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A consideration of the current view and history of the people of Canvey Island, Essex, in the context of modern England with regard to the place of the church in community particularly in the face of bereavement and the conduct of funeral rites.

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"I believe our life on earth is not the only life we have."

Lin

The Revd David St. Clair Tudor

A consideration of the current view and history of the people of Canvey Island, Essex, in the context of modern England with regard to the place of the church in community particularly in the face of bereavement and the conduct of funeral rites.

Abstract

This study is the result of six years of part-time research by a practising Church of England minister. It focusses on the people of Canvey Island in Essex from the early 20th century when the church held sway over every aspect of their lives, to the present day when engagement with the church is one option of many. The study seeks to show how and why many who belong to no church congregation still call on the church at a time of bereavement and how the church might better recognise and sanctify the language and practice of those who would not call themselves religious.

The thesis explores the many-faceted and often contradictory contextual issues of contemporary ministry with particular focus on the whole gamut of funeral ministry from miscarriage and neo-natal death to a death occurring naturally in old age. It examines the relationship between the intrinsic and the vernacular on the one hand and the language of the established church on the other. It recognises the so-called folk religion as the basic longing of humanity for meaning and order in a chaotic and seemingly random life: a longing which the church has largely adopted, organised, formalised, institutionalised and often fossilized. It considers how such desire is met by Civil celebrants and others if church ministers are slow to respond to the need.

In this third decade of the twenty-first century, society is at a crucial crossroad with regard to the way in which we handle death, grief and an understanding of on-going life which survives the physical. A society increasingly at home with the connectedness of everything through the internet requires a church that understands and recognises its language and its longing. This thesis repeatedly addresses the ways that the church and its ministers need to embrace its changing role, particularly at the time of death.

The author's upbringing in the British West Indies is very different from that of the people of Canvey Island. In distilling the fruit of twenty-four years of ministry among them, he has sought to use readily intelligible language to tell the stories of the dying and the bereaved and to bring to bear academic studies from the fields of sociology, anthropology and theology in the context and light of the lived experience of parish life.

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to the past ministers, and to the men, women and children of Canvey Island, Essex, who have taught me so much about the work of creator God in our ordinary, daily lives.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

“For twenty-five minutes in that crematorium you made my Dad’s life matter.” These words were uttered by the daughter of a 79-year old man whose funeral I had conducted some weeks previously. Her Dad, John, would not have called himself a member of any church. His life was not particularly remarkable, but he was loved. And it is that love that I as minister was called on to reflect back to the small congregation gathered in the crematorium chapel on a winter’s morning. I minister in the Parish of Canvey Island in the Thames Estuary and conduct over two hundred funerals a year. The communal memory of the people who moved out of East London is of a church that played a vital part in the lives of ordinary people, particularly in times of joy, sorrow, celebration and tragedy. The people have traditionally looked to ministers of the church to bring historical, religious and civic traditions to bear in marking moments in the course of individual and public life. The majority of the population in Canvey Island is at least two generations ‘unchurched’, but they have a keen and intrinsic sense of the spiritual which is expressed in vernacular owing much to the Christian history of the country but is often unvalued by the church at large.

This thesis explores the contextual issues of ministry for the modern minister particularly at the time of bereavement in the particular context of Canvey Island. I examine the possibility that what some in the established church would disparagingly call folk religion is actually the basic longing of humanity for order in a chaotic and seemingly random life – a longing which the church has adopted, organised, formalised, institutionalised and often fossilized. As Callum Brown wrote, the tendency of social scientists, taking their cue from the established church, has been to privilege “a ‘rationalist’ approach to religion which assigns importance to ‘formal religion’ and which denigrates or ignores ‘folk religion’, ‘superstition’, and acts of personal faith not endorsed by the churches. It privileges numbers, counting religion by measures of members or worshippers, and ignores the unquantifiable in argument and

methodology.”¹ This thesis runs counter to the view that organised religion has no place in the lives of the dying and the bereaved in the contemporary world as experienced in Essex and elsewhere. This thesis suggests that, for the people of Canvey Island who turn to the church in time of grief, religion has not died but is undergoing a mutation that augers well for the future of faith in a creating, redeeming God.² I submit that, while sociologists and ethnographers study this evolution, the institution of the church is slow to recognise, embrace and celebrate this fact. John’s daughter gave thanks that at last the shape of her father’s life was given some significance. She knew there will come a time when her father is totally forgotten but she rejoiced that for a while, in that chapel, his life was seen to have mattered.

This thesis engages with modern scholarship in the fields of anthropology, sociology and theology to underpin the study of concrete histories of actual people over time in a particular place when faced with death and bereavement. But this work will show different emphases in the conclusions that may be drawn about the state of religious sensibility in the current age. I have no argument with the writings of sociologists, academic theologians and anthropologists, working as they do within their own strict terms of reference. Each study and resulting opinion adds to our understanding. I simply suggest that theirs is not the definitive photograph in an ever-shifting landscape. Meanwhile I am aware that the terms and phrases I use reflect my particular angle of vision as a parish priest in a particular parish over a particular period of time, and so there will be, by the very nature of ministry, blind spots. My perspective is but a moment in the unending change of humankind’s experience and ability to give voice to such experience.

People have been burying their dead long before the Christian Church began to tell them who could be buried where, when, under what circumstances and by whom. The 20th century and the early years of the 21st century have witnessed a profound and far-reaching change in the way society as found in Canvey Island relates to the church with regard to

¹ Brown 2009:11

² Gauthier 2019

how rites of passage, particularly associated with birth, marriage and death, should be marked and celebrated. This is what Linda Woodhead termed “the de-reformation of religion”.³ When we consider funerals, the pace of change is gaining momentum in this third decade of the 21st century. Gone are the days when just about every bereaved family turned to the local vicar to conduct a standard funeral service lifted straight out of the Prayer Book. Today’s bereaved expect the service to be personal – tailored to the life of the one who has died and sculpted to the tastes of those left behind. At the other extreme some opt not to attend a ceremony but are content to leave the disposal of the body to the funeral director. This practice of direct cremation whereby the coffin is taken directly from the funeral director’s premises to the crematorium and placed on the catafalque without much ceremony or any congregation, has jumped the Atlantic Ocean from North America and is gaining some traction and acceptance in British society. Many more people experienced this, albeit involuntarily, during the lockdown occasioned by the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020/21. I shall return later to their response to that experience. Suffice it to say for now that the words of Abraham Lincoln from another age and a very different context resonate with me today with regard to the role of the church in 21st century Essex society: “The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise to the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew.”⁴

Other researchers may well make observations similar to those found in this work and draw comparable conclusions across the country and, indeed, across a large part of the world, but this study is different and particular in that I draw on my experience of ministry as a Church of England priest among the people of Canvey Island over some twenty-four years. I have studied their history, examined the parish registers and captured the written and oral comments of those who have turned to the church in times of grief. I have been privileged to engage with a number of rituals of grief that use the language of church but are not part of any organised church. I reflect on whether people’s interaction with the church at a significant time in their lives has made a difference to their active belonging

³ Woodhead, 2012

⁴ Lincoln, 1862

to the fellowship of the church and how the church nationally and locally has evolved to meet this pronounced evolution of society. We shall see that as populations grew in Essex, churches were built but congregations remained small. Yet the ministry of the church came into its own, and still comes into its own, at times of bereavement whether local or national. This work seeks to draw attention to ordinary attitudes, practices and un-creeded beliefs found among many of those who live in 21st century Canvey Island and raise them to their rightful place in the church and academic study.

All the people who currently live in Canvey Island, whether they turn to the church at significant moments in their life or not, are products of their history. As Martyn Percy observes, “one does not need to be a sociologist to understand that class, ethnicity, gender, age and aesthetics all exercise powerful influences on the theological construction of reality that comprises ecclesial cosmologies”.⁵ These factors will become apparent in this work. While the formal structures of obvious belonging to the church have faded, people’s sense of the spiritual has remained undimmed. Such spirituality calls upon poetry and the concept of angels, the lighting of candles, honouring anniversaries of death and the ritual of the funeral to encapsulate the recognition and the healing of grief. The church’s central selling point of hope is as necessary, and valued, today as it ever has been among a cross section of society.

My thesis is that the task of the Church in these days is to recognize and sanctify much of the language and many of the practices of those who do not belong to a worshipping congregation and to acknowledge that the church is bigger and wider than the traditional structures allow. The church must seek to engage with those who come to church only at Christmas or not at all and with those who come to the church hall for aromatherapy, karate, line-dancing, Majorettes, U3A, bingo, bowls and Tai Chi. I suggest that the church is called to take and bless the seemingly inadequate loaves and fish found in the massive crowd of modern civilization: the crowd that hungers and thirsts for it knows-not-what. This is a hunger and a thirst which is particularly acute in the face of loss and bereavement. The populist surge of the 21st century champions ideals of individual and immediate

⁵ Percy 2010:1

satisfaction along with authentic experience and the ability to express an opinion on anything and everything. Smartphones, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other social media platforms give the individual person unprecedented arenas in which to take issue with the traditional, the hitherto authoritative and the perceived forces that are to blame for any current ill. Such individual voices do not readily give themselves to the collective rhythm of liturgy and worship. But if the church pays attention to the often apparently discordant voices, a way can be found to recognize, harness and bless the underlying sense of humanity in search of a voice, in search of meaning, healing and identity particularly in the face of bereavement. Such varied and discordant voices have ever been a reality: the mere existence of a closed canon of Gospels and Epistles excluding other works labelled as apocryphal, shows that from earliest times people have sought to express truths in sundry and differing ways.

We shall see that in 2014 alone one hundred and forty-five thousand families and individuals in grief welcomed the Church of England minister into their homes - often for the first time ever. I suggest that they see the minister as more than the clerical arm of the welfare state.⁶ This thesis seeks to examine what it is these families require in a minister. We shall try to understand something of the church background of this particular community in Essex. The thesis shall further consider the work of Civil celebrants to discover the extent to which the needs of mourners are met by ostensibly secular ceremonies and the degree to which such ceremonies borrow the language and music of confessional religion to make them recognizable to the wider circle of family and friends of the deceased. Their work presents the church with at once a major challenge and a valuable opportunity to engage with the hopes and fears of ordinary people in the 21st century.

I examine what it is that ordinary families, uneducated in catechism, church doctrine or tradition, hope for in a minister whose ministrations have been requested often via the funeral director. I suggest the possibility that one thing such people seek is to establish some order on the chaos that, often suddenly, has been visited upon their family and their

⁶ Billings, 2010:147

very life when the death of one of their number has occurred. I seek to demonstrate that contemporary people's alleged denial of a life after death is only apparent and not real. I propose to show that when a number of people of Canvey Island in this century call upon the ministry of the church it is because they have perceived the local church to be faithful to its own vocation of being a blessing to all. That is to say, the church is perceived as being a conduit of divine favour, strength and protection for the community and for the individuals that make up that community, even though any concept of the divine is largely unformulated and vague. I suggest that the church has a choice – throw up collective holy hands in horror at the godlessness of the times, or amend working practices to communicate the eternal good news of God and serve the present age. The role of the church in this age needs to be authentic to itself, to those who count themselves as members of the body of Christ, as well as to those who feel themselves to be outside any recognizable embrace of the church. As Martyn Percy asserts, “few people come to faith because they have been convinced by a powerful preacher, or by the sight of a miracle. What brings people to lasting faith is the quality of help, friendship and life offered by the church, and the relationships made in and beyond its boundaries.”⁷ The church sees itself as called to proclaim the Kingdom of God. As we shall see, such language may not now be universally recognised but the concept endures. The church has needed to engage, not only with its view of itself but also, with an understanding of how the community in which it stands views the mere fact, let alone the ministry, of the church. When any suggestion is made that a church in England should be closed due to lack of attendees, the community in which it stands rises up to defend the existence of “their” church – the church which they currently do not attend! A large section of the community takes comfort in the fact of a church building in their midst and nurtures a communal memory of school visits, weddings, christenings and funerals attended. The church, along with the pub, the corner shop, the post office, the playing fields, the school and the cinema, point to the reality of a community in a particular place. And it is the church that, by its simple presence, speaks of continuity and otherness – that there was something before the present time and there will be something afterwards.

