

GROSVENOR ESSAY NO. 6



THINKING THE
NICENE CREED:

Death and Resurrection - New Life in Christ

The Doctrine Committee
of the Scottish Episcopal Church



GROSVENOR ESSAY NO. 6

**Thinking the Nicene Creed:
Death and Resurrection – New Life in Christ**

ISBN 0 905573 87 0

© Doctrine Committee of the Scottish Episcopal Church 2010

Comments or questions on this Essay should be directed to

The General Synod Office
21 Grosvenor Crescent
Edinburgh EH12 5EE
Tel: 0131 225 6357
Email: office@scotland.anglican.org

Scottish Charity No SC015962

Also available in this series:

Grosvenor Essay No. 1 - sketches towards a theology of science. £2.50

Published 2004. ISBN 0 905573 64 1

Grosvenor Essay No. 2 - theology and the power of the image. £3.00

Published 2005. ISBN 0 905573 66 8

Grosvenor Essay No. 3 - the inter-faith encounter. £2.50

Published 2006. ISBN 0 905573 71 4

Grosvenor Essay No. 4 - the shape of our church. £2.50

Published 2007. ISBN 0 905573 78 1

Grosvenor Essay No. 5 – on salvation. £2.50

Published 2008. ISBN 0 905573 83 8

GROSVENOR ESSAY No. 6

Thinking the Nicene Creed: Death and Resurrection – New Life in Christ

Contents

Preface	1
1. Responses to Death in a Post-Christian Culture	4
2. The Scottish Way of Death	12
3. Death in Modern Britain	15
4. Death and Suffering	17
5. Resurrection and Ascension	25
6. The Funeral Liturgy	41
Further Reading	50

Grosvenor Essay No. 6: Thinking the Nicene Creed: Death and Resurrection – New Life in Christ

Preface

In this new series of Grosvenor Essays, the Doctrine Committee of the Episcopal Church will be considering aspects of the Nicene Creed, with particular attention being given to the pastoral understanding and application of the Creed. As with the earlier Essays, we hope that these Essays will be useful both as sources of information, and also as a stimulus to further reflection both for individual church members and congregations.

Credo (from the Latin word *credo* – “I believe”) are short, authorized statements of the substance of belief. The creeds now most familiar to us in the worship of the church developed out of the life of the Christian community, but they have their origins in the ancient theological traditions of Israel, and later the literature of the New Testament. In Deuteronomy 26: 5 – 9, upon inheriting their land, the people are instructed to make a brief statement rehearsing the deeds of the Lord for them in history, beginning with the statement “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor.” In the New Testament there are brief and fragmentary statements of faith (e.g. Mark 8:29; I Corinthians 12: 3; I Timothy 3: 16), as well as the tripartite baptismal statement of Matthew 28: 19. From a very early period in the history of the church, candidates for baptism accepted a short formula of belief which varied from locality to locality.

In the Church’s worship two creeds are commonly used. The Apostles’ Creed is used mainly at Matins and Evensong and at Baptism, and the Nicene at the Eucharist. The form of both took time to develop. So, although the Apostles’ Creed is not quoted in its present form until as late as the eighth century, already by the end of the second century a shorter version was in use for baptism at Rome; hence the name of that shorter version, the Old Roman Creed. The Nicene Creed has likewise a complex history. Although its use in worship appears not to have begun until the fifth century (and not in Rome itself until 1014), its acceptance as an expression of Christian belief dates from much earlier. The first universal Council of the Church in 325 at Nicaea (in modern Turkey) already included most of the first two thirds, while the remainder, including the last part, was accepted at the next council in 381 at Constantinople (modern Istanbul). The tongue-twisting character of the more accurate

designation as the 'Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed' explains why its title was quickly abbreviated to the more familiar 'Nicene.' As, unlike the Apostles' Creed, it was also adopted by Eastern Christendom, this explains why in modern times it has featured as a foundation of Christian unity, as, for example, in the Lambeth Quadrilateral of 1888. In all events, in the Episcopal Church today the Nicene Creed is by far the most common utterance of the substance of our faith as Christians, linking us with the confession of the faith across the centuries. Thus it seems to us to be valuable to pause for a while and offer reflections on some of the central aspects of what we profess to believe in our regular statement in our worship, week by week, of the Nicene Creed.

In this essay we will concentrate specifically on the issues of death and resurrection.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

Our concerns here are, in the first place, pastoral – what it means to utter these words in the context of our experience of death and bereavement, or how we value our own lives in the light of such a profession of faith. As in previous Grosvenor Essays, we take corporate responsibility for the text as a whole, but each member of the Doctrine Committee has contributed a particular reflection on some aspect of the subject, and each contribution has its own, at times provocative, edge. We give some attention to the historical and theological roots of this statement on death and resurrection, but we are also concerned to examine what practical difference it makes in our lives and the experience of what it is to be mortal and human to speak of resurrection, of heaven and the afterlife. Some attention will be given as to how such Christian belief relates to what might be called 'folk theologies' in our contemporary culture in Scotland, and what is distinctive in Scottish culture in questions relating to death and our changing perceptions of the end of our mortal existence.

This new Grosvenor Essay follows on directly from its predecessor, Essay No. 5 – *On Salvation*, specifically on the themes of biblical ideas of

salvation and salvation in the church. As in the earlier Essays, we have avoided the use of footnotes and append an annotated bibliography suggesting further reading and material for thought and discussion.

The Doctrine Committee of the Scottish Episcopal Church:

David Jasper (Convenor and Series Editor)

Gregor Duncan (Co-Editor of Grosvenor Essay No. 6)

Martin Shaw

David Brown

Paul Foster

Clare Lockhart

Duncan MacLaren

George Newlands

Wilson Poon

Elsbeth Davey (Secretary)

1. RESPONSES TO DEATH IN A POST-CHRISTIAN CULTURE

It has become a commonplace to describe Britain as post-Christian. Christianity, it is claimed, has been pushed to the periphery where faith must cling on to such marginal ground as is left to it; perhaps as a private leisure pursuit, a form of alternative therapy, or as an outcrop of a fading cultural establishment.

One sphere of the Christian church's influence which has been slower to succumb to secularization is in its traditional role as midwife at key points of transition in life: birth, marriage, and death. For many people in Great Britain with no regular church commitment, the churches remain the default providers of ceremonies to mark these thresholds.

Even these traditional roles, however, have been steadily eroded since the early 1960s. Regardless of whether or not we think that Britain should be described as 'post-Christian', or even 'secular' (a contested, and far from neutral, term), it is undeniable that the churches no longer hold their former monopoly in these areas. One particularly striking example of this loss of influence is the remarkable growth in the popularity of cremation over burial throughout the twentieth century. Prior to the Second World War, just four per cent of bodies were cremated: today this figure reaches some seventy per cent. The processes of death and mourning have become medicalised and bureaucratized, with the clergy's contact with the bereaved and dying increasingly mediated through doctors and funeral directors, in hospitals and crematoria paid for by the state. For the majority of people the churches are no longer the gatekeepers of the afterlife.

What these trends imply is a population that is increasingly detached from a Christian liturgy and vocabulary which address the issues of death and the afterlife. This raises a question which is the focus of this first section of this essay: how do people respond to death when they lose sight of the traditional beliefs and practices which once made death meaningful? A second question then might follow from this: how might the church make use of the resources of the Creed in the face of these responses?

There are many contemporary examples of what might be termed 'folk responses' to death, which represent a break from the British churches' traditional forms of Christian belief and practice. These include

the recent growth of 'wayside shrines', marking the spot of fatal road accidents or acts of violence. Such memorials seem to have grown up in imitation of the shrines found in the traditionally Catholic and Orthodox countries of the Mediterranean, although there is some evidence of their use among gypsy communities in Britain from the turn of the twentieth century. In their current form, however, they possibly owe much to the growth of tourism and air travel to southern Europe. (It is an irony that increasingly secular people in Britain have opted to import the religious symbols of more overtly religious cultures in order to remember their dead. It raises the possibility that, far from people becoming wholly secular, perhaps the churches in Britain are not 'religious' enough.)

Other popular or 'folk' responses which have been observed include the practice of communicating with the dead, perhaps with the assistance of a medium, or the private memorialization of loved ones through the erection of garden totem poles, or the sponsoring of a tree in a public park. The online social networking site, Facebook, has recently offered to 'memorialize' the profiles of its dead members, rather than simply deleting their accounts. Funeral services themselves have also become secularized, with the growth in agencies providing 'humanist' funerals, and the increasingly bespoke nature of the funeral service in which all kinds of disparate elements may be brought together as a 'tribute' to the dead person. The steady growth in the practice of cremation through the twentieth century, which we have already observed, and the more recent popularity of woodland burial, point to changes in our conception of the body after death, and of place as a site of memory.

Any response to death has to take into consideration certain realities. First, there is a body to be dealt with. Secondly, there is the question of the ongoing life, or spirit, of the deceased, and what has become of them. Thirdly, there is the experience of human grief. And lastly, and particularly in relation to the death of public figures, there is the disruption to the social order caused by death. When we consider how people today respond (or fail to respond) to death, we can analyze their response in terms of these realities.

It is not only popular responses to death which have undergone radical change in recent decades. The church's practice has also changed rapidly. Contemporary innovations, such as the growth of wayside shrines, must be set against the backdrop of a religious culture

which has seen continual development in its responses to death. In other words, the way that the church has dealt with the four 'realities' named above forms a crucial background to shifts in popular attitudes. We need only go back as far as the Reformation to see the kind of ruptures evident in the church's belief and practice in the face of death. The pre-Reformation church took seriously the journey of the spirit after death, and the consequent necessity of prayer for the souls of the departed. This remains the case in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches. By contrast, Protestantism, historically, has forbidden any communion between the living and the dead. In Scotland, for example, the *First Book of Discipline* of 1560 insisted that, "singing of Mass, placebo, and dirge, and all other prayers over or for the dead, are not only superfluous and vain, but also are idolatry, and do repugn to the plain scriptures of God." Burial was to be accompanied by neither singing nor readings, in case these were mistakenly thought to profit the dead; and neither clergy nor their preaching were thought advisable for the same reason. What mattered was that "the dead be committed to the grave, with such gravity and sobriety, as those that are present may seem to fear the judgments of God."

Here we see the Protestant response to death at its most extreme: there is a body to be dealt with, and a God to be feared. There is no place for the spirit to receive attention after death, and little awareness of the psychological needs of the bereaved. Insofar as the mourners are considered at all, it is only to ensure that the death serves as an example to them of the power of sin. In many ways this approach reflects Archbishop Cranmer's in his prayer books of the previous decade: there is little amounting to a burial liturgy, just the sentences, prayers, psalms and readings - and these not necessarily in church. As subsequent revisions took place, there was an increasing tendency to bring the elements of the Order for the Burial of the Dead within the walls of the church, and to refashion a funeral liturgy.

