

FUNERAL SERVICE FOR AN INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY

I recently conducted the funeral for my father, who died after a long episode of declining health. It was a joy and a privilege to work with my family in preparing this service. But many of our family are not avowedly Christian so I wanted to respect their spiritual traditions as well as be faithful to my own. I also wanted the theology to reflect my own liberal/progressive Christian understanding. In the days following dad's death, I had a long talk with my mother about various matters theological including what I understand about life after death. What I said accorded with her understanding and is reflected in the words I chose to use in the service.

At the urging of some of my colleagues who attended the funeral to support me, I offer an annotated version of the order of service for others to contemplate and use. Please feel free to modify it to suit your own spiritual journey and needs. Names have been removed leaving blanks where other people's names may be inserted.

Rob Stoner
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Order of Service

I struggled with what to say to begin the service that would not be trite or over-pious or reflect a spiritual reality that I could not accept. In the end I settled for an adaptation of these ancient words.

Opening: God be in our heads
 and in our understanding;
 God be in our eyes
 and in our looking;
 God be in our mouths
 and in our speaking;
 God be in our hearts
 and in our thinking;
 God be at our end
 and at our departing.

Mum was particularly keen that we both thank everyone who came and note the absence of critical members of the family.

Greeting: We have gathered here today to give thanks for
 and honour the life of.....

You have come because you are family - close family or extended family;
or because you are friends - old, long-trusted friends or newer friends;
or because you know through other connections in his life.
We have gathered to mourn the death of and to grieve for our loss.
Or maybe you are here because you want to support those who grieve
to surround us with love, to bear us up on our continuing life journey.

For whatever reason you have come, thanks.
Thanks for knowing and being part of his life;
thanks for knowing us and being part of our lives.
On behalf of and all her family, thanks for being with us today.
We want to acknowledge that there are some who would like to be here
but are unable to do so.
In particular, are not here.
They had a strong bond with and are with us today in spirit.

In the introduction which follows, I wanted to acknowledge the different spiritual traditions present in my family and in others who attended and to invite them to participate in ways that would be faithful to their spirit. The service then flows directly into a time of prayer.

Introduction:

I am, as most of you know,
and it is indeed one of the great privileges of my life
to conduct this funeral service today.

This will be a service in which avowedly Christian forms of worship take place.
I recognise that not all of you, including some members of family,
have chosen the Christian faith as your spiritual journey.
So during those times, particularly in times of prayer,
I invite you to remember in whatever way accords with your spirit.

Prayer:

Having said that, let us enter into a time of prayer.
Let us be still in the presence of God.

Creating God, we thank you for the gift of life;
from the moment of conception and birth to the moment of our last breath
we live amidst the wonder and beauty of all life
and marvel at the gift of what it means to be fully human, fully alive.
And today we particularly thank you for the gift of life
a gift to us and to many others in this world.

Loving God, we thank you for the gift of love;
for the wonder of human relationships
the ability to know another and be known
to accept another and be accepted
to live in depth of meaning together.
And today we particularly thank you for the love we knew from
and the love we could offer him in return
a depth of relationship which makes our grieving even deeper.

Gracious God, we thank you for the gift of grace;
for the ability to forgive and be forgiven
for opportunities to let go of the past and make fresh beginnings
for opportunity to find deep peace in our lives.
And today we want to let go of any hurt or failure
in our relationship with
may we be enabled to know forgiveness and healing
that our continuing memories of may be filled with peace.

Ever-present God, receive our prayers.
Amen.

In introducing the hymn, I acknowledged that my father's journey had not involved church attendance in his later years but that dad used to "go to church" regularly on a Sunday morning by watching "Songs of Praise" on ABC TV. The hymn we sang, "Abide with me", was chosen by dad.

Hymn:

Many of the Bible readings traditionally used at funerals either reflect a remote theistic God or a view of life after death which is a bit "pie in the sky when you die". Mum chose the following reading because it is grounded in the reality of life. Following the reading, a eulogy to dad's life was shared.

Reading: Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.

Eulogy:

In the section that follows, we wanted to do several things; to invite people to remember and share their own stories after the service; to engage in quiet reflection now; and to honour that dad had served in the war (without buying into the full RSL invasion of the service). The silence was broken by the Last Post unannounced. The silence surrounding the Ode of Remembrance was a natural invitation to continue in prayer.

Reflection: We will each have our own memories of
You are invited, over tea and coffee after this service
to share your stories of with each other.
There will be some photos of in an album
for you to peruse and to help you remember.

But now, you are invited, in a moment of silence
to remember the that you knew.

Last post

Ode of Remembrance

Prayer: Let us continue in an attitude of prayer.

Gracious God

Today we remember with gratitude the life of

- husband, father, father-in-law, grandfather, great-grandfather;
- brother, friend, colleague, neighbour.

We are grateful for everything in life that was good and honourable
but we are most thankful that we knew him and loved him
and knew that he loved and cared for us.

So while we are thankful that is released from further suffering
we pray for wisdom and courage to grieve his passing.

Enable us to weep and to laugh;

to let go and to rebuild;

to remember in our lives the qualities of life
which we discovered in life.

We thank you for those that, even in their grief,
surround us and support us through these days.
May we each be upheld and strengthened today
and encouraged to live our lives fully and hopefully
as a living testimony to presence amongst us.

Grants us each your peace, we pray. Amen.

In creating new word around Committal and Commendation, I wanted to reflect some of the theology about life after death that mum and I had talked about.

Committal & Commendation:

None of knows what lies beyond the grave.

Some of us believe that there is a life beyond this life -
an encounter with the living God;
but in his letter to the church at Corinth, Paul says that
it is as different from this life as the fully grown plant is
from the seed from which it grew.

Some of us believe that this life is all we have
and that we are called to live this life as fully as possible
- fully human, fully alive to God's purposes.

But whatever we believe about life beyond death, we can all know this:
..... is at peace;
he is at peace from the troubles and ailments of this world;
he is at peace with us
he is at peace with God.

..... body will return to the earth
there to re-enter the great cycle of nature.

But spirit will live on
in those of us he has influenced through his life.
So we will remember not just for the events of his life, for what he did;
but we will remember the person he was
- a man of integrity, fairness, peace and love;
and those qualities will be re-remembered in our lives for generations to come.

So, we release body to the earth
ashes to ashes, dust to dust, elements to elements.
And we commend his spirit to those who would choose
to be keepers of his memory

Good bye
You are no longer with us but you are still vitally part of our lives.

Mum chose "Joyful, joyful we adore you" as the final hymn because she wanted the service to end on an upbeat. Its words are entirely appropriate for the occasion. Following the hymn I closed the service and then people were invited to pay their respects before joining the family for refreshments and remembering.

Hymn:

Blessing: May each of us know the gifts of God
grace, mercy and peace
in our lives today and every day. Amen.

Paying respects:

You are all invited to pay your respects to
and then join us for tea and coffee.
After the family has said their goodbyes you are invited to follow.
There will be red poppies for those returned servicemen and women
who wish to place one on his coffin.
For the rest, there are sprigs of rosemary
- rosemary for remembrance - to use if you wish.