⁷ Percy, 2010:42

And so, twelve years after her fourteen-year-old daughter's funeral in Canvey Island, Donna posts on Facebook that it was on this day that "everyone got to say goodbye to Maddie. St Nic's was packed to the rafters. The church was full of bright colours to match my beautiful daughter and the church fell silent to a white coffin being carried in. The vicar began to sing *The Song of Farewell* and when the school choir joined in up in the rafters my heart truly broke to see the heart-broken faces of these teenagers. I don't remember much about that day, but that will stay with me forever."⁸ By the end of that 12th anniversary day this post had been 'liked' on Facebook by 238 people. Some ministers would regret that the experience of the church's care before and after her daughter's death did not cause Donna or her family to become regular worshipping members of the congregation. But it seems to me that the funeral touched hundreds of people with something of the love and compassion of God. That funeral took place right on the edge between ordinary daily life and the area of transcendent otherness of which we become aware at significant times of our life. The church meets lives that are lived on the edge. It is at this edge where the mission and ministry of the church is to be found, particularly and especially at a time of bereavement. This is the place for the life and witness of the church in the present age.

The *Song of Farewell* to which Donna referred opens with the words, "May the choirs of angels come to greet you." We shall see in Chapter Fourteen how and to what extent this concept of an appeal to angels to conduct the soul of a loved one to a heavenly resting place resonates with people in the 21st century.

Setting

For this work I focus on a community of roughly 40,000 souls who live on an area of land some 4 miles by 7 miles situated in the Thames estuary in the South-East of England and surrounded by a defensive sea wall. The community is called Canvey Island. This area of land in Essex, England is some 30 miles from London and 8 miles from Southend. Many of the families have roots in the community which pre-date the East Coast floods of 1953 in which forty-nine of the inhabitants of the island died. Most of the families

⁸ "Everyone got to say goodbye"@Donna, 13 July 2019

came originally from East London and we shall look at their engagement with the church in London before they moved further east into Essex.

The insider/outsider debate

In reflecting on the views traditions and practices of the people of Canvey Island who turn to the church at a time of bereavement I have to ask myself whether I am, as a minister, an insider or an outsider. Although, as we shall see, I grew up in a very different environment, I believe that I am both. The volume of papers entitled *Theorizing Faith*⁹ speaks from the points of view both of those who arrive in a community specifically to study that community and those who decide to study a community having belonged to it for some time. Each of them finds it difficult to pin down what exactly is meant by religion and how the insider/outsider debate is relevant to them. Helen Waterhouse finds it helpful to see insider/outsider as “an umbrella term which embraces variety”.¹⁰

Elisabeth Arweck and others turn to the Weberian notion of *verstehen* which has to do with sympathetic empathy enabling an attitude of openness to and understanding of beliefs and practices without actually becoming a practitioner oneself. Arweck signals the danger of this in that sympathetic empathy can become “empathetic sympathy in cases where the academic observer gets so close to the representatives of the faith s/he studies that a certain amount of detachment is lost or – as the saying goes – that the researcher goes native.”¹¹

Jo Pearson makes the point that “objectivity as an absolute cannot exist – research, especially research which involves people, will always have some effect on the researcher, and will always be filtered by the researcher’s own subjective views.”¹² I suggest that in Canvey Island I have not gone native if the term is understood in a

⁹ Arweck & Stringer, 2002

¹⁰ Waterhouse, 2002

¹¹ Arweck & Stringer, 2002: 123

¹² Pearson, 2002

pejorative sense. I arrived 23 years ago as a member, as it were, of an extended family increasingly recognised as such by those who live in the parish I serve. For the purpose of this work I position myself with Peter Collins¹³ in resolving the inside/outsider conundrum as seeing myself as occupying that space indicated by the backslash between insider/outsider. I am the backslash between the white and the black. I am the backslash between the colonised and the coloniser. I am the backslash between the received traditions of the church and the longings of contemporary people who seek to find meaning in death and bereavement. In my work among the people of the parish I did not step into a vacuum but rather into a long history of church and state, the received views on marriage and divorce, sexuality and suicide. In my life in Canvey Island I have not simply been Rector: I have also been husband, expectant dad, father, parent in doctor's waiting room, at school gate and at school assemblies. I have been a member of sundry local clubs and a person in the queue at the supermarket. In Martyn Percy's words, "a certain organic relationship with the community was assumed."¹⁴

The culture of the Caribbean society in which I was nurtured and that of Canvey Island are, on the face of it, quite different. Martin Stringer¹⁵, following Wagner¹⁶ suggests that to construct a culture is to seek to confine and control the people being described. But I suggest that to recognize two cultures as being somewhat different and somewhat similar allows one to appreciate a common heritage while acknowledging difference in language and presentation.

Eleanor Nesbitt suggests that no researcher can be either a complete insider or a complete outsider. She writes, "Both researcher and researched inhabit a shared cultural space and ... neither can be quite the same after the fieldwork encounter".¹⁷

¹³ Collins, 2002

¹⁴ Percy, 2010: 165

¹⁵ Arweck & Stringer, 2002: 13

¹⁶ Wagner 1981

¹⁷ Nesbitt, 2002

Lowell W Livesey¹⁸ coins the term “ethnographic condition” by which he means the “constant need to negotiate and re-negotiate one’s status, seeking just the right measure of member-like acceptance, while preserving critical distance sufficient for ‘scientific’ discernment and honest reporting.” He goes on to say that “as field researchers we are almost always both insiders and outsiders, albeit in a variety of respects and dimensions, in different degrees and in a partly-negotiated balance between the two.”¹⁹ This is precisely the condition of one ministering in this decade of this century in Canvey Island.

Being in the space occupied by the backslash is particularly true of my relationship with the people of Canvey Island in that the material upon which I rely was not harvested or compiled with a doctoral thesis in mind. The letters, emails, Facebook posts, rituals and practices quoted and described were offered and enacted naturally in response to people’s experience of bereavement and the place of the church in their time of grief . The bereaved did not know that their views would form part of a thesis (though the permission of those who may be identifiable has been obtained since). They were not filling in a questionnaire or answering carefully crafted questions. In some parts of our encounter I will have been an outsider and in others an insider. In others still I will have been an outsider with an insider role. Like Janus, the backslash faces both ways. As Collins puts it, “Each of us is bound to be both self and other. No matter how many similarities exist between self and other, there will always be differences.”²⁰ He concludes further, “comprising a multitude of voices, we each become simultaneously insiders and outsiders, and therefore the distinction is largely redundant.”²¹

Jo Pearson from her very different perspective of researching a community to which she apparently belonged but to whose beliefs she could not assent, concludes that “the researcher may be able not only to maintain a deep understanding of the community,

¹⁸ Livesey, 2002

¹⁹ Livesey, 2002

²⁰ Collins, 2002

²¹ Collins, 2002

but also to retain an ‘objective’ stance through the application of theory and the adoption of a relevant methodology which allows for both distance *and* involvement.”²²

Method

There is no shortage of sociologists and others with sundry academic backgrounds who have charted the ways in which modern, postmodern and neo-modern people cope with dying, death and bereavement. Many have laboured to understand, explain, justify or dismiss modes of conduct and patterns of belief that are found outside the obvious structures of church belonging. Such practice and belief has been variously labelled “Invisible Religion” (Peter Berger²³), “Ordinary theology” (Jeff Astley²⁴), “Natural Theology” (Daniel Hardy²⁵), “Implicit Religion” (Edward Bailey²⁶), “Implicit Theology” (Martyn Percy²⁷) and “Theology by Heart” (Ellen Clark King²⁸). All these titles are helpful but, by their very nature, limited. Practice and belief shape each other. Both are fluid. Any attempt to encapsulate what is going on and what is believed is out of date almost as soon as it is codified. My experience of ministry in Essex finds that very little of this academic work has filtered through to the practitioners of church organisation and belonging in national, diocesan or local communities. We shall see that time and time again the dying and bereaved fashion their own practice using some of the language and customs inherited from when the church controlled and directed what was done and what could be done, without any reference to canon law or prayer book.

In this work I seek to eradicate the implicit and implied value judgements when academics speak of “ordinary believers” as though the beliefs held, consciously or unconsciously, by people untrained in theology and pastoralia are somehow to be

²² Pearson 2002: 109 Italics hers

²³ Berger, 1970

²⁴ Astley, 2002

²⁵ Hardy, 2002

²⁶ Bailey, 1997

²⁷ Percy, 2010

²⁸ Clark-King, 2004

tolerated rather than acknowledged as being a genuine and real response to life and loss as they are experienced

The times out of which we have now emerged were postmodern.²⁹ Individual feelings and longings become the stuff of public activity. The public funeral incorporates and indeed is devised according to the wishes and belief system of the deceased and the bereaved. A simply modern way (like the rebuilding of parts of some cities in the 1960s and 70s) could not incorporate traditional way. Walter coins the term neo-modern as having followed on from postmodern.³⁰ I suggest that these stages may not be identified precisely in history. There have been traces of each always. Perhaps the genius of the neo-modern way at least generally in the British Isles is that everyone is free to express what they feel without fear of censure. But a purely neo-modern way of expressing the self above all else may find itself shorn of the sheltering safety of the traditional forms of religious ritual, medical expertise and community.

As Rowan Williams put it in a lecture attended by the present author, what is required is an interpreter – not one who will interpret to and for the church – but one who “has the gift of helping people make sense to and of each other”. He went on to say, “Communities don’t just happen. They need nurture, they need to be woven into a unity”.³¹ Such is the history of Canvey Island. And this unity – particularly in the 21st century - is made up of disparate entities.

An Hassidic community has recently arrived in Canvey Island. They send representatives to the open air Service of Remembrance on Armistice Day, contribute to door-to-door collections in Christian Aid Week and allow their children to stand in doorways as the Rotary Christmas Sleigh passes by. To mark their arrival from North London, they attended a dinner at a local hotel to enable them to meet people already established in the community. Men and women were separated simply by a long table

²⁹ Walter, 1994: 41f

³⁰ Walter, 1994: 46

³¹ R. Williams, 2004

laden with food. That event alone, for which the Hassidic community needed to obtain permission from their Rabbi, defies neat pigeon-holing in the life of the wider community of Canvey Island. But it went a long way to allaying fears on the part of the established community with regard to the nature and the place of the Hassidic community in the ongoing life of Canvey Island. It gave the Hassidic community the confidence to approach the church to ask, for example, whether branches of trees planted in the churchyard which overhung the road could be pruned as passing under such branches contravened their regulation that forbids them entering a cemetery. They have also felt able to work with ministers of the church in preparing to address students at secondary schools about the way of life of their community.

Callum Brown in his postscript to *The Death of Christian Britain* ³² is at pains to point out that his work did not suggest that what had died in the 1960s in Britain was Christianity or the churches “but rather *the dominance of a Christian culture within British Society*”³³ This Christian culture, as backed by the state through censorship of the arts, commerce and sexuality, was no longer perforce the overriding arbiter of human life. However, Brown still maintains that the decline in numbers attending church on Sundays or even seeking baptism for their children or a church wedding for themselves is evidence that “the British people started to reject the role of religion in their lives”.³⁴ He goes on to suggest that a new phenomenon has begun: “the decline of Christian belief”.³⁵ Brown quotes Steve Bruce’s work as maintaining that “from the 1960s faith itself – in God, in the afterlife, in the supernatural – has been in decline.”³⁶ The stories of the people of Canvey Island told in this work beg to differ. As the sway of religious sensibilities has become less coercive and more discursive, so personal piety has become practically impossible to measure and demonstrate statistically. Faith is evidenced, rather, in the desire for the language of eternity to be heard at the time of bereavement and farewell. It is evident when one who has no obvious, measurable sense of belonging

³² Brown, 2009: 200

³³ Brown’s italics

³⁴ Brown, 2009: 189

³⁵ Brown, 2009: 190

³⁶ S. Bruce, 1996

to a worshipping congregation, turns to a minister of the church to conduct the obsequies of a loved one. Those who turn to the church in Canvey Island demonstrate that religious sensibility is implicit. It is evidenced in everyday sayings and activity; in the family traditions enacted at Christmas and Easter and on Valentine's Day and in the performance of rituals in the face of bereavement. A deduction of what people believe may be arrived at from what they do and say rather than from what creeds they are able to recite.

