of people who believe in life after death has decreased to less than 50% of the population', but the pattern of belief is impossible to assess on any 'scientific basis in sociology'.²⁰ Another relatively recent study claims 29 per cent believe that at death 'nothing happens, we come to the end of life';²¹ and the rest believe any number of different theories. Yet, even starting from a confessing perspective, 'beyond Christian fundamentalism few address themselves to hell; indeed, even heaven receives little attention by comparison with a this-worldly focus'.²²

I myself have seen my parents, much of my family and many friends and colleagues die; I am expert at attending funerals and writing letters of condolence. Yet I feel that, in the mysterious trade of death, I am still a novice. In this I am apparently not alone: 'we are not often very skilled at expressing the numinous in our religious ritual', and funerals, like other church services, seem 'less successful at providing occasions to express conflicting emotions'.²³ Not only am I ill equipped to confront death, I am terrified of dying, despite my faith. Perhaps surprisingly, investigators say both that 'religious orientation does not necessarily reduce concern with death' and, more tellingly, that believers are 'more likely to be made anxious by thoughts about death'.²⁴

Initial reflection

Turning to the separate but interrelated spiral of theological reflection in Green's method, humanity has wrestled death and the fear of death for ages, touching the very heart of faith: 'except for man, all creatures are immortal for they are ignorant of death; what is divine, terrible, incomprehensible, is to know that one is mortal'.²⁵ After this first incident, my theological response was an avalanche of sometimes confused ideas and phrases, all of which reinforced the idea that 'as far as Christian orthodoxy is concerned it consists, very largely, in an assault upon the fear of death. In St. Paul ... death is described as "the last enemy to be destroyed"'.²⁶ If that is so, surely my fear became an indictment of not only my faith but also my formation as a priest.

Looking at that burning body made all the interrelated doctrinal questions we had been studying suddenly relevant. I thought first of the arguments of Justin Martyr and Tertullian on the resurrection of the body, asking, as they sought to counter their contemporary critics, 'Is it not impossible that the bodies of men, after they have been dissolved, and like seeds resolved into earth, should in God's appointed time rise again and put on incorruption?'²⁷ Even Calvin

wrestled with the issue of 'the resurrection of bodies that suffered corruption' and found an answer in the 'infinite power of God'.²⁸ I thought of the opposing twentieth-century views on the reality of the resurrection of Jesus himself, without which, to my mind, there can be no faith: Pannenberg's argument, 'the assertion of the reality of Jesus' resurrection appear[s] as historically very probable',²⁹ seemingly at odds with Bultmann's claims that the 'resurrection cannot prove the value of God because we cannot prove one act of faith by another'.³⁰ I thought of the nature of sin and forgiveness; the long history of the debate in the Church about whether we can 'influence the fate of the dead by the prayers of the church universal ... or settle the fate of the dead by the local congregation' who used to 'make judgements about who was fitted for Christian burial (and by implication heaven)'.³¹ Was the trucker – who lived outside the whole apparatus of repentance and forgiveness which forms much of the Church's liturgy – now forgiven and enjoying eternal life? I bewail the hypocrisy of a society which claims not to believe, but still expects heaven. Yet when the Psalmist writes, 'you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit',³² I wonder exactly what I believe that means. These questions of sin and death, resurrection and faith cannot possibly have a proper airing here, but my overarching sense was that, at the place where I needed my faith most, I seemed to have it least. And that image kept returning: the simple end of a once-living body, efficiently disposed of, very much a this-world phenomenon, not the gate to eternal bliss.

Yet gradually, almost as a result of the constant internal battle, I grew weary of it. Instead of my fear I focused on the simple universality of it all. Accepting that burnt body as the 'blight man was born for',³³ but also considering 'that to fear death itself is to live every moment of one's life in terror of a certainty that common sense tells us we must face and faith teaches us to embrace for love of God',³⁴ I could perhaps park my doubts and assuage my fear. I began to appreciate the familiar words, 'we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it',³⁵ the recollection of happy, funny incidents; finite life on earth and the need to use well the time God gives us. The sense, perhaps relief, of an ending.

An initial response

That experience in the crematorium removed one element of mystery, and it helped me to understand the role of the Church and the priest, in the context of confronting that immutable but universal certainty: the ashes that remain.

The ritual we could perform became both a 'corporal' and a 'spiritual work of mercy';³⁶ the fire not 'as purposefully destructive but as a positive sign of God's purpose'³⁷ for the body at the end of life; the value of having someone to say words of comfort – 'suffer us not, at our last hour, for any pains of death, to fall from thee';³⁸ the value of symbols – flowers, clothes, gravestone; the value of the memories and the favourite music; the value of the tea and drinks and sandwiches afterwards; the value of the process. I could do this.

