

Funerals for **Missional Disciples**

preparing to preside at a funeral service
in the United Reformed Church



Produced by the Mission & Discipleship Committee
of the North Western Synod of the United Reformed Church

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a **Missional Discipleship** resource, helping local churches in

**Walking
the Way**
Living the life of Jesus today

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Funerals through a Missional Discipleship lens

1. The key question

What is the Jesus-shaped difference that Christian faith makes in this time of acute bereavement, dislocation, disorientation and despair? Is there Good News to be heard and experienced in the situation of profound grief and loss occasioned by the death of someone who is deeply loved?

2. Good News: and pastoral sensitivity

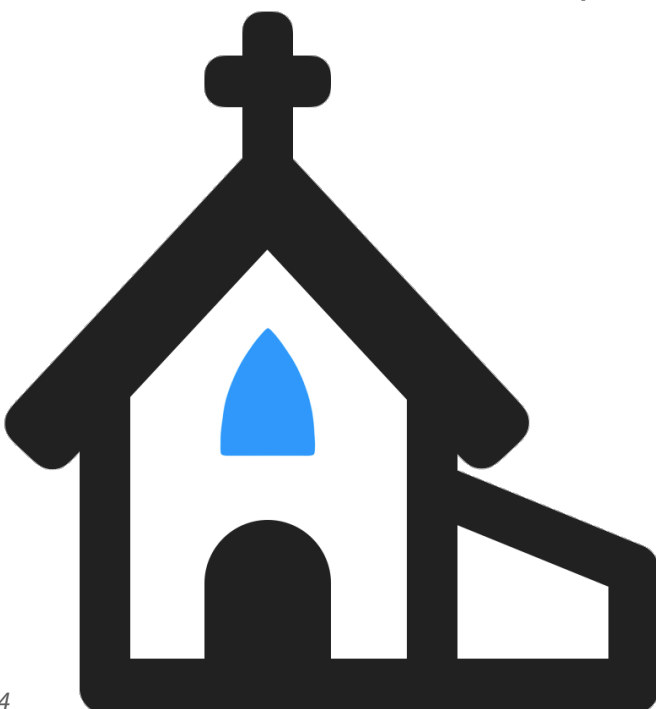
The gospel is always Good News of Jesus over against the concrete Bad News that governs people's lives. If it is not to come across as glib, trivial, or escapist (ie pretending that that things are less awful and soul-destroying than they are), there needs to be deep, empathetic entry into the suffering of the family. The message that "God is with you in your suffering" will only be experienced as authentic, comforting and healing to the extent that they experience you being "with them". That pastoral relationship is the basis on which they will be able or prepared to hear Good News and experience it as something that genuinely addresses them in their situation.



3. Good News:

and the experience of the church

Their experience of the church will be similarly vital to the credibility of anything you wish to say about Good News. Funerals are key moments in which very vulnerable people encounter the church – often one of very few times or even the very first time in which they do so. Their capacity to hear and receive Good News will depend in large part on the extent to which they experience it as recognisably “Jesus-shaped”. Their vulnerability is double-edged: on the one hand, it can make them open and receptive to Good News; on the other hand, they are likely to be more acutely attuned to anything about the church that is not authentic. Funerals are therefore key moments for self-examination by the church: it needs to *be* Good News for hurting people, as well as proclaim it.



4. Resistance to Good News:

negative experiences of church

Negative experiences of the church – either personally or by reputation – are at the heart of contemporary church decline. The most common results from research indicate that people rate Jesus highly; their resistance is to the institution that bears his name, which appears to have little in common with the life, values and practice of Jesus. Typically, they cite:

- ▶ Unlike Jesus, the church is non-welcoming and judgmental towards people “not like us”
- ▶ It is one of the few places in society that practices discrimination
- ▶ It is concerned about its own survival and power, rather than in making the world a better place
- ▶ It acts as the self-appointed “Gatekeeper of Heaven”
- ▶ It preaches a God who is to be feared and appeased
- ▶ It is full of people who are looking for a guaranteed “ticket to heaven” and threaten other people with hell
- ▶ Its main interest in contact with outsiders is to recruit new members

Our response must not be to be defensive or critical; we need to *be different*. The church lives and dies by its reputation, rather than by its own publicity apparatus. Jesus did not act as his own publicity agent; his reputation spread by word of mouth. When the church is making a Jesus-shaped difference, people talk. This is the challenge of missional discipleship: to close the gap between Jesus and the church that bears his name. Funerals are key moments for people to experience that difference at rare moments when they are unusually present and potentially receptive.