Frequently in this work I let the bereaved speak for themselves before, during or after the funeral. This work is not an extended treatise on secularization, liturgical reform, the theology of grace or the concept of angels. Secularization theory provides no answer to the mutation that Christianity is undergoing in England currently. Whether secularization is deemed to have begun centuries ago or in the last 70 years, the specific, real, pastoral situations alluded to in this work express aspects of ministry in their particular contexts. Their stories will find echoes in the experience of many. They are presented as such rather than as formal case studies. As Brene Brown pithily puts it, "stories are data with soul".³⁷ Some historians and sociologists still treat first person accounts with suspicion as not being strong evidence. But as Jeanette Winterson observes: "When someone tells me what they heard or saw, I believe them, and I believe their friend who also saw, but not in the same way, and I put these accounts together and I will not have a seamless wonder but a sandwich laced with mustard of my own".³⁸ While I am aware of the maxim that the plural of anecdote is not data, I value Peter Berger's assertion that "one's own faith and the experience brought on by this faith will actually constitute 'data' or 'evidence' upon which inductive reflection can take place."³⁹

All of the people mentioned by name or their bereaved relatives have given me express permission to quote them and/or to allude to their situation. Their stories are usually about

³⁷ B. Brown, 2013

³⁸ Winterson 1991: 93

³⁹ Berger, 1979: 141

disconnection and a search for connection. Occasionally I have been able to set down the words of the dying when they have spoken or written about their wishes for their funeral and have intimated something of their view of this life and the coming existence following their death. This is what Callum Brown called “discursive Christianity”.⁴⁰ This is to do with ensuring that the voices of the 21st century bereaved and the dying in Canvey Island are heard, attended to and valued as we seek to understand something of how religious inheritance is adopted and adapted in the present time by those who can no longer be described as “churchgoers” or “church members”. In this I stand in continuity with those who affirm that, despite the impression that people had forsaken all religion in these last years, “‘history from the bottom up’ brought reassessments based on oral tradition and autobiographical sources, showing how strong were the continuities in popular religious experience between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries”.⁴¹ The particular value of quoting directly from emails, homespun poetry, social media posts *et al* in this work is that the words quoted were written at the time of bereavement and loss. They are not words written from the vantage point of later reflection and analysis of what was felt at the time. As Brown has said, such words “reveal a reflexivity to the discursive world in which the work was written and in which it was read.”⁴²

I call several witnesses to support my case of a community’s reliance on the church in times of bereavement and the need of the church to recognise and sanctify the language and actions of the bereaved. As noted, several times I let the bereaved and the dying speak for themselves. Another witness is the written history of the people who make up the community being discussed - from when they dwelt in East London before moving to the cleaner and more open spaces of Essex. Thirdly, I think it is in literature that a sense of the human mind can be best expressed. And so I quote poetry - both ancient and modern - alongside homespun lines of the bereaved crafted in the pain of their loss or adapted from the experience of others. Poetry may be seen as prayer. In grief the bereaved turn to their concept of the heavens to make sense of their situation and to assuage their pain.

⁴⁰ Brown 2009: 12

⁴¹ Brown 2009: 29

⁴² Brown 2009: 117

The bereaved express their loss through the prism of what they already know. Fourthly, Biblical narratives alongside modern scholarship are pressed into service as we seek to capture what it is that makes life have meaning in the face of bereavement for those who live in the 21st century in a discrete part of Essex. People in the current age for the most part have forgotten the language of grief. I show that the minister can and does bring into the home of the bereaved the vocabulary of loss. Scholarship through the ages will help us see how the contemporary mind-set might be understood with the help of theories of reciprocity, the value of the gift of ministry, sacred time and sacred space, the place of science, the psychology of suicide, sexuality and dementia, the place of ritual in community, the changing regard and respect for authority and language in general.

When the neurosurgeon Paul Kalanithi faced the prospect of his own death at the age of 35 due to lung cancer, he found that language was “an almost supernatural force, existing between people, bringing our brains, shielded in centimetre-thick skulls, into communion”.⁴³ A word only has meaning if it is shared. Ministers bring in their very selves the Word of God first heard at the moment of creation. This may sound terribly pious and holy. But the minister does not meet the bereaved in the metaphorical sanctuary; rather the minister meets them in the sitting room or the churchyard, in the church doorway or the coffee bar and gently walks with them as far as they are able to go. The Word, however expressed in the 21st century, finds a place and strikes a chord in the soul of the bereaved. The timeless word of compassion, empathy and understanding brings light into the temporary darkness of loss. Deep speaks to deep. A relationship is created in the reality of suffering and the need for a funeral. The question is raised as to what makes human life have meaning even, or especially, in moments of death and loss. The minister allows the bereaved to rail against a God who allows undeserved suffering, and is not threatened when one in the grip of grief acknowledges, like Dostoevsky’s Ivan, that he cannot accept nor agree with the world God has created.⁴⁴ Together the minister and the bereaved explore what it is that makes life worthy of continued living. The minister does not bring the whole sum of human knowledge into the dwelling place of the bereaved.

⁴³ Kalanithi, 2017: 39

⁴⁴ Dostoevsky, 1990

Knowledge grows through the relationship of minister with the bereaved and the community - and it is never complete.

I examine statistics of current church attendance and what people say about believing and belonging. Finally, we shall acknowledge the reality that the church does not have, and never has had, a monopoly on pastoral care and that the church is now only one choice in a crowded field when it comes to the conduct of funerals in the 21st century. And we shall see that wherever the minister of the church is not emotionally available to parishioners in a realistic 21st century way, bereaved parishioners will swiftly turn to other forms of civil ministry.

Light on the mysterious

Funeral ministry has changed in the same way that just about everything else in society has changed. A great section of the British population remains interested as the light has been let in over the past 70 years on the exciting mystery of the Royal Family as the Coronation, royal weddings, funerals (but not baptisms) have been televised. Editors know that sales will rise when their publication features a photo of any member of the family. We have seen the Queen declare 1992 an '*annus horribilis*' for her and her family. She spoke with an honesty and humanity that we cannot imagine coming from, say, her Grandfather, George V. The years 2020 onwards saw the Queen's second son in difficulty through his relationship with a convicted man and a book was published detailing the rift between the Duke of Cambridge and his younger brother. Meanwhile, many church buildings have been 're-ordered': the altar has moved from the far distance to the nave; celebrants are now seen to face the congregation rather than in the traditional direction of God; parishes without vicars are said to be in vacancy rather than in interregnum; and hierarchy and deference have given way to focus groups, synods and committees. People are no longer in great fear of head teachers or local policemen. The powerful vicar has been replaced by a team ministry which runs what looks suspiciously like an international voluntary association. Some aspects of this dissertation may seem tangential and even irrelevant to the study of the place of the church in the lives of people at the time of terminal diagnosis and bereavement. But I suggest that people's view of the relevance of

the church in their lives is conditioned by the place of the church in society as a whole. Their view of spirituality and organised religion evolves in the context of their family and social life in which the joys and travails of the Royal family, television personalities, football stars, psychics and tabloid headlines are still of great interest. These aspects of daily life have meaning and value which the church disregards to its own disadvantage.

It is my intention that this work is not a simply academic enterprise but one that reflects the triumph of hope in the often dark ordinariness of genuine, experienced human lives. The work does not dwell at extraordinary length on semantics. I wish the voice of the bereaved and the dying to be heard at the highest levels of church organisation and academic endeavour. This highlights the difficulty in a work of this kind. Sociologists, using survey data, strike what might be called a high to mid-range level of comment while ministers at the coal face of parish life operate more at the mid to low-range of knowledge and theoretical abstraction. Neither work is right or wrong but it is hoped that judgement of one may not be made from the point of view of the other.

I grew up in Barbados, a colony of the British Empire. The country gained Independence within the Commonwealth and became a Republic in 2021. I bring myself from the very different background of the Caribbean interacting with a post-colonial, religiously-diverse (and non-religiously diverse) Essex community for the past twenty-four years and I focus on the effect of observing, as well as interacting with, the culture of this community set against the culture of a nation, both historically and currently. I have striven not just to study but to live a particular experience of meaning. I am ordained into the Anglican Church – the Established Church of England. In London and at Oxford I was trained in systematic theology. As a Rector I am given the responsibility of sharing with the Bishop the Cure of Souls within the parish in which I am appointed to serve. This is a responsibility for all the souls in my parish and not just those who come to church. Some ministers understand their role to be one of ministering only to the gathered congregation. I believe that everyone belongs to the church whether they attend acts of worship in the church building regularly, frequently or not at all. Their creation by God makes them children of God and my mission is to bring the hope of this truth as evidenced in the life,

death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ realistically into the lives of people as they go about their ordinary lives. Such hope should be offered to the collective community as standard rather than something that depends on an individual's perceived deserving of God's love. The parish is made up of people whose belief, if any, in God has no system. Indeed, many would say they are not religious while having a working belief in a life that follows this one: another life in which the pain is ended and the sickness is no more. An opportunity for engagement between my training and their polaroid snapshots of eternal life presents itself particularly at the time of bereavement which necessitates a pause in striving for job satisfaction, career advancement, the creation of wealth and the pursuit of happiness. In my role I aim to lead, serve, represent and enable a particular community of faith which exists in many ways for the sake of those who do not belong to it. Death, loss and bereavement do not recognise church walls and neither should the minister.

The British nation currently is ambivalent about the place of communities of faith in the fabric of society. Sometimes such communities are seen as bars to knitting together a community and sometimes they are seen as resources to further just that purpose. I am clear that when the church takes seriously the hesitant, apparently secular, offerings of those who have no tradition of church belonging, active church congregations grow and the community of the church and the wider community enter into a symbiotic, elusive, exhilarating relationship in which both thrive and the work of God is manifest in deeply intrinsic and publicly visible ways. But the growth of a church community must never be the motivation for ministry. Such growth, if experienced, is a side effect of effective ministry – a result of people finding that the church is capable of recognising and honouring the dark moments of bereavement in the early days of abject grief, in the planning and the conduct of the funeral and in the follow up in the days, months and years afterwards.

This study is timely as these last two decades have seen in the United Kingdom and the world a period of profound change in the place of the church in community. We have witnessed the rise of other funeral ministries and hitherto undreamt-of possibilities outside the traditional parameters of ecclesiastical engagement. I had intended to write this study anonymously, referring simply to 'The vicar' but soon saw that as an anonymous

publication it would lose most of its value as the result of an engagement with real people in real situations often at the worst time of their lives.

I hope to demonstrate how the place and times from which a large cross-section of the people of Canvey Island came, and the modern context in which they live, all influence their view of death, bereavement, continuity, belonging and identity along with the church's place in their lives when they have to deal with the practicalities, and their underlying understanding, of death. I have selected moments of bereavement with which I have been personally engaged as a parish priest. By examining the circumstances of death and the way in which each family sought to deal with the ensuing days and practical realities, I hope to demonstrate what it is that, in these allegedly post-Christian days, people are searching for when they turn to a minister of the church to conduct the ritual of funeral. Thus we shall see what the minister in turn can offer a modern community which would prefer in Richard Rohr's words, "resurrection without death, answers without doubt, light without darkness, the conclusion without the process".⁴⁵

Before proceeding to meet several in the community under consideration it is probably helpful to reflect further on who I am and what early influences brought me to feel strongly about the ministry of the church at a time of bereavement.

⁴⁵ Rohr, 2016: 146

CHAPTER TWO

Who Am I?