I participated in other funerals as they arose over the course of my placement, and while the fear remained, I was less nervous, less awkward. I grew in confidence in writing and leading the prayers, and in my conversations with the families of the deceased. I recognised those universal needs.

The second experience

From this more ordered, if still fearful, perspective, I was able to gain some new insight at a funeral visit at the end of my placement. In a way, I had been through one of Green's reflective 'spirals' and was able to experience the ritual from a more self-aware perspective. The image from the crematorium, however, remained. John and I arrived at another modest but well-cared-for bungalow to find a mournful pair of grown sons, a doleful daughter-in-law, grandchildren and dog in the adjoining room (out of sight but noisy) and a widow who, with something approaching terror in her manner, said, 'You need to help me ... I don't know what I am supposed to think.' And, at that moment, I recognised those words. They were, perhaps, at the centre of my fear: the 'not knowing'.

Her husband, having slipped and fallen into the pool in their garden, apparently drowned or had a heart attack. First the neighbours and then the paramedics had tried to revive him. He survived the trip to the hospital and died there. Slowly, details emerged. He had been a docker, a hard man with Victorian values, family issues, sons perhaps not close to each other, one the favourite.

Another exploration

I was, by now, acutely aware of my own power to harm and heal here, but more amazed by the holy ground we occupied. What had begun as anxiety at having to relive the events of the past few days and of trying to discern the dim

outlines of their faith, became the process whereby the family grew together, the history of the dead man giving meaning to the stories of their lives together. In that way 'the words and language not only express, but construct the experience of grief':³⁹ the rugby-playing son seeing in his father's failings reasons to amend his own life, great and growing candour within the family, and the sense that we were *all* discovering the truth together. 'A spirit of openness which echoes and offers up the love of God.'⁴⁰ A great sense of blessing overwhelming the fear.

My fear also sprang from 'not knowing'. Not knowing the answers to all those interrelated questions about what happens, about what I believe, about what it means. Yet, in the context of this exploration with the family – piecing together the memories and reactions for the prayers and the address – the unknown became somehow less terrifying. It wasn't the universality of death that I had discovered, but its particularity. 'Death gives a particular life its full value.'⁴¹ Perhaps my role as a priest was to be there for *this* particular story, for *these* people at *this* moment. Not to expect conversion, not to expect immediate closure, and not to expect great revelation. Perhaps my fear itself was a gift of both solidarity and vulnerability in ministering at that particular point: creating the space for the 'facing and experiencing of memories, good and bad and making some sort of whole from which the future can make sense.'⁴²

Suddenly the words 'Let the dead bury their own dead' seemed to resonate.⁴³ I saw that the *process* of the sacrament is for the living, that 'it is through human relationships that we come to a sense of our identity and through their loss that we come to know grief.'⁴⁴ A requiem mass with hymns, incense and an eloquent eulogy was no more valuable than the simple visit to the crematorium. This was *their* unique moment. It was about the dignity of each person, of human life; of course, of the deceased, but, in a different way, very much of the bereaved. Completing 'this journey with the dead' allows us to 'become more attuned to the needs of the living.'⁴⁵ My 'own Christian interpretation of "overcoming death"' could lay 'not in an ignoring of death but in the acceptance of life as a daily gift ... expressing the biblical idea of sharing in Christ's death and resurrection.'⁴⁶ And in that hope, I saw one answer to the fear of the unknown that I and that widow shared.

While I thought I was wrestling with the theology surrounding death, and the practicalities of being a priest, I was really wrestling with myself. My fear was not simply fear of death but of not knowing about death. In this, using the cycle

allowed me to organise, to find a place for and to examine the flood of thoughts and emotions. The first turn of the cycle had left me with the universal, the second with the particular. My knowledge and availability grew as I had 'paid attention' to what I was learning about myself. Along the way, I began to identify the patterns in the strands of fear and belief and to at least acknowledge the 'not knowing'.

Further reflection

From a theological perspective, however, the greatest learning came from a further cycle of exploring these episodes with my colleagues. During this session, one suggested I think about Jesus' own fear. At that point I realised that in trying to digest conflicting, almost overwhelming amounts of Scripture and doctrine, I had neglected what was perhaps the most important passage, Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane: 'In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.'⁴⁷ He died the most humiliating, painful, lonely, unjust death. Jesus had been terrified; he had lived my fear.