Thus, by the latter half of the nineteenth century there was a growing acknowledgment, in a society increasingly detached from its Christian heritage, that there was more required of the funeral than simply fearing God and disposing of the body. An order for burial which did little to address the question of the ongoing journey of the spirit, and offered little by way of comfort for the bereaved, came to sound increasingly out of place. Perhaps especially for the largely unchurched urban working classes, mourners would hardly be nourished on a threadbare liturgy

which offered little more than hope in a faith of which they knew almost nothing. The 'sentences' which open the Order for the Burial of the Dead in the *Book of Common Prayer* (1662) might have provided comfort to those who believed in the 'Resurrection and the Life'. But without this faith, the words of Job might well have sounded more like the praise of a capricious tyrant: "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

It is instructive to notice briefly how funeral liturgies have developed in response to such changing beliefs and expectations concerning death. We shall give further consideration at the end of this essay to the *Prayer Book* of 1929 in the Scottish Episcopal Church and to liturgical developments against the theological background of the Creed. For now it is sufficient to offer one or two comments of a more pastoral nature: that in comparison with the 1662 Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*, the 1929 book offers a departure from the earlier book's austerity, with its bare focus on the disposal of the corpse. While retaining a focus on the dead person, the 1929 liturgy also extends the sentences to include those with an expressly pastoral focus, as for example: "Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted (Matthew 5: 4)." In addition to 'A prayer for those in sorrow' which is added at the end of a section of entirely new prayers, use is made of consolatory material from scripture and in particular the inclusion of the comforting Psalm 23.

As well as this new emphasis on the pastoral needs of the mourners, the 1929 rite crucially sets the event in the context of a religious service in church. In the seventeenth century rite, Priest and Clerks meet the corpse at the lych-gate (built for just that purpose), and have the option of going into the church, or straight to the grave. (In this rite, it is hardly worth entering the church, as the order provides for merely two readings to be read, prior to reaching the grave.) While the 1929 rite preserves this rubric, it is clear that going straight to the grave would be the 'wrong' choice in terms of the rest of the service. Immediately following the sentences, 'The Service in Church' begins. In addition to readings from scripture there are new responses, prayers, and even provision for Holy Communion on the morning of the burial. This last element points towards the recovery of focus upon the journey of the departed spirit, with the rubric indicating that the *Agnus Dei* should be altered to become a prayer for *them*, not for us: "grant them rest eternal" in place of "grant us your peace." It is not only the church on earth but the whole communion of saints which is brought to the fore in this liturgy.

If a population still reeling from the shock of the First World War were suspicious of talk of heaven and hell, perhaps there was a role for the Order for Burial to stress the efficacy of the church as the appropriate vehicle for conveying the departed into the next life. The nineteenth century revival of Episcopalianism in Scotland was largely effected through the energies of the Oxford Movement, and it is perhaps not surprising that the revised rite of 1929 places great emphasis on, and confidence in, the institutional church. There is evidence of an upturn in churchgoing in Britain in the 1920s which may have supported this emphasis. The rite of 1929, in addition to the inclusion of provision for Holy Communion on the day of burial, also stresses the continuity between the earthly church and the 'mystical body' of Christ in heaven. In one prayer, God is 'the King of Saints', from whom we are led to expect that we will be "strengthened by their fellowship, and aided by their prayers." In this rite, the traffic between the dead and the living is once again two-way, and together both dead and living are united in the one communion of saints, whose earthly representation is to be found in the visible and institutional church.

By the early 1960s, however, this emphasis on the institutional church as the safest pair of hands in the face of death had become increasingly outmoded. This was the decade in which cremation outstripped burial as the preferred mode for dealing with the body, and signalled a turning point in the power of the church to govern the process of dealing with the deceased. Sociologists have used various terms to try to describe aspects of this cultural rift, including the notions of de-institutionalization, increasing individualism, the subjective turn, the quests for self-actualization and authenticity, and the mainstreaming of new forms of therapy. All of these cultural shifts meant that the notion of the efficacy of the institutional church was becoming increasingly implausible. De-institutionalization implies that people have become mistrustful of institutions, no longer finding themselves able to 'believe in' what the institution represents, but rather 'seeing through' the hidden power dynamics, vested interests, and hierarchies within it. It implies that people despise the attempts of the institution to impose conformity and control upon its members, at the expense of being free to be truly themselves. In this context what matters most is individual subjective experience rather than dutiful adherence to church norms. To put it bluntly, the processes of de-institutionalization since the early 1960s have, for the larger part of the British population, rendered the churches irrelevant.

The 1987 Scottish Episcopal Funeral Rites can be understood as a response to this changing context. The very opening words of the introduction, for example, affirm the particularities of individual experience over the potentially monolithic nature of a set liturgy: "The various rites set out in this book are not designed to be followed slavishly. Every death is different." The subjective experience of the mourners is emphasized: "Attention must be paid to the particular needs of the mourners at that death." A burden is placed upon the 'pastor' (note the designation) to conduct the funeral well: "Such words as are printed here are no substitute for the pastor's own use of sensitivity and imagination." Bereavement is understood as an 'opportunity' for pastoral care at several levels. Feelings must precede theology: "The truth of the human feelings must be acknowledged in order that the theological truth can become an effective communication."

The liturgy itself is thus set within a pastoral and therapeutic context. It begins with prayers that may be used with the relatives at the time of bereavement and like the 1929 rite, 1987 offers an extended palette of comforting sentences. Unusually, provision is made both for a sermon and a Eucharist within the funeral service itself, hinting at the possibility of a return to the Requiem Mass. The intercessions begin with a 'Prayer for the Mourners'. The words at the committal have been softened. No longer is it said that "Man that is born of woman hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery," but rather, the service skips forward to the more pastorally-sensitive words of committal, "in sure and certain hope of resurrection to eternal life."

These newer pastoral emphases within the 1987 Funeral Rites have been paralleled in the liturgies of other church traditions. Yet still it seems to be the case that people today would often rather create their own, bespoke, funeral service or act of commemoration, than reach for the resources of the churches. Why is this? One explanation is that the recent tendency to treat the funeral as a 'pastoral opportunity' is essentially to miss the point. It is sometimes observed that, while clergy and funeral directors too often (and actually against the emphasis of the 1987 rite as we try to make clear towards the end of our essay) think that the funeral is for the mourners, the mourners themselves think that the funeral is for the *deceased*. Despite the subjective turn of culture in the 1960s, mourners at a funeral seem to know instinctively that they are not there to focus upon their own feelings of grief, but to concentrate on the life of the person they have loved and to whom they are now saying

goodbye. The pastoral gymnastics of the clergy, and the unctuous hush beloved of funeral directors, are often features of the funeral which have to be tolerated by the mourners as they seek to get on with the task of saying farewell to their dead.

Another explanation for the growth in 'bespoke' responses to death places this in the wider context of consumer culture. One of the dominant features in a consumer culture is the way in which identities are constructed through choice, particularly the choice of what to buy. In a post-Christian society, the ongoing identity of the deceased person can no longer be found in some future eschatological hope, but must be retrospectively constructed in the memories of the living. This retrospective construction of identity is achieved by means of the 'tailor-made' response to death where, for example, the corpse disappears behind the crematorium curtains to the tune of the deceased person's favourite song, or the ashes are scattered at a significant site which in some way sums up some aspect of the dead person. Within this context, the traditional funeral in church is merely one identity marker among many which can be chosen or passed over at will.

How can the church respond to this increasingly deregulated marketplace, where people can freely choose a woodland burial conducted by a humanist celebrant over a religious service in church or crematorium? There are no easy answers, but there are resources within the Christian tradition which we should not lose sight of. One of these is the Creed.

One of the challenges that recently-bereaved people face is the challenge of constructing, often in less than a week, and sometimes with no previous experience, a ritual event that will be emotionally satisfying, intellectually meaningful, and that will somehow capture the uniqueness of the dead person. Not surprisingly, the result is often awash with sentiment. Perhaps, though, this does not matter, and clergy who cringe at hearing yet another rendition of 'My Way', or who balk at the headstone carved with the word 'Dad', need to accept that the majority of people will not want to wave farewell to their loved ones in the sonorous tones of the *Book of Common Prayer*. More seriously, however, sentimentality may sometimes be masking a nagging sense of superficiality - the unbearable lightness of being. What the church can offer, in humility, is a larger theological perspective which places death in the context of resurrection and judgement, and the promise of a new heaven and a new earth. There

is a whole world that beckons, larger in experience and perhaps deeper than the pencil jottings on the back of the envelope, from which mourners seek to construct a service. In saying farewell to their loved ones, they need not start from scratch.

The Creed's wider theological frame is also a corporate possession. Whether or not the bereaved believe in these things, the Creed at least lets them know that there are others around the world, and down the centuries, who have done and still do. The Creed is emphatically a statement of what 'we' believe. It is not a personal credo. It expresses belief in 'one holy catholic and apostolic church' into which we are (or may be) baptised. And those who die belong to the 'life of the world to come'. This emphasis on what 'we' believe, and on the communion of saints to which we belong, frees the act of commemorating the dead from the frantic quest to construct a flimsy network of memory kept alive only by those who knew the person. Once again, the Creed places our loved ones in a larger and more meaningful context.

Furthermore, while the Creed lacks an explicit anthropology (beyond naming our sins and implying our need of salvation) it clearly states that our ultimate identity is as subjects in the kingdom that will have no end. It frees us from the need to construct a retrospective identity, and instead offers the promise of human fulfilment in a resurrection body as part of the new order. In short, then, against modern tendencies towards secularization, de-institutionalization and subjectivity, and consumer approaches to commemorating the dead, the Creed speaks to us from a historical distance, offering a measure of objectivity which has the potential to relieve us of our contemporary preoccupations. No doubt the world into which the Creed was born suffered from its own peculiar idolatries; but these were different from ours today, and to that extent the Creed is even now able to breathe crisp, fresh air through our own nervous compulsions and mawkish sentimentality. The Creed does not offer a simple remedy to woo an increasingly secular, privatised world; but in the face of rapid and sometimes ill-considered change in our responses to death, it does just what it is supposed to do – hold us to some basic truths about God, and invite us to inhabit a larger world, both in this life and in the life of the world to come.

2. THE SCOTTISH WAY OF DEATH

Is 'death' a construct? It would appear to be the case when we examine the variety of cultural responses to the universal fate and destiny of humanity. Thus the various discourses on death in history and anthropology include both affirmation and denial in the management of death; embracement or avoidance of its reality; varying means for the disposal of the dead, and funerary rites and customs which are determined and shaped by a vast spectrum of beliefs and convictions about the afterlife. As Christians in Scotland in Europe at the beginning of the twenty first century, what are the factors and strands of tradition and belief that have determined or influenced our paradigm of death? Indeed, in a post-modern, pluralist British society is it possible to discern a distinctively 'Scottish' way of death?

*I that in heill wes and gladness
Am trublit now with grete seikness
And feblit with infermite:
Timor mortis conturbat me. (The fear of death disquiets me)*

*Sen fir the deide remeide is none,
Best is that we for dede dispone
Eftir our deide that lif may we:
Timor mortis conturbat me.*

The words of the mediaeval priest and poet William Dunbar offer an insight into a pre-reformation Scottish society whose view of death and mortality was held in common with the rest of Christendom in Europe. The intellectual and spiritual lives of the people of his time were shaped and influenced by the consciousness of death and the question of the afterlife. High infant mortality, a life expectancy foreshortened by plague and other sickness, the constant toll of death by famine and the hazards of war, all ensured that death was the constant companion of the mediaeval Christian. If 'Keep death daily before your eyes' was the precept of Saint Benedict, there was not far to look.

Philippe Ariès in *The Hour of our Death* describes the way of death in medieval Europe. He notes a paradigm shift, a transition from the Roman cultural understanding of the 'sting' of death as primarily weakening the community, to a medieval focus on personal anxiety and preoccupation with death, 'my death'. Ariès attributes this shift to the rise

of an individual consciousness in the thirteenth century. In an age where there was almost no notion of domestic privacy or personal space birth and death were inevitably visible and public.