As Thomas Lynch, undertaker and poet, says, “How we come to be the ones we are seems a question worthy of inspection.”⁴⁶ I grew up in Barbados where the culture wordlessly dictated that games involving cards or dice were not played on Sundays. I grew up with a black Barbadian father and a white English mother. I was six years old on 26th May 1962 when my mother greeted me at breakfast time with the words, “Granddaddy is dead”. I knew instinctively that she was wrong. I suppose in an effort to play for time I asked, “So who is going to take us to the Queen’s birthday parade?” This was one of my grandfather’s fixed tasks each year. I have no idea whether my mother answered the question. I would not have heard it anyway as I was dealing with the fact that although Granddaddy had died (I had visited him on his sick bed every day for several weeks; I had heard the phone ring in the middle of the night and I had heard my father’s car drive away at speed), I knew that “dead” did not describe his current state. But at six years old I had no words to argue with my mother. This was just something I knew. Looking back, the only place I could have acquired the knowledge I had then and the belief I have now, sixty years later, is from the fact that for months I had tended caterpillars in a box in my bedroom, delighted as each changed into a chrysalis and with a mixture of joy and sadness had let each of the butterflies go free. So I reasoned that if my caterpillars could undergo such a dramatic change, then Granddaddy was not going to do less. This state that my mother was calling ‘dead’ was in fact a different kind of life and a prettier and altogether more splendid life at that. It would be many years before I came across words that expressed this better than I could at the age of six: “The day which we fear as our last is but the birthday of eternity”;⁴⁷ or “When a man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language.”⁴⁸

I had not noticed at that stage that my parents were of different colours – different races –

⁴⁶ Lynch, 2019: 16

⁴⁷ Seneca, c 60

⁴⁸ Donne, 1624

and if I identified with either of them it was with my mother who had been born and raised in Surrey, England. In predominantly black Barbados I was considered white. I lived in the large house at the top of the hill, called Tudor Gap, where mixed-race and black Tudors had lived since the emancipation of the enslaved in 1834. Earlier that year Mary Tudor, the white widow of a white sugar plantation owner, had bequeathed in her will six enslaved people to be distributed among her sons.

Then, at the age of sixteen, on a church youth exchange scheme in Virginia, I was described in a party game as being black. That perhaps was the moment which, more than any other, prepared me for a ministry among the bereaved, those who feel displaced, alienated from what others seem to take for granted. To be neither black nor white is to belong to neither race fully and yet to be accepted by both as one who has some sense of what is being felt in any given situation: to be able to visit the bereaved for a while; to bridge the gap between all being well and nothing making sense; to interpret unvoiced feelings and to speak words that heal. And when all is done that can be done, to move on. For the minister in the house of the bereaved there is “no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come”.⁴⁹

My grandfather, like his father before him, was a funeral director (in those days called an Undertaker) and had clearly kept the best coffin for himself. It was a silver Canadian Casket with an angel at each corner. At the funeral I had no difficulty picturing the contents of the coffin being simply Granddaddy’s shell as I had buried several chrysalis shells in my time. In the cemetery I watched as my father, an Anglican priest, committed his father’s body to the ground and his father’s soul to God. I did not understand the words but again I knew what was going on and I also knew that someday I would be doing that. And so it was that twenty-seven years later I stood at the head of my father’s grave and said the words for him. On each of those occasions family and friends went the distance with the dead and shovelled the earth into the grave until it formed a mound on which the mourners could lay their flowers. It would be another twenty-eight years before I heard Tom Lynch say at a conference entitled *Taking Funerals Seriously* that in 1962

⁴⁹ The Letter to The Hebrews 13:14 (NRSV)

and 1989 we “got the living where they needed to go by getting the dead where they needed to be”.⁵⁰

So the cemetery was the very ground and compost of the embryonic call on my life: this, along with the realisation of my heritage based in both the life of the enslaved and the slave owner. As I grew up I heard theories about heaven and hell, original sin and venial sin. I learned of God and the devil. And eventually I learned of grace – that unmerited, free gift of a creator who does not deal with us as we deserve. From my grandmother I learned of eternal, inextinguishable, unconditional love.

And so to England

In England at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st in south-east England we find that the culture is different. The times are different and yet there is still a substantial section of the population that feels instinctively that death is not the end and, when it comes to taking leave of a loved one, requires some reference to the ongoing life of the one apparently dead. Many people still want a representative of the church to stand by the coffin and utter words and perform actions that encapsulate the place of the deceased in the procession of those who have gone before and who will follow. They want a minister to hear and to be able to tell their story. In an age of constant noise and too much information they want words to matter – words to encapsulate the life lived, the life now ended. They want the life of the deceased to have mattered in the grand scheme of things. And the minister of the church is the perfect timeless embodiment of on-going and eternal life. They want the minister to confirm that life is not random, that the energy that was the loved one still is and that, somehow, the love carries on. This modern poem entitled simply *Belief*, by Ann Thorp, proves apposite in the current age:

I have to believe
That you still exist
Somewhere,
That you still watch me
Sometimes,
That you still love me
Somehow.

⁵⁰ See also Lynch 2019: 129

I have to believe
That life has meaning
Somehow,
That I am useful here
Sometimes,
That I make small differences
Somewhere.

I have to believe
That I need to stay here
For some time,
That all this teaches me
Something,
So that I can meet you again
Somewhere.⁵¹

These words affirm the conviction held by the neurosurgeon and holocaust survivor, Viktor Frankl, in his analysis of the human condition, that the most pressing need of a human being is to see that life has meaning.⁵² He affirmed that it is essential to find meaning in each and every form of life, even in the most brutal of situations, and so find a reason to continue living.

I am conscious that as I engage with the people of Canvey Island whose roots are in East London, I am bringing to them the self that grew up in a family and a culture of funeral directors and ministers of religion. The vernacular of the Bible permeated our family conversation. In my childhood home if my father wanted to tell me something he did not want my mother to know about, he would start the conversation with, “Tell it not in Gath, publish it not in the streets of Ashkelon”.⁵³ My parents were teachers and when one of them was surprised that the other did not know something they would exclaim, “Art thou a teacher in Israel and knowest not these things?”⁵⁴ When I was deemed to have recovered from a fever or other such illness they would say one to another that he is “clothed and in his right mind”.⁵⁵ And finally, if it was felt that I was driving the family car at too great a

⁵¹ Thorp, 2015

⁵² Frankl, 1997

⁵³ 2 Samuel 1:20 (KJV)

⁵⁴ John 3:10 (KJV)

⁵⁵ Mark 5:15 (KJV)

speed, my father would say that my driving was “like the driving of Jehu, the son of Nimshi, for he drives furiously.”⁵⁶

In that Barbadian culture death is mourned openly, funerals are lavish and long, the bodies of the dead are visible in front parlours and in chapels of rest and during funeral services. The business of grief is muscular there: relatives, friends and colleagues carry the coffin; they guide the ropes as, like the friends lowering the paralysed man to Jesus, they lower the precious body to the gate of eternal life. Jackets are removed in the sweltering sun, shovels are taken up and the grave is filled with soil and rock and stone.

The current culture of Essex is two or three generations removed from such immediacy. Time was when moments of birth, courtship, grievous illness, nursing, death, joy and sorrow were all conducted under the one roof of the family home. Now the business of illness and death is sub-contracted out. When the death has occurred at home, funeral directors ask the mourners to withdraw to another room in the house while the body is put in a bag, zipped up and transported from the place of death; professionals prepare the body for burial and carry the coffin in and out of the place of the funeral; coffins are generally closed during funeral services and graves are filled in after mourners have left the cemetery. After twenty-four years of my ministry in the same parish, after twenty-four years of two cultures meeting in the parish context, both I and they have changed. As Penny Summerfield wrote in her study of the place of women in religious life, “personal narratives draw on the generalized subject available in discourse to construct the particular personal subject. It is thus necessary to encompass within oral history analysis and interpretation, not only the voice that speaks for itself, but also the voices that speak to it, the discursive formulations from which understandings are selected and within which accounts are made.”⁵⁷ If in this study I may be seen as an ethnographer with a frog’s eye view as opposed to a bird’s eye view – in the thick of things rather than flying high above the action where sociologists tend to glide - then the words of Scholte are pertinent: “The ethnographic situation is defined not only by the native society in question, but also

⁵⁶ 2 Kings 9:20 (KJV)

⁵⁷ Summerfield 1998: 15

by the ethnological tradition 'in the head' of the ethnographer. Once he is actually in the field, the native's presuppositions also become operative, and the entire situation turns into complex intercultural mediation and a dynamic interpersonal experience."⁵⁸

Scholte sees a reflexive approach as a necessary preliminary to understanding the place and effect of the observer in the study and analysis of the observed. So I understand that my observation of, my effect on, and the on-going relationship between me as minister, and those to whom I minister particularly in times of bereavement, is complicated and mutually affective. The minister who comes to the house with a fixed and immutable idea of how the funeral will be conducted and what all the ingredients will be, will not be invited by the funeral director to conduct many more funerals. The identity of the minister must always be subject to a relationship with the bereaved. The minister takes the risk of shrinking in the face of the raw grief of the bereaved. Very early in the conversation ministers are not an anonymous mouthpiece for the church but rather named human beings who bring themselves and their own experience of loss to the room. The discernment of what is going on in the house of the bereaved in the 21st century is not neutral: it is highly subjective. It is borne out of the minister's own experience of grief in a secularised age. Such experience does not have to be rehearsed or even mentioned. It is simply a contributory factor in the compassion and the perceptions that are brought to bear in the home of the bereaved.

Judith Okely makes clear that consideration of autobiography by the observer is not mere navel gazing. "The concern for an autobiographical element in anthropology is to work through the specificity of the anthropologist's self in order to contextualize and transcend it".⁵⁹ Okely argues against those who would say that consideration of the effect of the observer in observing and concluding is in some way narcissistic or self-adoring. On the contrary those who are not aware of the reality of reflexivity in their study might well be considered self-satisfied and arrogant.

⁵⁸ Scholte, 1974: 438

⁵⁹ Okely, 1992: 2

It may be agreed that studying the bereavement practices of parishioners in my ministry might be seen as fieldwork. Kirsten Hastrup suggests that fieldwork “is situated between autobiography and anthropology. It connects an important personal experience with a general field of knowledge.”⁶⁰ So when I enter the house of the bereaved wearing my clerical collar, I not only represent the church willing to hear something of the life now ended and to help the mourners plan an appropriate funeral, but I also am a particular person with a history and an experience of loss within a particular cultural identity. This particularity is immediately evident in that I am of mixed race with an accent that is mistaken for southern Irish by all except those who have been to the Caribbean. When I leave the house an hour or two later I hope and perceive that the mourners have confidence that I have listened and that the funeral will be particular to the one gone and to the needs of all the mourners. In coming to the conclusion that the funeral is in safe hands they have experienced something of my acceptance and understanding of the reality of loss and the need for them to grieve in a way that is helpful to them and acceptable in their own cultural context. For many mourners this will have been the first time that a minister of religion has sat in their living room. This fact in itself is part of the clue that so much has changed since the death of the one loved. There has been, and there still is, an emergency. The minister is well placed and well timed to help the bereaved divine what it is that may now emerge. The loss of the one who has died may have no social, economic or political ramifications but, nevertheless, the minister is alive to the internal psychological consequences for the loved ones left behind.

In the parish of Canvey Island, the vicar who now engages with the bereaved is the adult version of the child who watched his father say the words of committal over his grandfather’s casket. But the parishioners of Canvey Island have not grown up with the vocabulary and assumptions with which I was weaned as outlined above. Their concerns about the one now gone, in that first meeting of funeral planning, may be more basic and have to do with fundamental questions like, “Where is he now?” This is not the time to challenge or question the bereaved and their perception of this life or the next, if any. Our job at that moment is to bring as much of ourselves as we know to be present and attentive

⁶⁰ Hastrup, 1992: 117

in their time of shock and numbness as they face an uncertain future that they can hardly comprehend past the next meal. I am the guest of a family or an individual who thought they had some semblance of control over their life; but then, in a moment something has cancelled such control. In my relationship with them I give them permission to submit to this loss of control and the mystery of the next steps. This is an uphill task, working as we are against a backdrop of a worldwide collective fear of doom, apocalypse and Armageddon rather than with what should be a prevailing message of cosmic hope and light which the darkness of fear cannot overcome. This hill was particularly steep in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020/22.