5. The Good News: what is it?

The heart of the Good News is always the Easter story. The crucifixion of Jesus is the attempt to silence the Good News of the Kingdom of God – that God is transforming our world into the place it was always intended to be: a place of Life and flourishing. His death is the apparent triumph of the power brokers and a public demonstration that the world will remain unchanged and unsaved. Easter Sunday – the resurrection – is the promise that the Last Word belongs to God, and is a word of Life and salvation. So how does the Easter story address directly the context of the death and funeral of a family member and friend? St Paul addresses this issue in his first letter to the Thessalonian church, telling them, “Do not grieve in exactly the same way as those who have no hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13). What might it mean both to grieve and hope at the same time?



The reality of loss

We need to acknowledge the brutal reality of loss that a death causes. However “good a death” someone might have died, or however much their death may have been a merciful release from suffering, their dying leaves a hole in the lives of those who live that can never be filled. There will never again be the opportunity to talk to the person who has died, or touch or hold them. For all the preciousness of the memories they leave, there will never be the opportunity to create new ones. For couples, their passing is the end of a life lived together; that life – life as they know it – has ended. It is also the end of any opportunity to make things right, to say or unsay what needs to be said, and to make peace.

People need permission to grieve. There is a long-standing tradition of mis-interpreting these words of Paul to mean, “Christians don’t grieve”. Many church people, in particular, report wrestling with feelings of guilt and faithlessness because of the devastation they are suffering. They report that they are left floundering, with no means of acknowledging or process their intense grief, anger and doubts. They talk about the implicit pressure from the church community to “be okay” and to want to celebrate the life of the person they’ve lost, rather than mourn. That message is typically reinforced 3 months or so after the funeral, when their Christian friends clearly expect them to have “got over it”. The message is clear: Christian faith means not grieving and not feeling loss.

Hope does not minimize or trivialize that loss. Hope means that there is something more to be said about life beyond the overwhelming experience of grief and loss, but it is never *less than* that. Jesus' death was the death of all hope in the Kingdom he proclaimed. His resurrection was the incomprehensible promise that even death could not thwart God's love and determination to save. That is why Paul can write, "I am utterly convinced now that there is absolutely nothing that can cut us off from God's love for us in Jesus Christ – not even death!" (Romans 8: 38-9).

Unless we acknowledge the reality of what people are experiencing – the death of their own lives with the person who has died – there will not be space for hope to shape the bereavement process and the emergence of a new life.



“God is with us in our suffering”

There is no better or safer place to be than in the hands of God, because God made us and loves us. One of the greatest fears people have is that the person who has died is a “sinner in the hands of an angry God” (to paraphrase the title of a famous sermon by the Puritan, Jonathan Edwards). This is the message they have received from the church. It is especially a fear when the person has not been a church-goer.

Easter tells us that God loves us more than we can possibly imagine. The old term for Jesus’ suffering and death is “The Passion”. “Passion” has two meanings: great love and great suffering. The two are closely connected: to love is to be prepared to suffer on behalf of the beloved. Jesus’ death, we are told, is a sacrifice – a love-gift on our behalf. Jesus does not avoid or resist the cross, but offers himself for us and endures the suffering because he loves us.

What much Christian preaching misses out is that *God also suffers!* St John tells us that Jesus is God’s gift to us, born out of God’s love and given to save us (John 3:16). God, on Good Friday, suffers the death and loss of God’s one and only beloved Son. God has experienced grief and loss. That is why funerals are moments to proclaim the nearness of God, not God’s remoteness. God understands where we are. God is with us, grieving with us, sharing the pain.

“God loves us more than we can possibly imagine”

It is also the place to proclaim that *God loves the person we have lost even more than we do*. Much preaching suggests the opposite: we love the person and accept their faults; God demands perfection and condemns them for their failures.

This is theologically untrue and pastorally disastrous. It means we think of God as the person from whom we need to hide (as Adam and Eve do in the story of the Garden in Genesis). We are often desperate to “big up” people’s virtues in the hope that they will outweigh their faults in God’s scales of justice, and they will be allowed into heaven rather than condemned to hell. It is almost a case of feeling that we have somehow to fool God into thinking that we are better – and therefore more loveable – than we are.

The opposite is true. God knows us absolutely intimately. This is captured in the liturgical Prayer of Approach: “Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, and from whom no secrets are hidden ...” That level of exposure would be terrifying if God’s disposition towards us was judgmental rather than loving. The prayer celebrates the fact that God is the one person before whom we can stand nakedly and honestly, just as we are, because we are already accepted and loved.