A 'good death' for the Christian meant dying in a state of grace fortified by the rites of Holy Mother Church after a preparation which included the disposal of earthly goods, aural confession and viaticum, and in the case of persons of status, the preservation of 'last words' to friends and neighbours - the 'deathbed scene' pictured in so many woodcuts and engravings. There was too an acceptance of death as an inevitable event for which the Christian must prepare. It was the 'sudden and unprepared death' that was considered to be catastrophic, and those who died unshriven of mortal sin, the unbaptised, the excommunicate or those who had 'laid violent hands upon themselves' were excluded from the funeral rites of the church and therefore from the assurance of a place in heaven.

In the texts of the funeral rites, we find an approach to the 'meaning' of death for the medieval Christian. The church's view of the doctrine of the Communion of saints and the whereabouts of the soul in the intermediate time before the general resurrection of the dead had become more explicit over the centuries. The reverent agnosticism of the early Christian centuries had given way to the detailed Baedeker of Dante's *Purgatorio*.

The Catholic funeral liturgy focussed on the necessity of prayer to God for mercy on the soul of the dead person and for the admonition of the mourners. Since the supreme common prayer of the church was the Mass, it was the saying of Requiem Masses which would, above all, aid the soul. The concept of death as 'journey' from this life to the next is expressed movingly in the funeral liturgies of the time.

Lord Jesu Christ, King of eternal glory
deliver the souls of all the faithful departed from every
bond of sin....
Deliver them from the lion's mouth
That hell devour them not,
but let the holy standard bearer Saint Michael bring them
into the holy light.

In sum, the concept of death which Ariès describes may be characterised as an 'integrated' death. The ritual behaviour, the words

said and the customs adhered to are a direct and vital expression of the self understanding of a strong and coherent society with a well defined funeral structure and a common belief system. It is the dying person who is the primary agent in his own death, taking leave of his family and friends fortified by the rites of Holy Church with a confident knowledge both of what lies beyond the grave and the measures required to assure him or her of future salvation.

When we look back from a twenty first century perspective on the medieval funerary traditions, the universal depiction of the *danse macabre*, the teachings of the church on the pains of hell and purgatory, the books on the Christian art of dying, known as *Ars Moriendi*, or the liturgical apparatus of requiem and chantry, we can certainly recognise and relate to the desire to ritualise and find meaning in the experience of the end which is common to all humanity. Yet despite our common Christian tradition can we really connect, either with the intensity of the medieval embrace of the reality of death or their preoccupation with the spiritual bureaucracy attendant on the afterlife?

By the time of the Reformation, doctrinal considerations played a part in the restructuring of certain features of this paradigm for the Presbyterian believer especially in the area of funeral rites. The theology of the Reformation severed the psychological link between the living and departed by abolishing the doctrine and place of purgatory and forbidding the invocation of the saints. In the church's iconography, the empty niches of the statues of the saints were replaced by florid memorials to the lives of the rich and powerful.

Of course the practice of catholic rites, though officially forbidden, would persist in remote areas. After the influx of Irish migrant workers in the nineteenth century and the repeal of anti-catholic legislation, there were two or perhaps three visible strands of funerary practice and belief in Scotland. But what of the other characteristics of the paradigm?

3. DEATH IN MODERN BRITAIN

In contrast to the confidently 'integrated' view of death in the medieval world described by Ariès, the discourse on death in our own post Christian culture is both distorted and fragmented as to its meaning. By the late twentieth century, death had largely become a hidden or invisible event for most people. A pattern of dying had emerged in which the norm was as one writer bluntly put it: "The average person in Britain dies alone, in a hospital bed." During the decades after the Second World War, ordinary people increasingly became shielded from the physical reality of death and dying.

The responsibility for the management of dying shifted from relatives and friends to the medical and nursing professions. The rites around the disposal of the dead were entrusted into the hands of funeral directors who often removed the body of the deceased before the family had even had a chance to see it. The advent of municipal cemeteries outside the old limited community boundaries and the growth of cremation as a means of disposal, as we have seen, meant that the funeral rites for the urban dead now took place outwith walking distance for many mourners. As the old community boundaries broke down, the death of a neighbour became of less significance. Without the sustaining mechanisms of public mourning rituals and kinship networks, death as an event became increasingly privatised and hidden.

Furthermore, as the influence of the church on public attitudes and beliefs has declined, so the ideal of a good death has changed. Several factors have influenced this change. The Hospice movement has brought a holistic and empowering approach to the experience of dying. The good death is now a peaceful and relatively pain free death.

With the spread of agnosticism together with weak or conflicting Christian views on the afterlife, the emotional focus for our experience of death has largely in our own time shifted from a preoccupation with 'my' death to 'your' death or 'his/her' death. In Shakespeare's words, "Grief fills the room up of my absent child." (*King John*). It is the experience of bereavement which becomes the visible defining response to death in contemporary society. The normal human experience of grief has become pathologised. It is almost expected that after a death the survivors will need professional bereavement support from a counsellor or their doctor.

In the organisation of funeral rites there is often felt dissatisfaction with and disconnection from the official liturgies of the church, while in the public discourse on death, the decriminalisation of formerly liminal ways of death like suicide and abortion, and the gradual shift from moral theology to ethics has opened the way to free public debate on euthanasia and assisted suicide

This brief overview of the contemporary management of death in Britain has not touched on the variants of minority cultures or subsets of Scottish culture where the older approach to funerals may still be observed, for example, in the Highlands and Islands. But it may serve to illustrate the challenge presented to the Christian church as it seeks to proclaim the vital hope of life beyond death to contemporary Scottish society.

4. DEATH AND SUFFERING

We now turn to consider, from a modern scientific perspective, a fundamental theological question: is death to be understood as built into the way things are from the beginning, or as some kind of intrusion spoiling God's good work?

Scientific input to a theology of death

Irrespective of what we think of 'natural theology' – the attempt to deduce knowledge of God from 'nature' without input from 'special revelation' – it is clearly legitimate, even important, to take cognizance of scientific advances in our theologising. In the area of theological thinking about death, there is a wealth of scientific advances that have clear theological implications, but which appears to be virtually unknown to religious thinkers. In a nutshell, these advances together tell us in no uncertain terms that *death appears to be built into life as we know it at all levels*, from unicellular organisms to complex, multicellular beings like ourselves. Indeed, there is increasing evidence pointing to the conclusion that death was built in from the very beginning – in the simplest forms of organisms at the dawn of life itself.

In more detail, we are talking about two kinds of 'built in death'. First, it appears that there really is such a thing as 'natural life span' at all levels of life. Secondly, and perhaps even more amazingly, cells of all kinds seem to have the ability to 'commit suicide' before their 'natural life span' is up, and that such 'cell suicide' is even a necessary part of life.

Take first the idea of a 'natural life span'. It has been known for some time that the hearts of mammals of all kinds go through a little under one billion beats from birth to death. By 'death' we mean death from 'old age', rather than from predation or mishap. There is some variation: the hearts of (modern) *homo sapiens* seem to be able to sustain some two billion beats over an expected life span of some eighty years. But the narrow range over which the total number of heart beats varies compared to the scale of body weight and life expectancy covered is impressive: the data spans at least from the tiny humble hamster to enormous whales. Hamsters expect to live less than two years, but their hearts go at some five hundred beats per minute. Whales, however, use up their 'heart beat quota' over thirty years (at a rate of about twenty beats per minute). Statistics such as these suggest at least that the heart

muscle of mammals has a built in life time. It turns out that something similar holds for other groups of animals, although the variation is bigger once we stray outside mammals. Nevertheless, a 'pump' of finite 'design life' seems to be built in.

Heart muscles are, like everything else in the living world, made of cells. Mark Azbel from Tel Aviv University wondered some time ago (in 1994) whether the heart beat statistics pointed to something deeper about the workings of cells in general. His calculations suggest that this may indeed be so: it appears that cells of all kinds (and not just heart muscle cells) may accumulate damage as they use oxygen to 'burn' food and provide energy for their activities.

Deeper understanding of 'natural life span' comes from studying the basic building blocks of life, individual cells. Before progressing further, however, we need to understand some technical points. There are two kinds of cells in the living world, eukaryotes and prokaryotes. The former category includes all (multicellular) animals and plants, but also single-celled organisms such as various kinds of amoeba. In such eukaryotic cells, the genetic material, the DNA, is organised into 'chromosomes', which are contained inside a membranous 'sac' known as the 'nucleus'. The nucleus itself then sits inside a bigger 'sac', which defines the cell itself. In contrast, prokaryotes lack nuclei. All bacteria are prokaryotes. Their DNA floats around in the cell. Prokaryotes are much more primitive. Indeed, there is an emerging consensus that eukaryotes, our kind of cells, evolved from a number of prokaryotes experimenting with living together (a form of 'symbiosis'). Indeed, bits inside eukaryotes under the microscope still look like bacteria! Now we can get back to 'natural life span'. It turns out that eukaryotic chromosomes have 'age rulers' attached at the ends, known as 'telomeres'. These repetitive stretches of DNA are shortened each time a cell divides, so that it can only divide a finite number of times before the telomere is 'used up' and the cell reaches the end of the road. Finite life time is built in to the kind of cells we are made of!

Interestingly, bacterial DNA does not have telomeres. So for many years it was thought that these primitive life forms are 'immortal'. In other words, it was believed that a bacterium can, in principle, carry on dividing for ever if favourable environmental conditions persist. Recently it has been found, however, that the older cells – those that have divided more times – divide more slowly. In other words – they age! Their data suggest

that after about one hundred divisions or so, an *E. coli* bacterium will not be able to divide any more. Scientists have also managed to locate a 'rubbish dump' in the bacterial cell, where 'waste' appeared to accumulate from one division to the next. Presumably when the 'dump' gets too full, the bacterium also reaches the end of the road. This means that 'natural life span' is ubiquitous over *both* kinds of cells found throughout the biosphere on earth.

It is not yet completely clear how the 'natural life span' of single cells is related to the evidence from heart beat rates suggesting a 'natural life span' for multicellular organisms like us. But what is clear is that the idea of 'natural life span' is ubiquitously 'written in' at all levels of life on earth.

We turn now to the subject of 'cell suicide'. It has been known for some time that eukaryotes (this is, our cells) have the ability to 'self destruct' under certain conditions. The process is an impressive one under the microscope – a cell can destroy itself (often by persuading its neighbour to 'eat it up') in the space of a few short hours if they so choose. In other words, they can opt to commit suicide before their 'telomere-allotted' time is up. Indeed, it appears that 'self destruct' in many instances may be the 'default' option. To avoid suicide, a cell needs to receive the correct signals from its neighbours and from its physical environment. If this does not happen, then the cell goes into what is known as 'programme cell death' (PCD). It is easy to see that PCD is extremely important in the development of embryos. For instance, we all started in our mothers' wombs with webbed fingers and toes. The cells in the web underwent PCD at some stage while we were still *in utero*, leaving us with the un-webbed digits that we all possess. On the odd occasion when PCD goes wrong, babies are born with webbed hands or feet. The billions of connections that make up each of our unique brains are also intimately connected to PCD. It appears that many connections are made, but only the 'useful' ones survive PCD. It is clear that PCD is very much part of the 'creation of life', allowing great flexibility over evolutionary time scales in generating a whole variety of forms.

Interestingly, the study of PCD is linked to another fascinating area of biology – the evolution of altruism. The PCD of certain cells in a multicellular organism benefit the whole organism (e.g. giving me independent digits rather than webbed fingers) at the expense of the cells themselves. The theoretical basis for a Darwinian evolutionary

explanation of the evolution of such 'cellular altruism' may not turn out to be so very different from explaining why some meerkats give up having their own babies to nurse the babies of their relatives.