At a recent conference for clergy addressed by researchers of the *Church of England Funeral Project* sponsored by the Archbishops' Council, it was suggested that some bereaved people are anxious that they might be seen as hypocritical in inviting a minister to conduct the funeral when the deceased and they themselves could not be regarded as overtly religious and are hard put to recall the last time they attended a church service. The planning of the funeral is about far more than the planning of the funeral: the encounter transcends the obvious boundaries of the subject being discussed. Both the minister and the bereaved are engaged in a performance. Trust and affection are built up; the roles and the script for the staging of the funeral are being constructed and refined; the back story is being agreed. As Hastrup puts it succinctly, "It is a social drama confronting the performers with their unbounded selves."⁶¹

In this work I am aware of the distinction between the emic view of life in how the people of the community being represented here see themselves, and my etic perspective in which I seek to identify underlying trends, history and current practices. This work cannot come to a tidy conclusion because the forty thousand people who make up the community of Canvey Island are themselves living in a state of flux as society, family patterns, economy and culture undergo rapid changes. The best I can do is capture, offer and reflect on snapshots of life in particular moments in the face of loss and bereavement. The ideology of the young growing up today in Canvey Island is different from that of the elderly who

⁶¹Hastrup, 1992: 118

moved to the island from East London in 1954. The world view of those trained in social media and computer programming differs markedly from that of the ground worker, farm hand or factory worker.

Planning the funeral

In the drama of the funeral planning the minister elicits from the bereaved the story so far. As families often do not speak to each other of things that matter to them at a deep level, the minister may be the first person ever to ask the questions and listen to the answers of how the relationship with the deceased began, what were its high points and its low points, its regrets and its joys. In the words of Rowan Williams, “speaking changes things”.⁶² Just saying the words introduces new possibilities. And things are changed by the mere presence of the church in the person of the minister. Some families struggle to tell the minister what the departed one would have wanted in terms of music or liturgy. Many have no idea of the details of the life story and the skilled minister will have to make something out of very little. We are given permission to live on the edge of other people’s lives. We find that to be part of the narrative, to speak and to listen, is to generate signs and symbols, to invite interpretation of what has occurred and to come to a new appreciation of the meaning of loss. We help the bereaved understand that half the battle is to respond appropriately to what has occurred rather than to major on the event itself. And where the death has been particularly tragic – that of a child or a death due to murder or suicide, the minister can absorb the anger of the bereaved who, like Martha and Mary, might understandably cry out, If the Lord had been here, he would not have died!⁶³ The minister helps the mourners to see the world, with its cycle of birth and death, in a new light. The love the mourner has for the one now gone can then be perceived as a reflection of the love God has for the one now received into his nearer presence. In the words of the enduring musical *Les Miserables*, “To love another person is to see the face of God”.⁶⁴ The bereaved may well find it easier to tell the visiting minister what they have never said to each other. Such conversations bear fruit in helping the bereaved to face not only the

⁶² Williams, 2018:17

⁶³ Following the death of their brother Lazarus recounted in John Chapter Eleven

⁶⁴ Kretzmer 1980 - present

loss of the one loved but also to face their own death in the future and to (re)discover what it is to be a family made up of different people at different stages of life. And we ministers must never lose the sense that we are hugely privileged in these moments to “observe families as they are forged in a furnace of love and belonging.”⁶⁵

Most of the details shared and the perceptions gleaned by the minister will not be used overtly in the funeral but they will undergird what is said, what is alluded to and what is tacitly understood. The bereaved need to talk, to tell the story. The minister understands the need for the story to be told, “moment by moment, to say it out loud. It is like a package of words ... to hand to him: this is yours now.”⁶⁶ In this way, by clothing it in words, the experience becomes a more ordered memory which can be recounted countless times rather than remaining a feared and dreadful experience to be relived.

Where the deceased lived a life that was, in the grand scheme of things, unremarkable, a life perhaps that did not live up to early promise, the minister can assure the family that the Christian funeral does not measure the worth of an individual by what has been accomplished or what kind of person they were. The only measure of a human life is that it was created in the image of God and will be redeemed by the love of this creator God.

Where the deceased has been ill for a considerable time, perhaps with dementia, the bereaved might find in conversation with the minister that they can now recall the one gone as they used to be, now that they are no longer confronted with the daily reality of the emaciated body, the confused eyes and the absence of the once-loved personality. It may only be in the telling of the story that, in retrospect, the life now ended can be seen to have had meaning. In this way the minister helps the bereaved to reclaim the personality of the one whose suffering is now ended. As Tony Walter phrases it, “modernity structures death and loss, but it never determines people’s responses.”⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Mannix, 2017: 217

⁶⁶ Mantel, 2009: 85

⁶⁷ Walter, 2020: 15

The conspiracy of silence concerning the imminence of death, which often accompanies the last weeks of the deathbed scene, is at last ended. This is sacred stuff and the minister is hugely privileged to be entrusted with the narrative of a life and the account of relationships with family, friends and society. Very few people are fortunate enough to die in their sleep in old age. As Matthew Kirkpatrick affirms, for most families, the experience of death is more “likely to be drawn out, debilitating, dehumanizing and potentially painful”.⁶⁸ In planning the funeral, the minister can help the bereaved place the final illness and the lingering death in the full context of the life that has been lived.

Many bereaved, particularly among the older generation, will have attended the birth of a child or grandchild. The minister can help the mourners see that watching someone die is quite like watching a new birth. They can say, like the narrator in Eliot’s *Journey of The Magi*, “I had seen birth and death/but had thought they were different”.⁶⁹ The death may well have been a hard and bitter agony but little by little an assurance washes over the bereaved who can then say to the minister that in fact the one gone is now in a better place.

The minister will also be conscious that in the house of the bereaved there are many, often competing, griefs – who in the family was closest to the one gone? Who was the most forgiven, loved, absent, needed? The owners of these facets may well be jockeying for position in the narrative of the life now ended. And their different personality types and gender mean that they will cope differently with this stage of proceedings – one of them will want to plan every detail while another will want to ignore the whole process. Individuals, however close their bonds of love, do grieve in different ways.⁷⁰ The attentive minister will also become aware of possible resentments between members of a family where one wanted more aggressive medical treatment of the one who has died, while the others thought it best to ‘let him go’. Of such variety is the Kingdom of God made up. My experience of such conflict within families has led me to stop short of the conclusion of a recent study that suggests “the funeral is a rite in which family is displayed,

⁶⁸ Kirkpatrick, 2016: 3

⁶⁹ Eliot, 1969: 103

⁷⁰ Doka and Martin, 2010

indeed accomplished. When there was conflict between acknowledging grief and displaying family, then family almost always trumped grief.”⁷¹ I would say sometimes but not almost always.

I said earlier that in the house of the bereaved, equipped simply with faith and hopeful purpose, I am not just an anonymous mouthpiece of the church. But I do have to recognise that in the eyes of the grieving I am representing the timeless, global, eternal yet local church. Thomas Long suggests that as the minister arrives at the house, the mourners glimpse “the holy hidden in the fragmentation of our grief”.⁷² These lofty words contain a truth that as we frail human ministers arrive at the house of grief we bring with us, and reveal as already present, something of the grace of God and the realization that together we are embarking on a sacred pilgrimage which pauses at the grave or crematorium but which does not end there. Unbeknown to the mourners, it is often their courage and their strength in the face of illness and loss that bolsters the faith of the minister. The minister, coming fresh to the house of illness, death and grief, is often well and uniquely placed to glimpse the Kingdom of God in all its ordinary gloriousness. The minister is accepted into the house of the bereaved as they come to terms with the fact that one loved, who until a few minutes, hours or days ago was a warm, living human being, is now newly dead. The bereaved are faced with a future they can hardly begin to imagine. The greatest gift the minister can offer in the house of grief is the ability to listen and to allow the full depth of despair to be voiced. In this way the bereaved are helped to know that in their processing of their grief everything is usual, safe and necessary, and that this stage will pass in its own time in to a new normality even though they cannot imagine anything being normal ever again. It is fair to say that certainly since the nineteenth century the minister’s pastoral care focuses more on what the death means to the ongoing life of the bereaved rather than what death means to the one who has died.⁷³ Walter says that this makes the minister’s visit implicitly secular.⁷⁴ I disagree. It is a visit by a minister of religion and is,

⁷¹ Walter, 2020: 145-146

⁷² Long and Lynch, 2013: 49

⁷³ Aries, 1981

⁷⁴ Walter, 2020: 170

therefore, a religious encounter. Percy asserts that “Christian faith is far more widespread than is sometimes supposed in secular society.”⁷⁵

Having spent some time listening to the back story, the minister then turns to the logistical arrangements for the funeral. And some discussion may be had about why the family has asked for a minister at all, given that none of them would consider themselves members of any church and have not attended a service for several years - even at Christmas. It is at this point that the Civil celebrant (who has been sent by the funeral director because the bereaved said they were not religious) might be surprised to discover that the family asks that *Amazing Grace* be sung and that the *Lord's Prayer* be said! The church minister is required to attend to the words and feelings of the bereaved as they are presented even when they do not fit easily with any systematic understanding of religion. As Douglas Davies says cogently, “life lived is not as life documented, and ... it is unwise to impose an artificial order on human experience.”⁷⁶

Between the conversation and the funeral, the minister constructs the eulogy based on what has been heard and perceived. In this the minister moves from one who observes to one who describes, and cannot remove his personality from the engagement with the bereaved. The minister who tries to remove himself from the narrative comes across as uninterested and bored rather than dispassionate. Mourners rely on the minister to speak on their behalf. The minister reflects back to the gathered congregation the sense of the one now deceased and the place the deceased held in the lives of others, in community and in the heart of God. The minister is aware that in the congregation there may well be different and conflicting memories of the one deceased. The minister needs to steer a course between the Scylla of hagiography and the Charybdis of opening wounds. The eulogy will be a product of that particular moment and the particular relationships cultivated since the minister walked into the house of the bereaved. Because the minister is outside the relationships of family and friends – and yet a trusted professional-cum-friend – the minister can dispassionately utter words to begin the process of healing, allude

⁷⁵ Percy, 2010: 15

⁷⁶ Davies, 2002: 20

to imperfections with grace and mercy, lightly touch on personality and the legacy left behind in terms of family founded, work done and memories kindled. So Lorna could write in an email the day after the funeral, "...you really captured our Mum and the way we are as a family".⁷⁷ This accords with the view of the Jesuit Augustin Poulain who wrote a hundred years ago that what people want is "very exact pictures – I was about to say photographs – in which they can recognize themselves."⁷⁸

Not every family has people confident or eloquent enough to speak in public particularly when in the grip of grief. And timings at crematoria do not allow for two major 'speeches'. If the minister delivers the eulogy well, the truth of the Gospel will be demonstrated in the details of the life now ended and the lives of those left behind. And relieved of the necessity to "perform" at the funeral, the bereaved can simply be children, grandchildren, husbands and wives, sisters and brothers, nephews and nieces, mourning the loss of the one now gone.

And when the mourners gather for the funeral it is up to the minister to conduct proceedings. Malcolm Guite likens the minister to a conductor in two senses of the word: first like a conductor of an orchestra. To accomplish this the minister must stand a little apart – to keep himself "composed and the proceedings together on behalf of those who feel themselves falling apart". Secondly the minister may be compared to a lightning conductor. "The immense charge of feeling, both in the positive pole of thanksgiving and the negative pole of loss, must pass through me ... all the unsaid prayers, the agonies of those who have no faith and cannot pray, need to pass through me to God".⁷⁹

Contemporary people in Canvey Island may have difficulty signing up to membership of a church, they may bridle at being part of organized religion but they are not ready to give up all sense of a supernatural being outside of themselves. As Rowan Williams writes, "A loss of the sense of the sacred, a loss of the sense of being answerable to an intelligible

⁷⁷ S.J's Funeral

⁷⁸ Poulain, 1921: 13

⁷⁹ Guite, 2017: 17

gift, from beyond ourselves, in the long run entails more than simply the loss of God; it may entail the loss of the distinctively human”.⁸⁰ As far as we know, humankind as currently evolved is the only animal who, in the words of Yuval Harari, “can talk about entire kinds of entities that they have never seen, touched or smelled”.⁸¹ The minister, by his very presence in the house of mourning, gives tacit permission for greater truths to be enunciated, hitherto unvoiced thoughts to be spoken and unformed theologies to be explored. When confronted with death many 21st century bereaved embark on a vertiginous learning curve, having not grown up used to the language of death and eternal life. As Roger Scruton so aptly put it after reflecting on the words of the *Jubilate Deo*, “Once we came before God’s presence with a song; now we come before his absence with a sigh”.⁸² And it is into the house of sighs that the minister enters in the days after the death. It is the task of this minister to help the bereaved transform the sighing into song.

