

- young Christians of all ages make their first public profession of faith and are strengthened by the Holy Spirit in Confirmation to fulfil their promises
- the benefits of Christ's passion and death are brought to God's people in the Sacrament of Holy Communion
- God's Word is read and preached and hearts are converted again and again, in deeper and deeper ways of love;
- Holy vows of marriage are exchanged before God's holy altar;
- in the Church we publically offer thanks, confess our sins, receive assurance of forgiveness, ask God for our needs, praise and adore Him with psalms and spiritual songs
- divine—human communication by all these means – angels ascending and descending between heaven and earth; and, yes,
- for generations and generations, we have publically honoured, given thanks to God for, and commended the souls of our dearly departed, comforted in the promise of the resurrection to eternal life, we have done this, because it is worship, in the Church.

Our minds can scarcely comprehend the glory and grace of the ministrations of Christ that take place in our very midst in churches set apart for these things.

They are special places – we know it intuitively – our attitude changes as we enter, we speak with muted voice, some acknowledge with a bow the holy altar or the Cross before sitting, we are especially upset if something terrible happens there – it is consecrated ground, it is holy. Where better to bring the tender and grieving hearts of beloved family and friends but there? It comes back to the question – Do you want a Christian burial?

(To me it is very distressing to enter a funeral home chapel and to walk to the podium – no altar to acknowledge. I also find it very disturbing when they have a side room for the family, apart from everyone else.)

The church is a place surrounded by images of comfort – of the cross and of the resurrection. Even if in our deep grief we hear nothing of the words spoken or the prayers said, just to be in that place is to enter into worship. And we know that even if in our deep grief we cannot speak words, St. Paul reminds us, *the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities... the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.*

As a Christian minister, I do not know a better place for people to carry their grief to and to begin to be led out of it and to know the healing grace of God – to truly know in their hearts what is meant by our Lord when he says, blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Attempts to shield people from the reality of the death of a loved one, of the reality of their own mortality, because it is painful, is not doing them a service but rather hindering them from healing and growing. Of course people don't want to face death, but we do them a disservice if we cover it over. We hold them further from the truth, keep them from bringing their real wounds of grief to be healed. It is hindering them from facing the truth that it is God who gives the only help that is truly comforting.

So I ask, *"Do you want a Christian burial?"*

And I answer, *"Christian burials are worship, and worship is best offered from the Church."*

Why should funerals be in churches?

The Rev'd David Philips

Why is this even an issue? – we live in a culture that has an increasingly secular worldview; it is a society more estranged from the Church than it has been for many generations; a society that has increasing antagonism with all institutional life; a generation living in a time of greater peace and prosperity than ever before yet highly distracted by the world, the flesh, and the snares of the devil.

The business of funerals, seeking to respond to the desires of this estranged society in which we live, is putting pressure on the issue by constructing parallel [parody] "chapels" in an attempt to meet their clients needs in their estrangement.

But churches are receiving pressure on this question not only around funerals, but also on the issue of weddings, and a few years ago it was on the question of baptisms. But the pressure is not really coming from those who have been faithful churchgoers, for whom it is never really a question, but primarily from those who are estranged for whatever reason.

So the teaching on this question is really, I think, how to respond to those who see themselves as Christian but are not churchgoers. So why should funerals be in churches in these cases?

Two points I would like to make:

1. Christian funerals are services of worship, and
2. Worship is best offered from a church.

1. What is a funeral service?

The memorial or funeral service is not just a service where the community comes together to remember and to celebrate the life of a loved one who is "no longer with us." The Prayer Book service states it starkly – it is the service for The Burial of the Dead. The purpose of a Christian burial service is to remember the person who has died, but in the context of the knowledge that the person who died was made by God, has been redeemed by Christ through the waters of baptism and through faith, and is destined for glory. It is to give thanks to God for the life of the person, to commend to God in prayer the soul of the departed and to be encouraged by God in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life. In other words – a funeral service is worship.

As Christians, we do not try to hide ourselves from the harsh reality of death, but we face its tragedy with a holy hope. When I'm asked to lead a funeral in a funeral home instead of a church, and ask "why?", I am given various reasons by people, such as, it is more convenient, or my mother was buried from there, or they don't want to be reminded of the death when they go to church in future. I suspect though that the issue though is one of estrangement that people are having to face, and they don't want to face it but are being forced by the circumstances. There may be feelings of being a hypocrite, using the church when they haven't been there for years, or knowing their departed had some issues with the church.

When people, who are estranged from the church, call me wanting a service at a funeral home, I ask them gently, but knowing that I am being provocative, "*Do you want a Christian burial?*" And there is always some shock that they are faced with the question – of course they do! Yet it is a provocative question because for them now is a time when they are being reawakened to the reality of our

mortality, and it is a moment of crisis of faith. And I don't want to hide them from this crisis, not because I'm cruel or want to use the situation of their grief to manipulate them, but because in love, I want to help them through it, in the only way that I know as a Christian that will bring them true relief, that is, to strengthen them to have a more lively faith.

So I ask them, provocatively, but lovingly, "*Do you want a Christian burial?*" – of course they do. Then Christian burial is worship and such worship is most appropriately held in a Christian church.

2. Why do we worship in a church?

Why has God called on us to set apart holy places? Surely the whole universe is God's – God is present, fully present, in every place – enfolding, upholding, penetrating through and through every creature of His hand – every part of creation is "in the mind of God" – we cannot leave His presence even if we try. As the psalmist says, Wither shall I go from thy Spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.

God is everywhere - yes. The whole of Creation is, in a sense, holy ground - yes. And yet, we must confess that through our blindness, through our sin, we just cannot see it or acknowledge it or act as though this were truly the case.

We are like the patriarch Jacob, going about our business, and only in moments of God's gracious revealing, do we suddenly see otherwise. Remember how God gave to Jacob a dream of angels ascending and descending to heaven – and when he awoke, Jacob cried

out, Surely the LORD is in this place; and I knew it not – and his response was to build an altar there and to offer worship there.

God knows our blindness to Him and the holiness of His creation – and part of His provision for our salvation is to call on us to set apart special places, as he sets apart for us the holy Sabbath day, that we might begin to see from these special places and from reserving a special day, that the rest of the places on earth and the rest of the days of our lives are all truly holy. But we start with special places first. God has taught us from the beginning that we are to set apart holy places for worship.

Remember how Moses was called upon by God to build the tabernacle or "tent of meeting" in the wilderness – a sign that God was dwelling in the midst of the people of Israel. Remember how Solomon was called upon by God to build the Temple in Jerusalem – again, a sign of God's presence in the midst of Israel. This is not for His sake, but for our sakes.

In the New Testament we see the young Church beginning to gather, first in homes set apart for this purpose, often hidden in the days of persecution. Then, when it was less dangerous, or when it became acceptable to be Christian, beautiful places were built, partly on practical grounds – to hold many people in one place, and partly to help Christian souls to be more able to worship – high ceilings, beautiful art, give glory to God, evoke something of God's majesty, and lift our hearts up to spiritual realities.

The ministrations of Christ are so profound, so holy, that it is right that a special place be set apart for them. Think of what happens in a church:

- infants, children and adults are baptized into Christ, regenerate, born anew with the promise of eternal life