It has been thought for a long time that only the cells in complex, multicellular organisms can undergo PCD, since this is essentially a 'social trait' (cells go into PCD if they receive certain signals from their neighbours). But Jean Claude Ameisen, working in Paris, discovered a few years ago that even single-celled eukaryotes can undergo PCD. Since then, certain phenomena already well known in bacteria (prokaryotes) are now recognised as at least related to PCD in eukaryotes.

These recent advances apart, one hundred and fifty years after the publication of the *Origin of Species*, we must not forget also that Darwinian evolution depends on the 'struggle for existence'. Organisms give rise to more progeny than the environment can support, so that the 'fittest' variants survive. Death is an essential part of this process.

Such scientific findings clearly need to be taken into account when we come to think about a theology of death. On a literal interpretation of Genesis 3, we could say that all of this simply reflects the sentence of death imposed by God on Adam and Eve and the whole of creation. By this interpretation, what we have described here might just be seen as the 'groaning' of a fallen creation mentioned by St. Paul in Romans 8: 22. In other words, the original creation before some historical 'fall' could function entirely without death of any kind. But the scientific findings reported above suggest to us that if such a world existed, its physical workings would have had to be totally different from our current world. Death in our world is simply 'built in' to the system – it is not an 'optional extra'.

But other interpretations are possible. Since reasoning about God from nature is traditionally part of 'natural theology', we may start from the key natural theological text in Romans, where Paul tells us that "ever since the creation of the world [God's] eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made." (Romans 1: 20). It is significant that Paul should single out God's *power* as the part of divine nature most on display from creation. It is easy to interpret 'power' here quite conventionally – the word is so magnificently great that God must be very powerful, much

more powerful than any earthly ruler or scientist. But we must remember that Paul is the New Testament theologian of power *par excellence*, and he tells us that Jesus had completely overturned the whole human concept of power. Indeed, in Paul's 'theology of the cross', God's power is made perfect in weakness. (I Corinthians 1). So, if indeed we think the natural world should manifest the power of the God who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who died on the cross, then perhaps we may expect a very different kind of power being made manifest from the world's understanding of 'power'. And so, in this light, perhaps we should not be surprised to discover that 'death' is built into creation at all levels. In particular, we should not be at all surprised to see that death plays an essential and creative role in fundamental biological processes – from PCD sculpturing embryonic forms to the 'struggle for existence' giving rise to new species. Paul, we might suggest, gives us licence to think that the God we worship quite characteristically works *through* (and not *round*) the apparent weakness of death to bring life.

This line of thinking can be developed much further. On the widest canvas, it relates to the long-standing debate as to whether the incarnation would have taken place without human sin. A long line of Christian theologians stretching back to St. Anselm and before would answer this in the negative. The incarnation, indeed, is 'designed' specifically to 'solve' the 'problem of sin' and so without the problem, the solution would not have been necessary. This 'majority verdict' has always been disputed by what is admittedly a minority opinion, which nevertheless had influential support, for example, from St. Irenaeus. This 'minority verdict' suggests that the incarnation is fundamentally 'designed' to bring embodied humanity into the godhead and so even without sin, the Word would have still become flesh and dwelt among us.

The interesting question then arises – would this hypothetical enfleshed Word in a world *without sin* have died? We suggest an affirmative response to this. This hypothetical enfleshed Word would not, perhaps, have died a horrible, violent death. But he (or she) would still have died since, as I have argued, death is simply 'built in' to this 'first' creation, and not the result of some punishment. Death would then still be the gateway where by our hypothetical incarnate second person of the Trinity acquires a glorified body, ascends into heaven, thus taking embodied humanity along to be seated at the right hand of the Father. The glorified Word would still be the first fruit of a new, 'second' creation, where, indeed, there would be no death.

It can even be suggested that there is some biblical support for this line of speculative thought. Most of the Old Testament (with Genesis 3 being an exception) knows of the 'good death'. After a 'natural life span' of three score years and ten, one would be gathered to one's fathers. The 'happy ending' of Job is a *locus classicus* on this theme: "After this lived Job an hundred and forty years, and saw his sons, and his sons' sons, even four generations. *So Job died, being old and full of days.*" (Job 42: 16-17). The point is that this is a *happy* ending. So it is perhaps not so strange to think that in a hypothetical sinless world, the Incarnate Word could also die 'old and full of days', and then be raised to new life with a glorified body and ascend to heaven.

'He suffered death and was buried'

Thus, if death is built in from the beginning and not intruded as a punishment, might it be the fear of death rather than death itself that is the locus of human sin?

So we now return to the words of the Creed and their affirmation of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. W. H. Auden writes in his comments on his long work *The Age of Anxiety*, which he dedicated to John Betjeman.

The basic human problem is man's anxiety in time ... his present anxiety over himself in relation to his past and his parents (Sigmund Freud), his present anxiety over himself in relation to his future and his neighbours (Karl Marx), his present anxiety over himself in relation to eternity and God (Søren Kierkegaard).

We live at a time in which youth and youthful looks are worshipped, fearful of death and forgetful of its necessity in our experience of what it is to be human before God. The hunt for some cosmetic, some surgical process to stave off the ageing process may be an indication of a profound underlying cultural fear of death. Evident and gradually deepening lines on the face may produce sadness over lost youth and lost looks. Even with skilful applications of lotions and creams, the lines tell the tale of the ever creeping inevitability of decay and death. Leoš Janáček's troubling opera: *The Makropulos Affair* written between 1923 and 1925, is a retelling of a play by Karel Čapek. The principal female, Emilia Marty, is over three hundred years old as a result of having taken a

secret elixir while a young girl. Withdrawn in personality, cold in temperament and, as it were, sucked dry of hope, she realises that death is utterly essential. Her longing for death is not for escape from a prolonged life that has become tedious, but rather to experience a dying and death as part of the very necessity of what it is to be human. Emilia has denied herself the fear of death as a natural aspect of the human psyche. All too often our pastoral practice, if not the proper tradition of Christian theology, seems to offer a confused message as to whether death is an intrusion which must be opposed by a spiritual defiance or something to be accepted and used. Neither of these positions, however, finally abnegate the effect of the fear of death. After all, acceptance of death is as much as anything a victory over the 'sting' of death which acknowledges the deep presence of fear. Likewise even a bold and defiant refusal to accept death seems to assume that there is an inner fear which must be faced down.

In the letters of the New Testament, there are variable embryonic signs of an evolution in the articulation of meanings of life and the meanings of death. For example, the word 'heaven' is used for an experience of complete union with the Divine beyond death, whereas the word 'paradise' might be used to suggest a growing awareness beyond death of 'movement' towards that union. Of course, theological adjustment had to be made in the early years of the church. One of the initial expectations was that at the end of the apostolic age, there would be the entering-in, quite literally, of the New Age. When Christians then began to die, apparently before the arrival of this age, some careful theological response had to be formulated. Yet the development of the Western Christian doctrine of Redemption did not become crystallised until the Middle Ages. In the face of massive social dysfunction, poverty and disease that could claim whole ethnic groups in one pandemic, it is not surprising that the hope for another reality beyond the all-too-proximate experience of death would have particular prominence. The human imagination was stimulated to create fantasies of the 'beyond'. In the first millennium, depending on the varieties of cultural and political upheaval, including the experience of religious persecutions, the nature of life beyond death was described with varying degrees of urgency.

Searingly painful beyond any description though Jesus' crucifixion was, there is also that palpable agony which was experienced before the crucifixion in the Garden of Gethsemane, described by the synoptic gospels: an agony that has such intensity that Jesus not only sweated,

but he bled. This abandonment by God is the greatest Christian paradox of all, as it is also described as the ultimate love of God. At the very least, any intent reader of this episode in the Passion narrative can realise that God has descended to the very depths of ultimate human anxiety and fear, including the primeval fear of death. Although there is no such description in St. John's Gospel, it can be argued that the whole of that gospel assumes the constant sense of God's agony in Christ and the complete non-response of darkness to the Word surely arises from a deep and acknowledged dread of oblivion.

In I John 4: 18 there is the arresting image of 'perfect love casting out fear'. Simone Weil, the French philosopher, justice activist and mystic, was, as far as any biographical detail is concerned, not afraid of death, or so it would seem. She died in Kent at the age of thirty four, starving herself, despite suffering from tuberculosis, out of a determination to identify with French Resistance activists who were suffering deeply in France in 1943. However, in the collection of essays published as *Waiting on God*, she envisions God in the humanity of Jesus being at the heart of the darkest and most distant place in the universe. No matter what depth of distance, abandonment, rejection, or alienation that can be experienced by a human being, even to death itself, God has already been there. There is no fear, no gripping anxiety, perhaps even no temptation to cowardice, that God has not already experienced. How Weil could have entered into this profound reflection without herself experiencing the ravages of fear and anxiety, is difficult to imagine.

Thus, the blunt statement, 'He suffered death and was buried' cannot be otherwise understood except as true suffering: for it is only in such bluntness that the faithful can touch the hem of the garment of the God who suffers with those that journey through the dark and unlit corridor of the fear of death. And in the life of God we are led to a truth that is confronted and that will set us free, as well as generate light.

Having considered something of the cultural, scientific and existential aspects of death, we turn now to look at the scriptural material on both death and resurrection.

5. RESURRECTION AND ASCENSION

'On the third day he rose again from the dead'

Raisings from the dead were by no means unheard of in the ancient world and this tradition continued in the resurrections of saints in the Christian world. The modern agnostic might then reflect that definitions of death were much more imprecise in past ages, and resuscitations of people who had fainted were, then as now, not uncommon.

Yet the resurrection of Jesus Christ is not for Christians on this plane. He was known to them in the breaking of bread. Faith is against the appearance of things, a generous gift which need not be, but yet is. Resurrection means life before death, as eternal life is often said to begin with baptism and to go on for ever. Resurrection suggests a continuance through the grace of God between this life and God's future as a loving future for all creation. Resurrection is the sign and seal of the Christian hope.

The Hope of Hospitality

Hospitality is not always evident in church and society. Yet the hope of hospitality as promise, as the shape of God's intended future, has been and continues to be a powerful instrument for encouraging hospitality in difficult circumstances. Reflection upon possible futures, in optimistic anticipation, in trepidation, in trust, in resignation, does not always occur in a religious context. But still it is an activity described and assessed as centrally important in major world religions. God is the source and the object of hope, of a positive future for the created order. Prophets are seen as sources of hope and their return in various forms is anticipated as the expected fulfilment of hope. The transformation of the present world order, of the religious community, and of the self, as a physical or spiritual entity or both, as part of this process, is the content of hope. How this transformation is to be achieved is variously envisaged, in the cave paintings of neolithic times and in post-modern images of virtual reality. Hope is the antidote to that despair which is such a widespread and damaging aspect of human life. This transformation may be encouraged by appropriately empathic human activity, from human sacrifice to psychotherapy.

The ancient Mediterranean world produced a huge variety of reflections on hope, sacred and secular, from Pindar to Cicero and beyond through the Church Fathers. Plato reflected on the twin aspects of objective hope and subjective expectation in human reflection on existence, reflection which is essential to give us something to live for. Hope is associated with love, for it is drawn towards the good and the beautiful. In a religious context hope may be sustained by the promise of eternal life.