Before we look more closely at the motivations governing the request for a minister of religion to conduct the obsequies, it may be helpful to step back and consider what a funeral is for.

⁸⁰ Williams, 2018: 25

⁸¹ Harari, 2014: 24

⁸² Scruton, 2006: 54

CHAPTER THREE

Why bother with a funeral at all?

In 21st century Essex society when we hear that someone has died, among our first questions might be, “When is the funeral?” It is generally assumed that a death will be followed as soon as convenient, by a funeral. But, in fact, a funeral is not essential. The only necessary legal requirement is that the body of the deceased is disposed of in one of several prescribed ways. For the majority of people in England, the options are burial or cremation. For burial a simple hole can be dug in a place set aside for burials, the body can then be lowered into the grave and the grave filled in. For a cremation the coffin can be carried to the crematorium and loaded into the cremator. Indeed, each crematorium has a time slot in the early morning for “unwitnessed cremation” (increasingly called “direct cremation”) in which the funeral directors simply deliver the body to the crematorium and the body is disposed of. The witnesses to this are crematorium staff and funeral directors who, usually, did not know the deceased in life. As Tom Long phrases it, a funeral may simply be the transfer of the body of the deceased person from the place of death to the place of disposition.⁸³

With direct cremation, the body of the deceased is transported by the funeral directors to the crematorium for a cremation attended by no relatives or friends and surrounded by no word or liturgy uttered by religious minister or civil celebrant. A memorial service may follow at some future date where friends and family gather to celebrate a life, unencumbered by the actual body of the one who has died. For such a memorial service all are welcome, but the only person missing is the one who has died. The body itself has been disposed of, without eulogy, verse or prayer, without witness or rubric, by paid employees of the funeral company and crematorium. It seems to me that the trend of direct cremation, imported as so much else is, from North America, is a denial of death being dressed up as an acceptance of death. It is possible now for people to reach middle age without having seen or having to deal with a dead body. One of the things that distinguishes humans from the rest of the animal kingdom is that we process grief by

⁸³ Long and Lynch, 2013: 171

processing the objects of our grief, the dead body, from one place to the next. We bear mortality by bearing mortals to the brink of whatever it may be that happens next – or to the nothingness that follows this life.⁸⁴ And then we are better able to let go. What happens to the ability to grieve when there is no body over which to weep? It is not a coincidence that the great traditions of remembrance services began in the course of the First World War when there were no bodies being brought back from the Western Front. These services spoke to a need for national, communal and personal moments of remembrance. They went some way to countering the revival of spiritualism to which bereaved families turned in search of assurance that their son, fiancé, brother, father or husband was spiritually safe having been killed and lost with no known grave.⁸⁵ Since the United Kingdom's involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq, services of remembrance have taken on a new power in these islands. Like Mary Magdalene in the garden on Easter morning, there is a basic human need to anoint and reverence the body of the one now dead. And when that proves impossible, the further blow of an absent body is keenly felt.

The stated aim of those marketing direct cremation is that, by 2025, some fifty percent of funerals in England will be by direct cremation. And it is promised that this will be done at a fraction of the cost of a traditional funeral. St Margaret's Hospice in Taunton was the first hospice to launch their own funeral service in January 2018 offering, among other things, an unattended cremation for £1,295.00 – about £2,500.00 less than a traditional funeral. Professor Max Watson, a palliative-care clinician, who is Visiting Professor at the University of Ulster told the Church Times that this development saved the families the anxiety of having to make an additional transition from hospice chaplain to another service provider.⁸⁶

But a quick telephone call to a number of funeral directors in August 2019 suggested that we were way off the target of 50% direct cremations by 2025. Before the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020/21, one reason people opted for direct cremation was because the body

⁸⁴ Lynch, 2019: 131

⁸⁵ Hazelgrove, 2000

⁸⁶ Church Times, 2017

had been left to science but had not been accepted by the authorities – perhaps a post mortem was required or the individual died at a time like the Christmas period when the selected medical school was not able to receive the body. The Human Tissue Authority advises prospective donors always to have an alternative funeral plan should the body not be accepted as the family will now find itself saddled with a body for which no funeral ritual was expected or wanted. Other people leave explicit instructions that there should be no ceremony surrounding their death either because they have no religious belief or they think a funeral to be a waste of money. Occasionally such an instruction is left because the deceased found funerals too traumatic in life and does not wish their family to be subjected to such trauma. Very rarely is the decision made on cost alone. If a family wants a funeral they have one and then work out later how they might pay for it. I shall look in Chapter Four at how the pandemic of 2020 brought the possibility, and indeed the occasional necessity, of direct cremation into sharp focus.

Meanwhile it may be agreed that a funeral ceremony, as currently experienced, is not essential. And yet, since time out of mind, human beings have devised rituals, elaborate or simple, lasting minutes or days, to accompany the physical act of letting go of the body of a loved one. Such rituals vary according to the climate in which they evolved, the religion of the region and the culture of the people, particularly in terms of kinship and inheritance. Each community over time evolves a rhythm of activity which encapsulates a shared understanding of the meaning of life and death and the place occupied by the one gone in the physical and emotional lives of those now left behind. In time such activity becomes valuable in itself and comes to express deeply held, though perhaps unspoken, convictions which bind a community, create an identity and give rise to something approaching a creed.

Some would go so far as to say that religion should be seen primarily as a matter of cultural identity and not as doctrinal belief.⁸⁷ Religion has to do with what is understood to be behaving properly in the context of a particular society and its norms and aspirations. The cultural theorist Raymond Williams suggested that culture may be seen as a structure of

⁸⁷ Kwame Appiah, Reith Lecture 2016

feeling: a way of experiencing and making sense of the world.⁸⁸ Such structures arise out of particular places and groups of people over time. People in contemporary Essex would see customs that differ from their own as belonging to an obscure television channel or the pages of National Geographic. We feel a universe away from, for example, the Toraja of Sulawesi in Indonesia who allow the bodies of the deceased to dry and mummify for several months before they can afford an appropriate funeral. In the meantime the corpse remains part of the family household. After the Sunday morning service, the Toraja engage in the *Ma'nene* ceremony which involves the digging up of the bodies of loved ones and having new family photos taken.⁸⁹ It is hard to think of anything that would be more removed from the mindset of Essex people who think of *Rest in Peace* as a promise to leave the dead well buried.

In the largely Caucasian Anglo-Saxon Essex parish of Canvey Island, following a bereavement, a family of Ghanaian extraction met every Sunday in the home of the bereaved to plan the funeral and to pass the kettle round for donations towards the cost of the funeral. Only then was the funeral held – some five weeks after the death had occurred. The funeral lasted some three hours with the women relatives looking resplendent in traditional Ghanaian dresses. On the first, fifth and tenth anniversaries of the death I was invited to conduct a memorial service around the grave.

In Essex, exhumation of a body or even of ashes requires lengthy investigation of motives and much seeking of permission from legal authorities as we shall see in Chapter Nine. But of course the people of Greece, particularly those living in cities where space is at a premium, routinely gather up the bones of the deceased three years after the funeral and place them in a family ossuary or in one rented from the local council.

Many 21st century people in Canvey Island maintain continuity with the dead by tending burial plots, giving prominence in the home to an urn full of ashes or at least a photo of the departed one, establishing a foundation to raise money or awareness, lighting a candle

⁸⁸ Williams, 1961

⁸⁹ Tsintjilonis, 2007: 173-194

on significant dates to do with the life of the one departed, and coming to church to hear the name of the one gone mentioned in the prayers.

Lest we think that different cultural practices have to do with long ago and far away, it is instructive to note that in September 2020 mourners in Barbados were somewhat taken aback on arriving at the viewing of the body of a fourteen-year-old boy to find him seated on his bicycle for the whole evening.⁹⁰ It is not clear whether the family was striving to get back to imagined ancestral roots, but they simply said that they chose to give him that send-off because he was an extremely active boy who loved riding.

I have said that the digging up of bodies for renewed family engagement would be a concept far removed from contemporary Essex society, but a cursory glance at current Instagram and Twitter platforms will see an astonishing rise in the number of funeral ‘selfies’ – photographs taken by relatives of themselves posing next to the body of the deceased. Modern technology enables relatives who live abroad to be virtually present by means of Facetime, Zoom and Skype. In real time they can be involved as the loved one dies and later as bodies are prepared by family for the funeral director. It may be argued that this on-going desire to include the deceased in the family life of the living was behind Queen Victoria’s commissioning of a great number of portraits of her family gathered around the bust of Prince Albert for several years after he had died. Modern DNA mapping shows that we are all cousins no matter how different our tribal context may appear. Contemporary ‘selfies’ are the last contact we will have with the physical presence of the one who has died: cremation makes future contact with the size and shape of the one gone impossible. I shall look later at how disposal or retention of ashes has given modern people the opportunity to maintain or, indeed, re-invent, their relationship with the deceased.

As recently as 30th May 2017 the heartbroken civil partner of a homosexual policeman was allowed to marry him a month after he was killed in a terrorist attack in Paris.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Nation 2010

⁹¹ BBC News, 2017

Posthumous marriage became legal in France by Article 171 of the civil code which states: “The President of the Republic may, for serious reasons, authorize the solemnization of marriage if one of the spouses died after completion of official formalities marking it unequivocal consent.”⁹² Posthumous marriage arose out of proxy marriage which allowed women to be married by use of proxy to soldiers who had died weeks earlier. Then in the 1950s Irène Jodart pleaded successfully to be allowed to proceed with her marriage even though her fiancé, André Capra, had died when a dam broke killing 400 people in Fréjus. By posthumous marriage, any existing children are legitimised. The fact that the policeman and Irene Jodart were allowed to marry deceased partners suggests that the death of a partner had not prevented them from having someone to whom they could still legally be married. In a posthumous marriage ceremony the woman would usually stand next to a picture of her deceased fiancé. A picture, rather than a body, is all that is required.

In Essex in 2018 a man contacted a minister in a nearby parish asking that he and his wife renew their wedding vows as his wife laying grievously ill in a hospice. The minister offered to meet them immediately. The man wanted other family members there and 11 o'clock next morning was agreed upon. The woman died at 3.30am. The man gratefully took up the minister's offer of proceeding with the renewal of vows (albeit in a one-sided fashion). The words “till death us do part” were changed to “which even death cannot part”; hands were joined and rings blessed. Later the man wrote to the minister, “Your blessing this morning has certainly made our grief easier to bear. Thank you for your kind words. We will remember your kindness forever.”⁹³ Death did not prove to be a barrier in the ongoing relationship of marriage.

Clearly the Christian church has arrived very late in the day with regard to influencing the burial rituals and beliefs of the bereaved. As the Christian faith spread across the Roman Empire, the early church took over the sacred seasons and places of those occupying the conquered lands. The midwinter festival of Saturnalia became Christmas and the worship

⁹² Civil Code of France. Article 171

⁹³ Letter to M F, 18 September 2018

of Eostre, goddess of fertility and spring, became Easter. For centuries the church corralled people into buildings at certain times on certain days. This was done with no small measure of fear and threats of dreadful eternal consequences for those who did not conform. The reading and interpretation of sacred texts was the preserve of certain anointed people who exercised astonishing control of the population. As we shall see in the next chapter, people, now well able to read and think for himself, are finding new ways of expressing belonging, joy, grief and loss. These new ways bear a remarkable resemblance to the customs of our ancestors and the church would do well to take them seriously – to recognise and sanctify modern attempts to deal with grief and honour the dead.