A deeper response

Through these cycles of reflection, I have confronted something deep inside my own self, and have been surprised at what I have learned. I am content that I will never become an 'expert' at death. My fear will not disappear; indeed, it is one part of my humanity that Christ himself assumed in his incarnation. I see that recognising my fear should reinforce not diminish my faith. Fear comes from not knowing. Not knowing about death is of course axiomatic in this life, but not knowing is also almost a *precondition* of faith. At the epicentre of not knowing, I found the image of Jesus, sweating drops of blood. Reflection illuminated my very specific journey, but this image somehow balanced and transformed the image in the crematorium.

In returning to what I feel and believe, I hope that the relationship between fear and faith might evolve as I experience death from the different perspective of ministry. It seems almost certain that each individual experience will bring with it unique lessons about this great mystery of death, some further refinement of the questions which persist. I hope that rather than looking at

the ritual simply as an occasional office, as part of the way the Church serves the wider community, I might instead appreciate the opportunities inherent: to be open to my own vulnerability, to share something genuine of myself, and to perform a really great service for the people left behind. I hope that, when they remember the deceased, they remember the Church that was there for them in the care, professionalism and empathy I might offer. Most of all, I hope we might collectively marvel at the glimpse of Jesus revealed in and through what we feel and believe about the deceased. If 'Christian belief lives with the scandal of particularity',⁴⁸ then every life honoured in this ministry becomes both an embodiment and a reminder of the entire history of salvation which is at the centre of faith.

Notes

1. Warren 2004, p. 4.
2. Warren 2004, p. 4.
3. The Book of Common Prayer 2004, 'Prayers: In the Ember Weeks, to be said every day, for those that are to be admitted into Holy Orders', p. 41.
4. John 4:18.
5. Dodaro 2004, p. 216.
6. Green 2009, p. 82.
7. Green 2009, p. 78.
8. Green 2009, p. 19.
9. Ainsworth-Smith and Speck 1982, p. 84.
10. Holmes 2015, accessed online, 23 October 2015.
11. Hockey 2001, p. 203.
12. John 14:6.
13. Bradshaw 2006, p. 208.
14. Church Profile, 'The Benefice of ... 2009'.
15. Klaus G. Magni, 'The Fear of Death', in Godin SJ (ed.) 1972, p. 132.
16. Davies 2005, p. 137.
17. John 11:26.
18. Spohn 1999, p. 57.
19. Pierre Delooz, 'Who Believes in the Hereafter', in Godin SJ (ed.) 1972, p. 47.
20. Delooz, in Godin SJ (ed.) 1972, p. 38.
21. Douglas Davies, 'Contemporary Belief in Life after Death', in Jupp and Rogers (eds) 1995, p. 131.
22. Davies 2005, p. 167.
23. Ramshaw 1987, pp. 32–33.
24. David Lester, 'Religious Behaviours and Attitudes', in Godin SJ (ed.) 1972, p. 122.
25. Warren 2004, p. 1, quoting J. L. Borges, 'The Immortal'.
26. Douglas Davies, quoting 1 Corinthians 15:26, in Jupp and Rogers (eds) 1995, p. 133.

27. Justin Martyr, *First Apology*.
28. Douglas Davies, 'Theologies of Disposal', in Jupp and Rogers (eds) 1995, p. 72.
29. Pannenberg 1968, p. 105.
30. Rudolph Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology', in Bartsch (ed.) 1953, p. 40.
31. Sheppy 2003, p. 97.
32. Psalm 16:10.
33. Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'Spring and Fall', in *Poems*, 1918.
34. Tillyer 1987.
35. 1 Timothy 6:7.
36. Burying the dead (corporal) and comforting the sorrowful (spiritual) in the Roman Catholic Church as described in the newsletter of the Parish of Our Lady and the English Martyrs, Cambridge, 6 December 2015.
37. Davies, in Jupp and Rogers (eds) 1995, p. 76.
38. The Book of Common Prayer 2004, 'At the Burial of the Dead', p. 332.
39. Michael Anderson, "'You have to get inside the person" or making grief private: image and metaphor in the therapeutic reconstruction of bereavement', in Hockey, Katz and Small (eds) 2001, p. 136.
40. Ainsworth-Smith and Speck 1982, p. 82.
41. Paul Dunblon and Andre Godin, 'How do People Speak of Death', referring to E. Minowski, in Godin SJ (ed.) 1972, p. 60.
42. Ainsworth-Smith and Speck 1982, p. 54.
43. Luke 9:60 and Matthew 8:22.
44. Davies 2005, p. 25.
45. Rich 2013, p. 196.
46. Davies, paraphrasing Schweitzer, in Jupp and Rogers (eds) 1995, p. 134.
47. Luke 22:44.
48. Sheppy 2003, p. 17.

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