Hope in the Hebrew Bible and, following this tradition, in the New Testament, is centred upon God and his promise for the future of his people. In the Psalms a secure hope is based on God alone: any other basis is a false security. In the New Testament, especially in the Pauline writings, there is patient trust in God, in the expectation of the unfolding of God's future. In I Corinthians 13, hope is bound up with faith and love. The resurrection of Jesus Christ becomes the cornerstone of hope. The New Testament is everywhere coloured by the overarching hope, in eschatological expectation, of the coming of the Kingdom. This foundation of hope on the presence of God, past, present and to come, is taken up in the Fathers and in the theologies of the medieval, Reformation and modern periods, re-shaped according to the cultural imagination of the period (classically in the tradition of the three theological virtues of faith, hope and love). St. Augustine reflects the dialectic between hope and memory. For Aquinas, hope is not simply the fruit of experience but hope in God is a learned habit of will. Not to hope is sinful. Luther and Calvin both interpret the gospel as promise, though this promise is of course firmly based on past and present action by God.

Notions of eschatological hope tended to be replaced in modern Western thought by ideas of progress and evolution. There is a unique amalgam of eschatological hope, apocalyptic imagery and Enlightenment progress in the thought of Karl Marx, whose work was to be taken up by the mid twentieth century in thinkers who in turn inspired a rediscovery in Christian theology of the importance of hope and a reorientation towards the future. The turn to eschatology, and the thought of the determination of the present by the future, continues to be developed by the theologians. For Luther hope was basically individual hope. In the twentieth century the Tübingen theologian Jürgen Moltmann stresses the social and political dimensions of hope, providing an important stimulus for a theology of liberation or emancipation, and for a new turn to the future as a focus for theology. This continues to be developed as the

liberation of the oppressed through the freedom of the gospel and a theology of the Holy Spirit understands the future as a future of Christlikeness.

Hope has objective as well as subjective dimensions. The future of the physical universe is relevant to *one* strand of the complex thread of Christian hope. Exploration of divine action in relation to human life through the natural sciences from cosmology to neuroscience is seminal to grounds for hope. Hope is more than wishful thinking or blind optimism despite unpleasant facts. It is the hope of love, of corporate participation in the life of God, of the realisation of the transformative dream of divine hospitality

The delivery of hope

If there were no grounds for hope, it would be irresponsible to explore the hospitality of God. There are grounds. Despite the existence of 'texts of terror' in the Bible, God is himself hospitable in large areas of scripture and the tradition, and the incarnation of God is at its very centre: God has given himself away for others. The sense of the presence of God in the context of worship continues to provide a vital dimension to human response in engaged discipleship. Furthermore, apart from the sense of hospitality in all the major world religions, there is also a wide stream of well documented secular and humanist thought which makes a valuable contribution to human reflection on the secular world.

Despite negative developments in the global economy, the massive growth of humanitarian organisations, often based on religious conviction, is a testimony to the hope of hospitality. Even governments, though they still operate predominantly by 'national interest,' have at least become increasingly reluctant to espouse openly repressive or discriminatory policies. It may take a very long time for rhetoric to be matched by action, but the development of a culture of hospitality may contribute significantly towards this.

Resurrection as deliverance

Nowhere is the impulse towards co-operation more deeply urgent to the aspiration of an hospitable society than in issues of race and ethnic identity, a point brilliantly characterised by Barack Obama in his March 2008 campaign speech:

This is where we are right now. It's a racial stalemate we've been stuck in for years. Contrary to the claims of some of my critics, black and white, I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather who survived a Depression to serve in Patton's Army during World War II and a white grandmother who worked on a bomber assembly line at Fort Leavenworth while he was overseas.I've gone to some of the best schools in America and lived in one of the world's poorest nations. I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slave-owners - an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters....

But race is an issue that I believe this nation cannot afford to ignore right now I have asserted a firm conviction - a conviction rooted in my faith in God and my faith in the American people - that working together we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds, and that in fact we have no choice if we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union.... But what we know - what we have seen - is that America can change. That is the true genius of this nation. What we have already achieved gives us hope - the audacity to hope - for what we can and must achieve tomorrow.

Advocacy is necessary and dreams must be dreamed to provide inspiration. But advocacy alone is not enough. We have seen that hospitality also has economic dimensions. It reaches to the heart of the gap between rich and poor. It involves the fair and equitable treatment of workers. It touches areas of business ethics rarely mentioned by religions, yet germane to any vision of actualised response to the hospitality of God. It means just and transparent employment practices, not least in religious bodies themselves. It means the actual rather than the notional implementation of codes of business conduct, beyond the minimum of what corporate lawyers think we can get away with. In a globalized world it has consequences for the use of raw materials, energy resources, agriculture and all the basics that make the difference between a viable standard of living and destitution. All of this, we may say, is pie in the sky with a vengeance in the real world. Yet it is no less than what God expects of us. To begin to make a Christian contribution here requires religious leaders who are taken seriously in the cathedrals of business as well as in the cloistered cultures of their churches – not an easy task.

It would clearly be impossible and inappropriate for Christian theologians to attempt an encyclopaedia of all the detailed dimensions of society in which a Christian view of hospitality may make a decisive difference. Different readers will themselves be able to think of hospitality in relation to areas of which they have specialist knowledge. Here we can only indicate the nature of the Christian imperative and illustrate it within a limited range of examples.

How far do considerations of profit inevitably erode qualities of compassion in a fiercely competitive world? The delivery of a fair and justly shared world society is a responsibility which involves us all – most of all nations with most access to the levers of economic privilege. It equally involves poor nations which often operate micro-tyrannies at the expense of their own people. At the same time, history appears to have shown that economics alone will never be enough - neither Marxist nor neo-conservative economic blueprints have been genuine gateways to hospitality.

The universe, it might be said, is inhospitable. We are accustomed to confine discussion of the resurrection hope to the human. Yet although all our language and thought is entirely a product of our situatedness at a particular time and in a particular part of the universe, we can at least imagine complexities that operate well outside our local consciousness and time frames. But we may also go beyond the realms of the imagination. Christianity, in common with the other major religions, is focussed on the unique importance of human beings, but human beings within the physical universe. The God who was incarnate in Jesus Christ is deeply concerned for human beings. God encourages that hospitality which creates sympathy and relationality, which works to dissolve the enormous burdens of physical harm and mental stress and anxiety which affect so many generations of humanity. But we need not think of the hospitable God purely in terms of human sentiment. There have been instructive attempts in recent theology to imagine the nature of *kenotic*, or self-giving, love in theories of divine action in the universe. It would not be difficult to reframe this enterprise in terms of resurrection. Such a theological conception of the universe would clearly not construe the universe as having something like 'God is love' written across the proverbial Milky Way. But it would conceive of the complexity of the physical cosmos as tending towards goals which are expressed and cashed out in human terms as ultimately and unconditionally hospitable on a time frame of cosmic development. Anything less would be a

romantic limitation of the scope of true incarnation. This is part of the paradox of the power of God in creation and redemption, in self-giving not as ultimate dissolution but as plenitude, self-giving as producing fulfilment.

Indeed, it is part of the paradox of the reframing imagination that the impersonal complexity of the cosmos may enable us to conceive of the idea of hope as a catalyst for a Christian understanding of creation. God may be imagined as the creator of laws that are intended to produce a universe of diversity and rich creativity. The God who is personal brings together upward and downward causation in incarnation, in the absolute realisation of the hospitable self. May we also see the vision of the hospitable God as itself the catalyst for bringing to life effective hospitable dynamics in the world? Hospitable action in every local situation is important as an ongoing task, but it also needs focus and aspirational confidence within a wider framework of hope. The vision of the hope of love is important – but if it is not to remain a romantic idyll it has to be instantiated constantly in clear and practical action. And in the vision of an hospitable universe divine hospitality remains the source and origin of effective and constantly evolving creativity. The resurrection hope may be denied, crushed or forgotten, yet it remains the underlying direction of all human endeavour. There have been varieties of contemporary concepts of hospitality expressed in philosophy and theology and the challenge now is to maximise its transformative potential. The evolution of the physical universe retains the potential to develop in many different ways, and this complexity is reflected in the richness of the resurrection hope. The Christian future, we might imagine, has a bias towards rich differentiation, and an aversion to limitation and iron cages, theological, ecclesial or political.

How significant is the vision of a hospitable God? It is more important for the understanding and actualisation of a desirable human future, we suggest, than $E=mc^2$. Whatever the scientific complexities of the universe, the human individual, with its apparently endless possibilities for adaptation and development in community, is still the most surprising and fascinating entity in the cosmos. Of course the pursuit of science, mathematics and medicine has been and will continue to be vital to our human future. But however technically sophisticated it may be, a future without the prospect of the divine love has the potential to lead merely to conflict and aggression with all their attendant evils, even to the extent of human suicide while the balance of mind is disturbed. The

calamities of the twentieth century bear eloquent testimony to the destructive power of untrammelled strategic strength without solidarity, sympathy or compassion. That is why we venture to offer hospitality within the resurrection hope, carefully considered and constantly deployed, as the key to the universe, as the key indeed to the undergirding structure of divine action, quite as significant for us as the laws of relativity or thermodynamics. Understanding hospitality does not call for the kind of technical precision suggested by mathematical constants. It does call for wisdom in openness to the mystery of the God of unconditional love.

How are we to imagine the retrieving and highlighting of resurrection in the churches in the twenty-first century? Let us not overlook the basic matter of constant generational change. This will depend on what the churches will look like and how their members think and live in the future, and it has been suggested that the churches this side of the millennium are already becoming significantly different in their ethos and composition from churches of a previous generation. As Robert Wuthnow writes in his book *The Baby Boomers* (2007):

If I were a religious leader, I would be troubled by the facts and figures currently describing the lives of young Americans, their involvement in congregations, and their spiritual practices. The conclusions that emerge from these facts and figures may not be entirely worrisome for religious leaders, but most of them should be.

Young adults, now curiously neglected by adult Christian education and by resources appropriate to their changing needs, are likely to react differently than is often assumed to issues of faith and ethics. Diversity will continue to increase. Much will depend, even more than before and across the religious spectrum, on the perceived quality of community which they experience in church contexts. To meet this challenge a vital vision of hospitality, freshly worked out and energetically actualised, has the potential to be a valuable resource.

In reflecting on Christian community we are concerned at every stage for the relationship between the inner and the outer, between the nourishing of a vital and enabling discipleship and spirituality through word and sacrament in church, and an effective outreach to actualize the values of the Kingdom in society. Neither dimension can truly flourish

without the other. This is neither a conservative nor a liberal viewpoint. It is simply an attempt, however inadequate, to express the continuing call of the gospel in discipleship in the twenty-first century. How can we re-imagine this consuming and creative vision? It is in the silent presence of the crucified and risen Christ that we are perhaps most likely to experience the hospitality of the hidden God. And this will require of us the openness and confidence to listen to all streams of our rich and diverse traditions, not excluding those which are not immediately understood as progressive.

Somehow we are seeking to imagine a progressive Christianity which is evangelical, catholic and liberal; inclusive of spiritual insight from the broad stream of tradition and able to engage with a variety of changing cultural landscapes without losing sight of the heart of the gospel vision. We say 'somehow' partly in recognition of the challenges of the project, but also in recognition that the mystery of God is never to be grasped fully in any of our particular perspectives. There are many pointers to such a future in the tradition - in the early church, in medieval, Reformation and modern thought, and in the spiritual traditions of many denominations and many countries.

Can we dare to get real? Happy ending, or end of a beginning?

In these few pages we have explored some dimensions of the Christian hope of resurrection and we have tried to sketch the basic outlines of an hospitable outlook. But we are conscious of having only scratched the surface of the infinitely wider task of contemporary application. But here, at least, is an angle which should effectively open up, question and challenge many dangerous contemporary assumptions and should invite critical response and constructive reaction to them. To rest content is to fall behind.