Public or Private?

I said at the outset of this work that the church in the current age needs to recognize and sanctify much of the language and many of the practices of those who currently grieve. The Church of England as it exists now was largely fashioned in a time of settled community. For many in the 16th century life was hard, brutish and short but the boundaries of community were settled; the stories were told, the lives of those who had gone before were known and the place of burial, unadorned by expensive headstone, was simply remembered. Often parish registers failed to include a note of the location of the grave. The gravedigger, like his father before him and his son after him, simply knew where each parishioner was buried. Now, with families and friends scattered across countries and continents, careful record keeping, accessible on the internet, is essential. The vicar, called upon to inter a body in a churchyard, cemetery or crematorium ground can still embody a continuity that has largely been lost in modern society. The vicar is still in the privileged position of being the public face of private grief.

Mourning and the bearing of grief are intensely personal episodes. Even in the current age, by virtue of the fact that each person lives in a community of some sort, however much or little they may engage with the surrounding community, the expression of grief is also a very public matter. Local customs may include a collection among the neighbours for flowers; the shutting of curtains on the day of the funeral; the temporary closing of

businesses connected with the deceased; prayers offered in the local church; a family wearing dark colours for some weeks after the death; the cancellation of a party which had been scheduled for before the funeral or the playing of a testimonial football match in memory of the one who has gone. The death of each individual, no matter how ordinary a life lived, impacts to some degree on the surrounding community. John Donne's words hold true even in these days of anonymous neighbours and sprawling housing with no obvious social centre: "any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind." ⁹⁴

The sociologist Émile Durkheim, writing as the 19th century became the 20th century, suggests that the way that grief is currently expressed has more to do with the way in which society values certain categories of persons rather than to do with any innate human feelings.⁹⁵ So for example, whereas in our time in Essex the death of a baby is exceptional and tragic, in the Victorian era in Britain the grief attending the death of a baby would be much less marked than that attending the death of a member of the Royal Family. The mortality rate of infants was so high that families were surprised if the baby lived. Lou Taylor has shown that Victorian society required a woman to be in mourning longer for her husband's father than for her own child.⁹⁶

The public expressions of grief following the sudden death of Diana, Princess of Wales in 1997 was remarkable because it was so explicit and because, to our generation, it seemed so 'un-British'. The queue of people waiting patiently at St James' Palace to sign the book of condolence contained the great and the good alongside working class people. I found myself standing between the actress Maureen Lipman and a housewife from Bethnal Green, East London. But this seemed un-British only to those not old enough to remember the Funeral of Winston Churchill. The British have a history of taking to the streets in force following the death of a person whose life was played out in the public arena, particularly when the death occurred suddenly at a young age or following a long life so

⁹⁴ Donne 1624

⁹⁵ Durkheim, 1912: 201

⁹⁶ Taylor, 1983

that hardly anyone can remember a time when that person was not ‘there’.

John Wolffe in his work *Great Deaths* details the reaction of the general population to the deaths of public figures between 1840 and the First World War.⁹⁷ Just as in August 1997 over 1,000 people were present at Evensong in St Paul’s Cathedral in London on the evening of the day that Diana died, so in 1901, following the death of Queen Victoria, some 5,000 people filled that building ‘from end to end ... and all as still and reverent as any congregation could be.’⁹⁸

Like Diana, Queen Mary II died young at the age of thirty-one in 1695. No expense was spared on the funeral. John Evelyn the diarist went to see the ceremony on 5th March 1695 and concluded that “never was so universal a mourning.”⁹⁹ Similarly, when Princess Charlotte, the only legitimate grandchild of King George III, died in childbirth at the age of 21 in 1817, the public reacted to this as to a profound tragedy even in those days of high mortality of pregnant women and babies. The Revd Thomas Chalmers suggested that Charlotte’s death stirred up some recognition in the general population that the royal family were “partakers of one common humanity with ourselves”.¹⁰⁰ The reaction of the public to the death of Diana would have been a natural response in that earlier generation. And, of course, what we had for Diana that was not available to the population at the time of the deaths of Queen Mary or Princess Charlotte, was television bringing the grief and the response to grief into the living rooms of millions of people across the globe. People could take part and ‘pour out on to the streets’ metaphorically without even leaving their homes. The church must recognise this disjointed, far-flung engagement of a congregation gathered in grief.

The advent of television and satellite communication makes it easier to make the global local and the local global. Indeed the view we have on TV is better and more comfortable

⁹⁷ Wolffe, 2000

⁹⁸ Woolfe 2000:2

⁹⁹ Evelyn, Diaries Vol 2: part 39

¹⁰⁰ Chalmers, 1818

than that afforded to those who are part of a huge outdoor crowd. In 1953 many who could afford it bought a television specially to gather with family and neighbours to watch the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. This enabled a mass participation in the service at the Abbey while, some felt, reducing the sense of the mysterious and the sacred which had previously surrounded such events. Rood screens in ancient churches and cathedrals surely were built to keep the *hoi polloi* excluded from too close an experience of the sacred. Some 1.9 billion people across the world are said to have tuned in to the marriage service for the Duke and Duchess of Sussex broadcast from St George's Chapel Windsor in May 2018. People across the globe watched people jump to their deaths on 9th September 2001 after terrorists flew planes into the twin towers in New York.

In recent years the mantle of Royalty has been shared with stars of film and stage: actors, musicians, comedians and sporting heroes. The reputation of actresses has risen from that of one suitable only to be a mistress to a king to one who was feted, at least for the first year, as the wife of the fifth in line to the throne. New rituals have the modern vehicle of ultra-modern media to enable them to reach across the globe. Service registers in churches record the numbers of those who have attended an act of worship. Television viewing figures are not recorded in the service register in any vestry. But perhaps they should be. When churches streamed acts of worship on social media during the covid-19 lockdown of 2020/21, parishes were required to enter in the service registers the number of 'views' that each service had received.

Tony Walter collects an impressive array of scholars¹⁰¹ seeking to address the question of whether an activity is religious or secular. He concedes that the categories are fluid and almost impossible to pin down as not only are we presented with the activity but we must pay attention to the motivation and any hoped-for outcomes. He suggests that colonial powers identified 'world religions' as 'proper religions' with the concomitant downgrading of non-text based activities as 'folk religion', 'superstitious' or 'irrational'.¹⁰² I suggest that, just as the 20th century saw a great move towards

¹⁰¹ Walter, 2020

¹⁰² Walter, 2020: 171

independence of former colonies, so the Christian church in England is watching from the sidelines as people are emerging from the oppressive yolk of a colonising church into the light of independent thought, prayer, longing and activity particularly in time of bereavement. Walter rightly warns against rashly swapping the hegemony of colonial world religion for wholesale romantic enthusiasm of ideas and practices previously termed 'superstition' and 'folk religion'. He writes, "neither approach is helpful for the student of society, religion and death who simply wants to understand such practices".¹⁰³

Public outpouring of grief and solidarity is found in the local as well as the national or international scene. When John, a retained fireman in Canvey Island, died in the summer of 2018, his funeral was held in the parish church. His coffin was borne on a fire tender and an honour guard of colleagues stood on the running boards. The roads to the church were lined with people and every square inch of space in the church and the church community centre was filled. As the coffin drew near to the church the silence in the streets was total. John had borne pancreatic cancer with astonishing courage and an ongoing zest for life for over two years. He continued to manage a boys' football team and volunteered as a fireman for as long as he was physically able. The church that day became a meeting place open to a very large cross-section of the Canvey Island community regardless of their view of death and eternal life. The service register recorded the number of people who made it inside the church. But those who stood in respectful silence along the route and those who remained outside the church were not counted. His mother became a regular member of the church congregation in the last year of John's illness. 18 months after the funeral she was confirmed by the bishop, kneeling at the spot where her son's coffin had rested.

And again in February 2019 the church hosted eight hundred people who came in shock and in grief to the funeral of Andy aged 40, the life and soul of the party, everyone's friend, who took his own life in the early hours of New Year's Day. The service was streamed online for the benefit of Andy's best friend who was out of the country for a family gathering marking his own 40th birthday. Others who could not get out of work

¹⁰³ Walter, 2020: 171

were grateful for this facility. Some seven hundred people watched the service online that evening alone. Again, the service register records only those inside the physical walls of the church.

But, service registers notwithstanding, there are signs that the church is increasingly aware of a congregation larger than those who participate in the life and liturgy of the church each week. In recent years we have seen even cathedrals thrown open for the funerals and/or memorial services of footballers, entertainers, comedians, ordinary people who have borne ordinary illnesses in extraordinary ways and children who have been murdered. The church is still trusted to handle funerals after dreadful events like the murder of the girls in Soham in 2002. Fourteen crates of mail from all over the world were delivered to the vicarage in Soham every day in the weeks following the murder. The entire churchyard was covered in flowers. Media interviews were conducted with the church building in the background. The church was seen as the place to which one might direct lament, grief, hope and love. In 2014 Lichfield Cathedral was the venue for the funeral of Stephen Sutton who had raised £4 million the previous year for his teenage cancer charity.

In the face of such disaster, relatives, friends and society at large may not have paid much overt attention to religious matters in the preceding twelve months but right now in the early days of grief they need in their corner people who consciously and publicly profess a faith. The archaic formal dress of clergy and bishops and choir is accepted without question. Skilled organists have their music broadcast across the nation. The church is literally pulling out all the stops. The mourners need a ceremony conducted on manifestly sacred ground. The time set aside for the funeral is sacred. And normal time can wait until the sacred time is over. The music and the anecdotes may be quite secular in nature but it is all carried out in the context of a sacred time and place. The funeral conducted by manifestly religious persons in a manifestly religious place affirms the value of the deceased person in the sight of God regardless of the life lived. Such a funeral can handle a range of emotions as privately felt and publicly expressed following tragedies like the Grenfell Tower Fire in June 2017 or the terrorist knife and van attack in South London

just two weeks previously. By virtue of the place the Church of England has held historically in the life of the nation, the church still has the ability to command attention and elicit the affection of people prepared to hand over the conduct of such events to the church.

St Paul's Cathedral was chosen as the venue for the National Memorial Service six months after the fire in Grenfell Tower in which seventy-one people, including eighteen children, died. The congregation was joined by The Prince of Wales, The Duchess of Cornwall, The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge and Prince Harry. The newly consecrated Bishop of Kensington said to a reporter, "I am sure that the presence of the Royal Family will be a reassurance and support to those at the heart of this service. My hope and prayer is that the occasion will help us remember those who lost their lives, bring comfort and strength to the bereaved, support those who survived and offer hope for the future."¹⁰⁴ The fire had consumed totally several dozen of the bodies and so denied the families the rituals of mourning over an actual body in which they would otherwise have engaged. The service in St Paul's was as close as many families got to a funeral.

Following the horror of the nation in March 2017 when a man used his car to kill tourists on Westminster Bridge and then attacked and killed PC Keith Palmer with two knives, it was announced that the officer's funeral would be held in Southwark Cathedral the following month. There was no suggestion that the officer was a member of any worshipping congregation but the nation needed to honour him and could do no less than offer a sacred place and a sacred time for the family and the nation to mourn his death, give thanks for his life and his work and to acknowledge the debt we owe to all who stand in harm's way to protect the public.

Two weeks after the attack, the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, along with Prince Harry, gathered with thousands of people at a service in Westminster Abbey in which candles were lit in memory of those who had died. The Dean acknowledged that the families of the murdered had lost the most but that everyone had been left "bewildered and disturbed".

¹⁰⁴ As broadcast on Television

The service had been devised he said, “To affirm our shared humanity and our resolve to bring life and light to all”. For the night before the funeral itself, the Queen gave permission for the officer’s coffin to rest in the Chapel of St Mary Undercroft in the Palace of Westminster before being driven to Southwark Cathedral. So on three different days, within a short space of time, St Pauls’ Cathedral, Westminster Abbey and Southwark Cathedral were provided to the nation as sacred places open to all for a sacred time.