This is what Paul means when he writes, “But the proof of God’s love is that Christ died for us *while we were still sinners!*” (Romans 5:8). God loves us because we are God’s children, not because we are perfect – or even good. As Philip Yancey put it, “There is nothing we can do to make God love us more; there is nothing we can do to make God love us less!” This is what grace means: being loved by God for all we are and despite all we are, and therefore getting what we need, rather than what we deserve.

The funeral is the place to proclaim that the best picture we can have of God is Jesus. That is our assurance that we are loved more than we can possibly imagine. Or, as David Jenkins, Bishop of Durham, put it: “God is. He is as he is in Jesus. Therefore there is hope!”



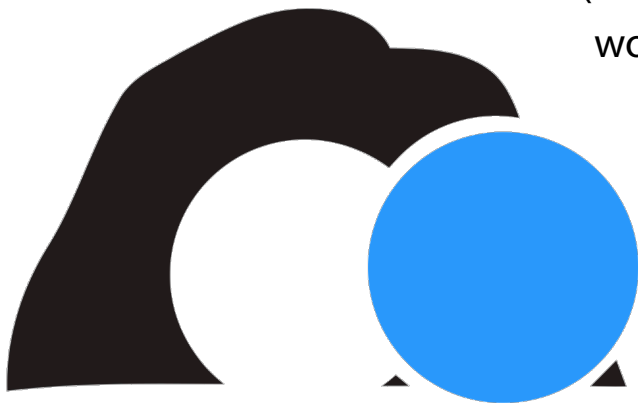
“The Last Word is Life!”

Easter Sunday proclaims that the Last Word belongs to God, and is a Word of Life. Creation is the overflow of the Life of God. Christian faith is the conviction and hope that all of creation is destined to share in this divine Life.

This is not the same thing as believing that “when we die we will go to heaven and be with God forever”. Jesus did not come on some sort of “rescue mission” to save us *from* the world; he came to transform this world into the Kingdom of God – the place it was always meant to be. That is why he taught his disciples to share his own prayer to God: “Your kingdom come; your will be done *on earth* as it is in heaven”.

Being “world creators” is part of what it means to be made in the image of God. The biblical story is that God gave creation to human beings to “create our own world”. The problem is that we have done so in rebellion against God. The result is a world that deals despair and earth, rather than “abundant life” (John 10:10). This is what the Bible calls, “sin”: a

world whose problems cannot be fixed either by repair or reform. It’s as though we have built in a self-destruct programme that means even our best efforts never achieve the transformations we intend and long for. It is a world in which Death has the Last Word over Life.



According to the Bible, the divine verdict on our sinful creation is death. It cannot be fixed; it has to die, and a new creation born in its place. That is the only way in which it can be saved. And the story of Easter is that, rather than God destroying the world and starting over, the old world dies in Jesus and the New Creation is born out of his resurrection.

If funerals are the places only to proclaim that the person we have lost is safe with God because death is not the end, we have only touched on a fraction of what resurrection means. This is the place to help people face not only the reality of the grief and despair of loss of someone they love, but also the helplessness, horror and despair we experience about the state of our world.

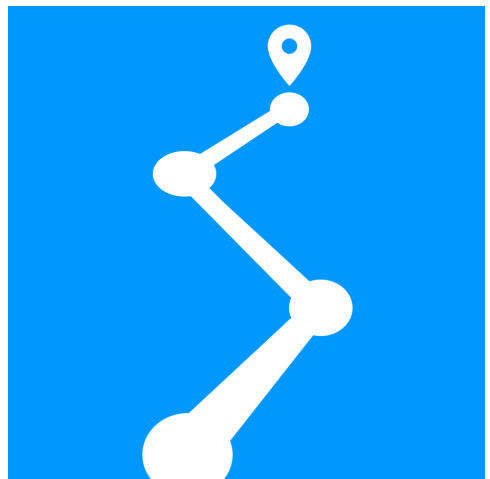
This is the place to proclaim that we do not only share in God's Life when we die, but that we can live in this world as beloved children of God, sharing in God's mission to save this world by transforming it into the Kingdom of God – which is its ultimate destiny.

That is what it ought to mean to “remember” the person who has died. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that we remain connected to the people who have died, for all that our immediate experience of them is severed. This is a different relationship: the writer imagines them as spectators watching a long distance running race, in which we are the competitors and they are cheering us on. We are strengthened by their encouragement, and inspired to keep going by “fixing our eyes on Jesus” (Hebrews 12: 1-2). We live out that ongoing connection with them by actively living a life with God, transformed by the Spirit and engaged in all the struggles to make this world more of the place God intends. This is the place to invite and encourage people to deepen their discipleship of Jesus: to see him more clearly, love him more dearly, and follow him more nearly, day by day.





Discipleship



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