Let's remind ourselves of the challenge. The world, we might say, has become flattened out through the technological revolution, through widespread access to the internet, and the possibilities for communication and for information sharing which this has brought about. The world has become hotter, through the emission of greenhouse gases and the struggle for ever increasing energy supply. The world has become crowded, as population growth has rocketed exponentially throughout the world. All of this presents a challenge to innovation, determination, and effectively targeted aid to the weakest.

Christianity is concerned for the most vulnerable in our world. Therefore we have to privilege these issues if we are to have any sort of hospitality worthy of the name. The centre of the gospel is *incarnation*. To reflect expansively on alterity or reconciliation without taking account of what is required to run the generators can only immunize us against facing up to the physical realities of the world. Global hospitality is inextricably linked to global politics and global economics. Obviously the Christian theologian cannot resolve these challenges, but she should at least try to make an informed contribution to their solution. If we can try constantly to reflect on God's hospitality for the world with our eyes wide open, rather than with our eyes wide shut, that at least will be something.

Hospitable Spirit

We have been thinking of the spirit of the resurrection, of a new order, of Christ-likeness. God as spirit is the source of that spiritual dimension in the cosmos which encourages transformation towards hospitality. Christian faith understands this dynamic as a *Christomorphic trace* in the universe. On an individual level this is traditionally understood as a call to Christ-likeness in discipleship. More widely we may think of it as a call to extend hospitality into every area of society. There is no inevitability about a hospitable universe. God needs us to respond in an imaginative and committed gathering of the fragments of love into larger fragments and effective structures and this call is extended to all humanity. In the midst of all that is negative, hospitable response is already there in observable instances, with or without religious connotations. The invitation is to keep making connections.

Resurrection and the Life Everlasting

In the Nicene Creed there are two references to life after death, first to Christ's resurrection and ascension and then at the very end to our own hope for "the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come."

And that is as it should be, since whatever hope we have as Christians for the continuation of our own lives beyond death is ultimately dependent, as the New Testament makes clear, on what happened in Christ (I Corinthians 15: 15-17). He led the way, and it is through incorporation in his body, the Church, that we are drawn into a similar hope. Of course, to put it this starkly raises all sorts of questions about the future of those outside the Christian community. But, in considering our

own future as Christians, that is emphatically not the place to begin. It is the privilege of faith through baptism, Eucharist and prayer to be drawn into Christ's own present existence, and so we need first to look at how that perspective works before we consider how God's love might operate more widely.

In the latter half of the twentieth century preachers and theologians were far more likely to stress the physical character of the resurrection hope than did those earlier in the century. Partly this was because of a desire, in the face of the current ecological crisis, to speak meaningfully about the restoration of the whole created order. Partly it was also because of a decline in belief in other ways of surviving death, such as the immortality of the soul. So a trend emerged to place all the emphasis on *eschatology*, on what would happen at the end of time, as can be seen, for instance, in the writings of the New Testament scholar and present Bishop of Durham, Tom Wright.

Throughout most of Christian history, however, looking towards such a final consummation had been combined with a supplementary account of a present reality in which all human souls are envisaged as surviving death, either 'asleep' or in some other intermediate state, while a privileged few, those particularly close to Christ, were seen as anticipating the end in enjoyment of the full life that Christ himself already experiences. In the traditional terminology there was the church militant (those of us still here on earth), the church expectant (those dead but not yet with Christ) and the church triumphant (those called now to be with him, including the saints - that is, those whom the church itself believes fall within this category).

While the Reformation broke with aspects of this picture, most obviously with the cult of the saints, it is important to note continuities. So, for example, the Westminster Confession of 1647 that became the defining doctrinal statement of the Church of Scotland and other Calvinist churches, gives unqualified endorsement to belief in the immortality of the soul. Equally, the final expectation was for a very literal resurrection of the body. Thus the Thirty Nine Articles of 1563, to which Anglican clergy were once required to subscribe article by article, makes clear a similar literal reading for what had happened in the case of Christ: "Christ did truly rise again from death, and took again his body, with flesh, bones, and all things appertaining to the perfection of Man's nature, wherewith he ascendeth into Heaven" (fourth article). Indeed, so concerned were

Christians for the gathering together once more of their mortal remains that it was not until the late nineteenth century that they began to accept the legitimacy of cremation. In Scotland the first crematorium was built in Glasgow in 1895, and the second (in Edinburgh) not till 1929. Even then the Vatican did not lift its ban until 1964.

So it would be quite wrong to think of one continuous form of belief across the centuries. Not only have there been differences of emphases but sometimes also of content, as Christians have wrestled with how best to interpret the New Testament and also with what form of belief might best cohere with our wider knowledge. Even in Jesus' day there was quite a spread of belief, with the Pharisees believing in resurrection and the Sadducees not and quite a few writings advocating immortality of the soul instead (e.g. Wisdom 2: 23-4; 5: 5; 6: 19; I Enoch 103: 4; IV Maccabees 10). Again, while most references to a future life are to the end of time, some clearly assume a more present reality, including, perhaps most obviously, Christ's words to the penitent thief (Luke 23: 43; cf. Matthew 27: 52; Mark 12: 25; II Corinthians 12: 2).

Such variety may well impel some towards agnosticism about what comes next. For them it is enough that the details are left in God's hands. That is acceptable, provided the unanimous witness of the New Testament is taken seriously that God does indeed desire a deeper relationship with us than is possible in this life; so some form of post-mortem existence is assumed. Others, however, will want to explore further. One fascinating wider change in human understanding has been the decline in belief in the immortality of the soul. In marked contrast, Calvin thought that this was in fact the easy option; on his view it was resurrection of the body that was difficult to sustain. Similar considerations may well provide the motivation lying behind the Calvinist Thirty Nine Articles' strident insistence on all the details of the resurrected body. Nowadays, however, few of us would believe that there is anything naturally immortal about the human condition, and this seems endorsed by the scientific data considered earlier in this essay. If we survive, it can only be thanks to the grace and power of God. Indeed, this is precisely what is asserted in the New Testament itself. Despite the Creed's preference for the active voice, again and again, even in the case of Christ, he is described as raised from the dead rather than himself rising: he too depended on the gracious act of his Father (e.g. Romans 6: 4; I Thessalonians 1: 10).

Even so, it would be unwise to move to the other extreme too quickly, and suppose everything to be postponed to the end of time, and then to a purely physical re-ordering of our world. In talking of his own resurrection hope Paul describes the difference between our present body and that later reality as different as the kernel from the wheat it eventually produces (I Corinthians 15: 35-50, especially v. 37). Even the Book of Revelation in envisaging the new heaven and the new earth postulates the absence of sun and moon (Revelation 21: 23). So the final reality will be something mysterious and radically different from the way things now are. Whatever happens it will thus not be simply the resuscitation of a corpse. As John's account of the emergence of Lazarus from the tomb makes clear, it was quite different from the resurrection of Christ, and the same point is made in the other gospels in the case of the widow of Nain's son and Jairus' daughter (John 11; Luke 7: 11-17; Mark 5: 22-43).

The reason why this is not always acknowledged with the confidence it deserves is because apologetic considerations can all too easily lead to an exclusive focus on the Empty Tomb that underplays, or even discounts, other aspects of the New Testament picture which pull in a quite different direction. What those other accounts make abundantly clear is that what was encountered was a transformed body, not at all one exactly identical with what had lain in the grave. While it was still a body that could partake of food (Luke 24: 42-3), it was also now one that could appear and disappear at will, walk through doors and so forth (e.g. John 20:19). It was also one not always immediately recognisable (Luke 24: 31), and, even when recognised, could produce a quite different reaction from the past, in the immediacy of worship (Matthew 28: 17). The sheer range in the type of encounters described implies a human form that defies easy categorisation, and indeed that variety would no doubt have been greatly increased had all the appearances mentioned in the New Testament actually been recorded in detail. Paul provides a long list, including one appearance to five hundred at once (I Corinthians 15: 6), and an early appearance to Peter that Luke only mentions in passing (I Corinthians 15: 4; Luke 24: 34). In addition if we include Paul's own encounter on the Damascus Road (Acts 9: 1-9), the earlier appearance to Stephen the first martyr (Acts 7: 55-6) and the form Christ takes in appearing to the author of the final book of the New Testament (Revelation 1: 9-18), there is a complete span, from the very strongly physical to the spirit-like, from the narrowly human to the most exalted human figure conceivable, sitting on the right hand of God.

What that variety suggests is the willingness of the risen Christ to adapt his form to whatever was most suited to address the concerns of those he encountered, a concern no doubt reinforced by the evangelists themselves as they adapt the way in which they present the story to indicate more clearly the continuing relevance of the Risen Lord to their readers' own lives. So, for instance, the natural way to read Luke's account of the Supper at Emmaus (Luke 24: 28-31) is not just as a record of what once happened but also as indicative of the possibility of continuing encounter with Christ for us today, whenever the Eucharist is celebrated: equally, in the reading of Scripture, as in the encounter on the road that immediately preceded this supper (Luke 24: 13-27 and v. 32). So what the Empty Tomb would seem to assert is not the importance of that particular body as such but what was conveyed through it: the totality of the identity of the Lord some of them once knew now continuing to be available in a new medium: body no less than mind and spirit but available in a new way. So in the appearances it is not just mental struggles that are addressed, such as Cleopas' wrestling with the interpretation of Scripture, but equally the need for intimacy of touch in the wounded side offered to Doubting Thomas or sharing in the fishermen's worry about the adequacy of their catch (Luke 24: 18ff; John 20: 24-9; John 21: 4-13). So what seems meant is that the body no less than the soul is caught up into this new existence in which every aspect of human identity is given permanent value by God.

How that new medium can best be described is a moot point. It has a radically new character of existence, and so none of our existing language quite fits. We live in a scientific world; so scientific imagery may help, provided we do not take it too literally. The heart of who we are is a bit like the information-bearing pattern, the ideas or programme that constitutes the software in our computer: strictly speaking something non-physical. Certainly this needs some hardware in order for it to operate at all, but it need not necessarily be anything like our present computer. So, likewise, then with our 'souls'. God can retain the memory of that pattern until he re-establishes it in some appropriate 'hardware' either immediately after death or at some later stage. But he does so in a world not physically contiguous with our own. The heaven, where the resurrected Christ now is, is, as it were, 'a parallel universe' existing alongside our own world, but with a body so physically unlike the body he had in this world that it shares none of the same matter. While the new heaven and the new earth of the eschaton could in theory share the same matter, once again it seems simpler to deny any physical overlap, not

least if human bodies at present constituted are inherently given over to eventual decay. If readers prefer a literary analogy for the relationship between the two worlds, they might like to draw on C. S. Lewis' children's classic, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Recall the door in the wardrobe and the way in which it linked two worlds. Perhaps the Eucharist is rather like that, with the resurrected Christ drawing alongside our present world to interact with it but at the same time in no sense physically and temporally contiguous with it.

Such encounter with the Risen Christ in the Eucharist has of course always played a key role in the earnest hope of Christians that a life of prayerful thought and action will gradually, under the guidance of the Spirit, lead to a re-shaping of their lives into a more Christ-like pattern. Precisely because the nature of the encounter has been perceived as so important, conflicts in interpretation over the nature of Christ's presence in the sacrament have frequently erupted. In considering those disputes, what was at stake is often misunderstood. Simply by definition God is present everywhere, or 'omnipresent', to use the more technical term. So the issue has nothing to do with questions of divine presence. Rather, it was a matter of how Christ's resurrected humanity is mediated to us, for, however transformed his body, it will still be limited to one space rather than another if it remains truly human and thus finite. So it was felt that a miracle was necessary for its presence to be felt in numerous Eucharists occurring simultaneously throughout the world. Transubstantiation was thus formulated as one way of explaining how this is possible. Calvin's notion of our souls being briefly caught up to heaven by the Spirit to relate to Christ there is but another. But the key point, however expanded, remains the same: the human Christ continues to make himself available to us for our transformation. The Eucharist is thus not just about encounter with God (often the modern reductive way of 'explaining' the sacrament) but equally encounter with the humanity of God in Christ, a humanity there to forgive, to heal, to release into new life. Fortunately, a less literal understanding of 'body' makes the notion more comprehensible.

So far in expounding the resurrection, no attempt has been made to distinguish resurrection and ascension. For some contemporary Christians they are in any case the same thing, while for others ascension is simply Luke's rather pedantic way of marking the end of the resurrection appearances. Admittedly, as a specific moment in time the two accounts are unique to Luke (24: 51; Acts 1: 3-11). But if we turn to

the imagery of ascension then we discover that, so far from being rare, the notion seems to run right through the New Testament. It is, for instance, an image repeatedly found in John (e.g. 3.13; 6.62) in Paul (Colossians 3: 1; Ephesians 4: 10) and elsewhere (e.g. Hebrews 4: 14; I Peter 3: 22). What the passages share is an emphasis on exaltation (sometimes very obviously under the influence of Psalm 110.1): that Christ is now at God's right hand and that thus even the cross was itself a victory - over sin and death. It is an issue to which we will return in the liturgical section. Suffice it to say here that, if on Easter Day we celebrate Christ's return from the grave, on Ascension Day we see our own humanity exalted to the right hand of God in a new estimation of human value and worth. There is also a new availability to the person of Christ. In telling Mary Magdalene to stop clinging to him because he is not yet ascended (John 20: 17), we must not vainly suppose that Christ is merely rebuking her for slowing down the next stage of his work. Rather, what he is offering is a promise - to be with her always if she will but allow him the necessary space to be who he really is; both human and divine; both God and exalted humanity.

It is that exalted being whose body on earth is now the Church. But it would be a mistake to think of his presence being there alone. Christian doctrine asserts that the divine Christ pre-existed the incarnation, and rightly so. As the Word or Logos of God he has, like the Spirit, been active throughout history. 'Logos' has so many resonances in Greek that it is easy to miss the full significance of the opening chapter of John. What that opening chapter tells us is that, if we want to find the source of the world's intelligibility, the pattern according to which it was made, then we must turn to Christ, and so the Spirit has been active throughout the world's history in urging others who do not know the historical Christ towards a similar pattern. And thus examples of such following can be found not just within the church but also well beyond in those of other faiths and none. Recall that in the parable of the sheep and goats (Matthew 25: 31ff.) neither group knew themselves to be such, and so it will be on Judgment Day. In the meantime, however, it is not for members of the church to pride themselves on being less sinful than the great mass of humanity, and so more deserving of that ultimate destiny. Only God knows the secret of our hearts. Instead, the church is called to the privilege of conveying to others the good news of what we know: a Saviour who identified with humanity in sharing our condition, and who now offers the gracious help that is necessary to secure our transformation.

But he does not do so alone. The community we have now become is partly the action of divine grace and partly a matter of our own decisions. But equally important as our own decisions is the influence of others upon us: families, friends, teachers and so on. And the same was true of the human Christ. Mary and Joseph played their part, but so too did many figures now unknown. Think, for instance, of the part the local rabbi at Nazareth must have played. It would seem odd, therefore, to suppose Christ now alone in heaven, delaying any others to join him till the end of time. That is no doubt one reason why from the early centuries onwards his Mother has always been assumed to be present with him. Later church history greatly expanded the list, and in the course of such developments it must be conceded that many wrong decisions were made. Some canonised saints were undoubtedly scoundrels, and many others probably never even existed. Even so, the faults in the system should not lead us to question the idea as such. Good and holy people - some declared saints, some not - have indeed lived profoundly Christian lives. Thinking of such individuals in heaven praying for us can help give us a lively sense of our shared community in the body of Christ.

It is a commonplace for non-believers to object that a longing for heaven is selfish. But of course there is only selfishness involved if one's own advantage is placed above that of others. So far from being self-interested, wishful thinking, the refusal to make death the final barrier can in fact constitute a realistic recognition of how far short believers have themselves fallen. There is so much unfinished business at death, which remains unresolved in consequence of the sad modern decline in belief in life after death. Those of us who still retain the hope can, however, continue to reach out to those beyond the grave in ways that the secular world does not understand but which can bring for us and for the dead great healing and peace. So, for example, we can ask forgiveness of those whom we have wronged in this life and know that it is accomplished in that other life beyond, just as we can pray for others who have done us wrong and know too that in that other world such wrong will be blotted out. Under the watchful eye of Christ, we know that such prayers will help effect such mutual reconciliation, even if we do not always understand precisely how. Such things can happen because the transformation that resurrection brings has already begun in the here and now for those that believe. (See Romans 6: 3-11).

6. THE FUNERAL LITURGY

To conclude our essay, and in the light of its various discussions around our theme, we take a close look at the modern funeral rites of the Scottish Episcopal Church to see how far they engage with the Nicene Faith and with the contemporary culture of dying and death.

There is an increasing tendency in our day for people, whether church members or not, to shy away from organizing funeral services in favour of ceremonies usually called thanksgivings for, or celebrations of, a person's life. It is almost as if both death and what might lie beyond it are to be elided for what appears to be safer ground, the actual *life* of the deceased. But the very words 'funeral' (the 1987 rites) or 'burial of the dead' (1929 Prayer Book order) in the titles of our church's official liturgies offer a challenge to this way of proceeding. The church insists that we are, first of all, dealing with a death and with what has to be done with and for a dead person. Of course, the rites speak of much more than this, but they are not designed to speak of less. And this is surely because they are expressive, to some extent at least, of the faith of the Christian community, classically expressed in the Nicene Creed, that while death was real and an ending for Jesus (and is also for each one of us), and has to be acknowledged as such, it was not the last word about his human life (nor about ours).

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

The last word belongs to God, and God intends it be a word of new life, as the Creed also affirms: "We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen."

Unlike the Order for the Burial of the Dead in the *Scottish Prayer Book* of 1929, the revised Funeral Rites of our church (1987) come with an introductory note which attempts to set out the rationale of the various liturgies on offer. The note turns out to be firmly rooted in the kind of faith we have just briefly outlined. So, the rites are to be understood as "an overall framework which expresses the church's faith and endeavours to relate that faith to a particular death" - this in the very first paragraph. They are designed to commit "the dead person into the keeping of God,

within the context of the resurrection hope". Only after these fundamental purposes of the rites have been stated, does the note go on to explore other important dimensions of the funeral service, such as the needs of mourners, the opportunity to help or challenge "people who attend a funeral with little or no church connection ... by what the Gospel has to say about death and eternal life", the articulation for the wider society of how the Christian faith "gives meaning to life and to its conclusion in death". The note concludes by outlining what the funeral rites themselves, as liturgies to be enacted, must do to fulfil all of this: they must "both speak of God's love, forgiveness and promise of resurrection and relate these to the immediate human experience of death and mourning. ... the truth of the human feelings must be acknowledged in order that the theological truth can become an effective communication."

Is it possible to discern whether the liturgical texts of 1987 live up to this proclamation of Christian faith as rooted in the Nicene Creed and whether they do what their compilers claim they ought to do? Well, not entirely, for, as the note itself says, "the various rites set out in this book are not designed to be followed slavishly. Every death is different". So much depends on how precisely the liturgy is conducted, and in what spirit choices of material are made. Moreover, and the note is altogether silent on this matter, a critical element of most funeral liturgies is the sermon: not only whether it is a homily or a eulogy, but also what is or is not said in it may, after all, be what most strikes members of the congregation for good or ill. *Every death is different* and, so, inevitably, is every funeral. Nevertheless, all that having been said, it remains an important task to try to assess whether the official texts of the church are such as to offer, in themselves, good opportunities for those responsible for a funeral service to fulfil the purposes we have been examining.

To explore this question we now consider the various materials in the liturgy under the following headings, with inevitable overlaps:

1. The reality of death
2. The resurrection and ascension hope
3. The human realities
4. Proclamation of the gospel
5. The meaning of life and death

The reality of death

It turns out that there are plenty of examples throughout the various liturgies which do not shirk from naming death for what it is. The Prayer at the closing of the coffin is particularly clear: “Father, your servant’s eyes have closed in the final sleep of death, eyes that laughed, eyes that shed tears.” Or there is the prayer at the service for the reception of the body into church before the funeral service: “Father, Give peace to your servant, whose body now rests in this place: May the prayers of your whole Church uphold her and support us in face of death’s mystery.” Among the petitions for insertion in the intercession we find this, ‘after a short life’: “God of all mystery, whose ways are beyond understanding, lead us, who grieve at this untimely death ...” or this, ‘after a difficult death’: “Gentle Lord, your servant has come by a hard and painful road into the valley of death ...”. Among the suggested psalms and scripture readings we find choices which reflect the same refusal to avoid naming death and what it is: Psalm 90 is permeated by the fragility and brevity of human life, while Ecclesiasticus 38: 16-23 proves to be a very daring choice – perhaps not often taken up by those organizing funerals - with its insistence not only on shedding tears for one who has died and shrouding the body with proper ceremony, but also on keeping grief within strictly defined bounds so that “with the burial, grief should pass; a life of misery is an affliction to the heart” (38: 19). Finally, and interestingly enough to modern sensibilities, there is an echo of this somewhat brusque practicality in the materials provided for the ‘Farewell by a Relative’: “We pray for ourselves, who are severely tested by this death, that we do not try to minimize this loss, or seek refuge from it in words alone, and also that we do not brood over it so that it overwhelms us and isolates us from others.” All of this suggests that the funeral rites are well-designed to make it possible to acknowledge, with restraint and dignity, and yet with absolute clarity, the reality of death as an ending.

The resurrection and ascension hope

It comes as little surprise to discover that, while the reality of death is not shirked in these rites, it is in fact rarely spoken of on its own, but most often in conjunction with some kind of reference to the resurrection hope. For example, the Prayer at the Closing of the Coffin may begin “Father, your servant’s eyes have closed in the final sleep of death, eyes that laughed, eyes that shed tears”, but it goes on in a different mood: “Let them wake to the full vision of your glory, and our brother see you

face to face; through Jesus Christ our Lord.” In fact the funeral rites are full of texts strongly articulating the Nicene faith that “We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.” And these outweigh very considerably the incidence of materials on the reality of death, thus tilting the liturgies strongly towards proclamation of the resurrection of Christ and its relevance both for the dead person and for those who have gathered for the funeral. This seems to bear out fully enough what is said in the introductory note about committing “the dead person into the keeping of God, within the context of the resurrection hope.” We may take only a few of many possible examples. Among the ‘Prayers with relatives at the time of bereavement’ we find: “Lord of life and death you are with us in the daylight and the dark. As this our sister goes from us, may your love be with her in the shadows and lead her to your presence where the life that began with you is sustained for ever through Jesus Christ our Lord.” This prayer avoids explicit use of the language of resurrection, but nonetheless manages to convey the conviction that our hope rests on the faithful love of God to hold us and renew us beyond death, on the grounds that he has given us life in the first place. Far more explicit is one of the opening collects for the Service in Church: “God our maker, your creative will gives life to all that is: your quickening power brings us to birth and raises us from death. Take this your son N. into your keeping and give him the new life that is promised in Jesus Christ our Lord, who once was dead and lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, now and for ever. Amen.” It is interesting to note that the following ‘Prayer for the Mourners’, similarly couched, is mandatory for the Service in Church: “God of the living and the dead, when you raised Jesus from the tomb you gave new hope to his desolate disciples. Cleanse, restore and heal us in our time of sorrow. May we go forward in his strength upon our pilgrimage, sharing the fellowship of the redeemed, both living and departed.” In this case the resurrection faith is directed, not so much towards the dead person, as to those who remain and live with the loss. The prayer ‘after a short life’ asks that this same faith be deepened among those who grieve: “lead us, who grieve at this untimely death, to a new and deeper faith in your love which brought your Son Jesus, the young prince of glory, into resurrection life.” These three examples demonstrate how the funeral liturgies articulate the church’s faith on several levels and for several ends. Among the scripture readings suggested for use at the services are many on this theme and not only from the New Testament, and not all explicitly or at all about resurrection. Psalm 139: 1-18 proclaims the invincible quest of God for his creatures as the source of hope, while no fewer than three passages from

Wisdom of Solomon make use of late Jewish ideas on the immortality of the souls of the righteous. However, the New Testament passages from Romans 6, I Corinthians 15 and I Peter are foundational texts in this resurrection context, while of the two gospels proposed John 6: 37-40 focuses also on resurrection. Among the additional collects (some carried over from the Prayer Book service) this fits the present theme: "Grant that all who have been baptized into Christ's death and resurrection may die to sin and rise to newness of life, and that through the grave and gate of death we may pass to our joyful resurrection." And the 'Farewell by a Relative' ends with: "May God grant us courage and confidence in the new life of Christ. We ask this in the name of the risen Lord." And, of course, there are the words of the Committal Service, mentioned earlier in this essay, which proclaim a "sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ". This brief survey of the funeral rites indicates that they provide plenty of opportunities for setting the dead person, the death itself and its consequences for the mourners in the context of explicit faith in the resurrection of Jesus and also, when appropriate, in a context which affirms life beyond death without explicit proclamation of the resurrection.

But what about that other pillar of the Nicene Faith, the ascension of Christ? Here, it seems, little or no opportunity is given by these rites to explore this and its significance in this context, so that in this regard at least they do not appear quite to measure up to the fullness of the Nicene faith: "he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father." Perhaps the unstated assumption is that Resurrection and Ascension are really but one and the same: the 'demotion' of Ascensiontide in our current liturgical arrangements to a kind of blip on the surface of the onward march of Eastertide to Pentecost might very well reflect a loss of conviction about the distinctiveness of Christ's ascension. This failure to engage with the credal faith is a pity, for surely the imagery of the ascension in liturgy and hymnody speaks very strongly of the destiny of Christ's human nature, and so in faith and hope of our own, as we are led in his train into the very heart of God, from glory to glory. On the basis of these rites it is unlikely that anyone would be encouraged, say, to include Christopher Wordsworth's great ascensiontide hymn in a funeral service, with its magnificent verse:

Thou hast raised our human nature
In the clouds to God's right hand;
There we sit in heavenly places,
There with thee in glory stand;
Jesus reigns, adored by Angels;
Man with God is on the throne;
Mighty Lord, in thine Ascension
We by faith behold our own.

It may also be worth suggesting that if more had been made of the ascension in the rites, more might also have been made of the body. It is interesting to note that the rites include a service which is entitled the Reception of the Coffin into Church, whereas we find a prayer in that service, "Father, Give peace to your servant, whose body now rests in this place." This unambiguous reference to the dead body might lead us to ask why the service is not called the Reception of the Body into Church. At the end do we lead the body or the coffin or even the person out of church? The Nicene Creed looks for the "resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come", the cognate phrase in the Apostles' Creed being "the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." This theological truth, the resurrection of the body, appears problematical, and yet is fundamental to the Christian account because to Christ's own story and experience. The ascension helps to elucidate it in terms of the entirety (and not a kind of persisting, inherently immortal part) of our persons being, beyond the dissolution of death, brought by Christ into the very centre of the divine life, a new context which is scarcely imaginable and yet our true home in the ascended Christ.

The human realities

The introductory note of 1987 clearly states that "the truth of the human feelings must be acknowledged in order that the theological truth can become an effective communication." If this can be taken to mean that part of the purpose of a funeral service is to bring before God as honestly as possible such often unpalatable realities as the circumstances of a person's death, grief, suffering, guilt, anger, loss, sin and fear, and not to cloak them in the interests of being merely upbeat, well and good. But there must remain a suspicion that it might have been better to say: "theological truth must be articulated in order that the truth of the human feelings may be honestly addressed." It is the faith of the church, as expressed in the creed, which is primary here, not the human feelings.

And to put it this way is to preserve the possibility of that faith challenging and transforming cultural assumptions about death and dying and beyond. Be that as it may, it can certainly be said that in this area the new rites are very different indeed from any of their Prayer Book predecessors, and represent a serious attempt to respond, and to help clergy to respond, to contemporary understandings of dying, death and bereavement and to the feelings they will encounter as they accompany and guide people in the preparations for any funeral. Nevertheless it is important to emphasize that everything so far examined indicates that this real departure is still understood to be in the service of the church's traditional faith that "For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father," and the implications of that faith for our dying and living.

It is in the prayers suggested for insertion into the intercession during the Service in Church that this aspect of the 1987 rites is most evident. They offer prayers, in turn, of thanksgiving for the dead person, after a long life, a short life, a courageous death and a difficult death. There are also prayers in sorrow, guilt and regret, for pardon for the deceased, and in grief. Each of these prayers tries to express something of what people may really feel when a person dies. Here are a few examples. 'In grief': "Father, You know our hearts and share our sorrows. We are hurt by our parting from N. whom we loved: When we are angry at the loss we have sustained, when we long for words of comfort, yet find them hard to hear, turn our grief to truer living, our affliction to firmer hope and our sorrow to deeper joy." 'In sorrow, guilt and regret': "Forgiving God, in the face of death we discover how many things are still undone, how much might have been done otherwise. Redeem our failure. Bind up the wounds of past mistakes. Transform our guilt to active love, and by your forgiveness make us whole." Or, 'after a difficult death': "Gentle Lord, your servant has come by a hard and painful road into the valley of death. Lead her now into the place where there is no more pain."

Clearly, the inclusion of such prayers requires of those planning and leading any funeral service a good deal of care and sensitivity, but it is reasonable to expect, and is often the case in practice, that the rewards are worth that effort: to put it at its most basic, these elements of the rites are a spur to honesty about the deceased and those who gather for the funeral service. So, here too, the rites appear to offer good opportunities

to relate the church's faith to ordinary human experience of death and dying.

Proclamation of the gospel

From the materials that have been examined so far it will be obvious enough that these services are designed in themselves, properly used, to allow a clear proclamation of the Good News of God's faithfulness to us in life and in death and beyond which is centred upon the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Naturally, in a context where the Episcopal Church is not a parish church and most funerals are for church members or those with some kind of real church connection, the services are not embarrassed to concentrate on the key elements of the faith, though we have seen that they can credibly be used in contexts where specific Christian faith on the part of the deceased or those gathered for the funeral appears problematic: the alternative opening collect for the Service in Church is a good example of this flexibility which has been built into the rites: "God our maker, your creative will gives life to all that is; your quickening power brings us to birth. Let your love sustain us to the end of our days and bring us through death to a new beginning; through Jesus Christ our Lord." They can certainly be seen as serving the mission of God, as the church through its representatives, usually the clergy, commends the dead to the love and mercy of God and presents to people a clearly Christian view of human life, death and faith in what lies beyond. However, it cannot be too clearly stated that whatever riches these liturgies might contain, much depends for their effectiveness in proclaiming the gospel on what we might call 'performance': the spirit in which things are prepared, the manner in which the words are said and the service allowed to unfold, the music that is chosen to be part of it, the words of a sermon or an address, above all perhaps whether an honest impression of the dead person is conveyed and a more than routine affirmation of the church's faith offered. None of that can be guaranteed by any set of liturgical texts, though it might be argued that the ones on view have been well enough designed to prompt and encourage a careful and non-routine approach at every level.

The meaning of life and death

It is perhaps somewhat superfluous, in view of all that has preceded it, to devote a distinct section to how the funeral rites might help people to see how the Christian faith gives meaning to life and to its

conclusion in death. But there are specific points to be identified in the texts where this does indeed become apparent and it seems appropriate to conclude this final section of our essay with at least a few of them. The very first prayer, if chosen, is a good example: "God our maker, your creative will gives life to all that is; your quickening power brings us to birth. Let your love sustain us to the end of our days and bring us through death to a new beginning; through Jesus Christ our Lord." Human life finds its origin in the creative purpose of God to make life possible, finds its meaning in God's love for his creatures, and while it ends in death is brought by that same love to a new beginning. The Prayer of Faith acknowledges the finitude of human existence – "we are dust and to dust shall return" – but trusts in God's power to fashion us anew in the likeness of Christ. The elements in the services which involve commending the dead person into God's keeping imply an understanding of human life as destined for the full knowledge of God's love and the unclouded vision of his glory (in the prayer from the service for the Interment of Ashes). Death is therefore seen positively as the gateway to this fulfilment, opening the way to life with God for ever (the prayer 'after a long life'), enabling the person to enter upon a journey from this world into the communion of the Holy Trinity and of all God's people (the prayer at the Commendation). The Commendation itself sees death as a setting free from the 'bondage of earth', from that very finitude which we saw earlier acknowledged.

In conclusion, it is perfectly possible to argue that the official funeral liturgies of our church do indeed offer many opportunities, even with the reservations expressed above in relation to the ascension of Christ and the resurrection of the body, to express in pastoral practice and rich liturgical celebration the faith of our church:

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father and we look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

FURTHER READING

Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*. Trans. Helen Weaver. New Edition. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991)

A fascinating study of changing attitudes towards and understanding of the event of death.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM, 1953).

Profoundly moving, classic meditations on faith in the face of death by one of the great theologians of the twentieth century.

A.E. Burn, *An Introduction to the Creeds and the Te Deum* (London: Methuen, 1899)

This now very old book can still be found in libraries and remains a useful historical introduction to the Creeds.

John Burnaby, *The Belief of Christendom: A Commentary on the Nicene Creed* (London: SPCK, 1959)

A sophisticated text for more detailed study, can be found in libraries.

J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*. Third Edition (London: Longman, 1972)

The stalwart handbook of generations of students and ordinands, this remains still the standard text in English on the Creeds. Dense and full of theological and historical information.

Nicholas Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God: Reading of the Apostles' Creed* (London: SCM, 1992)

Still the best modern study of the Apostles' Creed in English.

Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*. Trans. James W. Leitch. (London: SCM, 1967)

An attempt to work out a new Christian approach to the future beyond the sin of despair.

Wolfhart Pannenberg, *The Apostles' Creed in the Light of Today's Questions*. Trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1972)

Specifically concerned with the Apostles' Creed, this book attempts to translate this ancient formulary into the terms of modern thought and experience.

Simon Tugwell, *Human Immortality and the Redemption of Death* (London: DLT, 1989)

Covers the ground surrounding resurrection of the body and immortality of the soul and their outworkings in dealing with death.

Simone Weil, *Waiting on God* (London: Fontana, 1959).

Weil was described by André Gide as "the best spiritual writer of the twentieth century." She died in England aged only thirty four, refusing to eat anything more than was given to her compatriots in Occupied France.

Frances M. Young, *The Making of the Creeds*. New Edition (London: SCM, 2002)

This is perhaps the best and most accessible introduction to the Creeds available.