And on 15th June 2018 the ashes of Stephen Hawking, the celebrated theoretical physicist, cosmologist and atheist, were interred in Westminster Abbey. Sacred space and sacred time were found in this national shrine for one who taught that the universe is governed by the laws of science. The public affection for Hawking was so great that twenty-seven thousand people applied for the thousand tickets that were available for the ceremony. His ashes were placed between the remains of Darwin and Newton who in their time had had their differences with established religion. Hawking once said, “I regard the brain as a computer which will stop working when its components fail. There is no heaven or afterlife for broken-down computers; that is a fairy story for people afraid of the dark”.¹⁰⁵ In an interview with Reuters Hawking did concede that “the laws may have been decreed by God, but God does not intervene to break the laws.”¹⁰⁶ The physicist is buried in an ancient site dedicated at least in part to the proclamation that God is a God who, through his Incarnation in Jesus Christ, continues to be involved in, and to respond to, the prayers of his creatures.

Thus it may be said that the line between public and private grief and the ritual of mourning is rightly blurred. The church does well in the 21st century to recognise that it has no monopoly on the manifestation of grief and so should be available to provide a very public space for a local, national and global community to express the loss of, and thanksgiving for, one who meant everything in the private lives of a small or large circle of people. The worshiping life of the church is ongoing and unceasing. From time to time others wish to enter into it for a while and then leave again having had a glimpse of the

¹⁰⁵ Guardian, 2018

¹⁰⁶ Hawking, 2007

otherness of life, love and loss.

Now that the law of the land and the dictates of society no longer compel people to be members of a particular church, both church and community must constantly strive to find fresh, relevant and helpful ways of co-existing and interacting. Before looking at the place of the church in the community of Canvey Island in particular, I reflect further on the place of the church nationally in the hearts, or at least the awareness, of Britain today.

CHAPTER FOUR

The culture of 21st century Britain with regard to religion

In 2004 Alan Billings wrote a book *Secular lives, Sacred Hearts*, subtitled somewhat alarmingly “The role of the church in a time of no religion”. In it he suggests that, although many now do not belong to any church they may still be considered spiritual beings.¹⁰⁷ When I heard him speak to one hundred and fifty ministers in June 2017 he made the point that Europe is not only religiously diverse but also non-religiously diverse. Frequently in my own ministry I find that some who say they are not religious still want to sing the hymn *Amazing Grace* and ask that the *Lord’s Prayer* be included in a funeral service. Some write poems in which they express a certainty that the one now gone is “looking down” on those who are left behind. Others ask that there be no mention of God or eternal life but wish to focus on a celebration of the earthly life now ended. Some people who belong to a church ask that the funeral be held in the crematorium as they do not want to be ‘reminded’ of the funeral every time they come to church. Some who never come to church ask that the funeral be held in church to accommodate the crowd of mourners and to give the deceased a “really good send-off”. Simple division of people into religious and non-religious will not do. Later Billings acknowledges that evaluating just how secular Britain has become is not an easy task.¹⁰⁸ He affirms that we are living through a process of change in our culture that may well not have reached its conclusion. Peter Berger acknowledged that the reality of the modern world did not fit his earlier thesis¹⁰⁹ that travel, literacy, television and migration would cause the world to become a secularising force. Rather he found that modern life produced pluralism: an “historically unprecedented situation in which more and more people live amid competing beliefs, values and lifestyles”.¹¹⁰ Meanwhile the church needs to respond to the stated needs of the community in which it stands. The church must respond with integrity: faithful to its own understanding of its mission but in a way and with a language that is accessible to

¹⁰⁷ Billings, 2004

¹⁰⁸ Billings, 2010: 13

¹⁰⁹ Berger, 1969

¹¹⁰ Berger, 2012: 49: 313-316

those who have no history of the language, doctrine or liturgy of the church.

One family in Canvey Island maintained that they and Mum (who had died) were not religious so they did not want any hymns even though the funeral was to be held in church prior to interment in a nearby private cemetery. But they did request that the service include the playing of Cliff Richard singing *Psalm 23*. And in his eulogy to his mother the son said to his father, “Mum I am sure has been looking down on you with a smile on her face whilst you are now doing the cooking, firstly because she never saw you do it and, secondly, because she now knows you can.”¹¹¹ For this allegedly non-religious family it was acceptable that Mum’s favourite singer sing a psalm and, moreover, they were certain that Mum, though dead, was still aware of, and involved in, the life of her family. In this funeral, the song, the eulogy, the venue and the presence of a minister of the church went some way towards a narrative that sought to answer the mystery of what the death of Mum meant for her and for those who remained. The event was certainly honourable and, I would say, holy.

A study published in *The Guardian* in May 2016 carried the banner headline, “Christians now outnumbered as UK becomes less religious”. The article based on the Report, *The No Religion Population of Britain*¹¹², confirmed that in the 2011 census, those who identified themselves as having no religion reached 48.5% - up from 25% three years earlier. Stephen Bullivant, the report’s author, of St Mary’s Catholic University in Twickenham is quoted as saying, “What we are seeing is an acceleration in the numbers of people not only not practicing their faith on a regular basis, but not even ticking the box”. The reaction in some quarters has predictably been one of shock and near despair that contemporary people have no faith in anything outside themselves.

It is expected that when the results of the 2021 census are analysed the number of people in Britain describing themselves as Christian will have dipped below 50% for the first time. The question “What is your religion?” was first included in the national census in

¹¹¹ P.A’s funeral, 10 September 2018

¹¹² Bullivant, 2016

2001. 72% of respondents said they were Christian. By 2011 this figure had fallen to 59%.¹¹³ In 2018 when the British Attitudes Survey asked a more neutral question, “Do you regard yourself as belonging to a religious group?”, a mere 38% identified as Christian. 52% said they belonged to no religious grouping. These are those whom the sociologist Linda Woodhead described as “nones” – the people of no religion.¹¹⁴ The baby boomers have in large part found organised religion unhelpful, Their millennial children and Generation Z have not grown up with the assumptions, Sunday and familial practices that were the expected norm of earlier generations.

But it is important to note that the phrases “organised religion” and “religious” are not interchangeable. Woodhead herself acknowledged that of those who counted themselves as not belonging to any organised religion, only a small minority were militantly secular and fewer than half described themselves as atheists. The largest bloc was made up of “maybes, doubters, and don’t knows”, plus a group who did believe in God, a higher power or in “something there”. The younger the cohort, the smaller the proportion of atheists.¹¹⁵

Again, Davie studies “a religiously plural society in which large sections of the population prefer to live outside the sphere of religion for most of their lives”.¹¹⁶ As shown by the examples of the lives of people in Canvey Island illustrated in this work, not to attend church services regularly is not the same as living “outside the sphere of religion”. The people of Canvey Island who turn to the church in times of bereavement may not have any daily use for organised religion but they are certainly religious and require a minister to tap into the bank of inherited religious understanding in helping them to cope with eternal questions of life and death and the nature of eternal life. This suggests that spiritual hunger is part of the human condition even when formal church attendance and belonging wane. This is borne out by Abby Day’s study of so-called

¹¹³ ONS, 2012

¹¹⁴ Woodhead, 2016

¹¹⁵ Woodhead, 2016

¹¹⁶ Davie, 2015: 113

nominalism.¹¹⁷ Day suggests that belief is a social activity. It can arise from one's situation at birth, one's ethnicity or one's aspirations in a given community. The community of Canvey Island is shaped by the history of its people emerging out of East London, their experience of the floods of 1953 and living surrounded by a sea wall which gives the community specific and obvious boundaries. Anthropologists and sociologists would have us believe that the one who is in church every Sunday arranging the flowers is more religious than the widow who never comes to church but knows that her late husband is safe in the arms of a loving God. The widow would be described as spiritual. Such distinctions do not hold up in the face of lived experience. A Theos report phrases this well: "An overwhelming majority of people – 77% - believe that 'there are things in life that we simply cannot explain through science or any other means'. Only 18% disagree. Those who consider themselves to be a member of a religious group are more likely to agree with this (87%), but so do the majority (61%) of those who are not religious."¹¹⁸

All this of course begs the question of what we mean by the word 'religious'. As Roy Rappaport says, "The concept of religion is irreducibly vague, but vagueness is not vacuity, and we know well enough what people mean by the term to get on with things".¹¹⁹ Yuval Harari offers the suggestion that religion can "be defined as a system of human norms and values that is founded on a belief in a superhuman order".¹²⁰ He suggests that one function of religion is to legitimise social structures by arguing that they reflect superhuman laws.¹²¹ Religion insists that we are bound by moral laws that we did not compose and which we are not at liberty to change. Each religion has a slightly different version of these laws and attributes them to different revelations by different incarnations of their perception of creative energy. Time was in England when to be religious was synonymous with belonging to a church or other ancient faith community. But increasingly in the 21st century we must see the church as just one manifestation of

¹¹⁷ Day, 2011

¹¹⁸ Theos, 2013c: 12

¹¹⁹ Rappaport, 2013: 23

¹²⁰ Harari, 2014: 210

¹²¹ Harari, 2017: 211

humankind's desire to create a narrative that strives to make sense of birth, life and death. By virtue of the British society in which we live, a society whose Monarch is the head of the Church of England, this narrative will have much of the vocabulary and, indeed, many of the trappings of a Christian heritage.

In 1790 Edmund Burke compared the privileged treatment of the church in England with the seizure of church lands by the French Revolutionaries. He asserted that the people of England, far from thinking a religious national establishment to be unlawful, hardly thought it lawful to be without one: "They do not consider their church establishment as convenient, but as essential to their state, not as a thing heterogeneous and separable, something added for accommodation, what they may keep or lay aside according to their temporary ideas of convenience. They consider it as the foundation of their whole constitution, with which, and with every part of which, it holds an indissoluble union."¹²² In 2021 this would seem like a gross overstatement but still with some kernel of truth within it.

So it is clear that socio-religious values have influenced behaviour in every aspect of life. This is no more so than in the face of loss and grief. But, much to the church's consternation, a vast cross-section of this society will see no need to gather with like-minded folk every Sunday morning for a Parish Eucharist. Absence from the Sunday pew must not be mistaken for indifference to belief in things eternal. Davie gets it right when she says of the difficulty of pigeon-holing contemporary faith, "Indifference, moreover, interweaves with unattached belief on the one hand, and more articulate versions of the secular on the other."¹²³ This is a manifestation of what Alan Billings calls 'Cultural Christianity' – non-credal and non-attending – a legacy of the time of 'Church Christianity'. This is the remnant of an age when baptism into the Christian faith was an entrance rite into civil society, ensuring that all jobs were open to you.¹²⁴ Burke in 1790 emphasized that the church is "the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a

¹²² Burke, 1955: 22

¹²³ Davie, 2015: 223

¹²⁴ Billings, 2010:15

love to our country and to mankind.”¹²⁵ He saw religion as an institutional structure which moulded individual morals and connected individuals to the nation as a moral community. He perceived that the revolutionaries in France were destroying the very foundations upon which a civil society rested. The revolution removed the intermediary institutions between the individual and the state. If Burke were writing in the 21st century in England he would see that the same has been achieved without revolution but by dint of education, mass communication, freedom of expression and the freedom to worship or not.

The Bullivant Report ¹²⁶ reveals that three-fifths of those who say they now have no religion were brought up with a religious identity and fewer than 10 per cent of those who were brought up non-religiously now identify with a religion. And yet, as noted above, when the question about religion was first introduced in the census of 2001, some 71.8 percent of respondents identified themselves as Christian. The local Church of England primary school in Canvey Island is over-subscribed each academic year. Most of the parents making the applications belong to no church congregation but are anxious that their children should be brought up with “proper Christian values”.

Somewhere along the line the title ‘Christian’ became a cultural marker for a whole host of “ethnic, cultural and moral, rather than religious, values.” ¹²⁷ One explanation of this phenomenon might be that, as Britain became more multicultural, the word ‘Christian’ stood in for ‘British’. ¹²⁸ People in the Caucasian expanse of Essex, who 15 years after the census of 2001 would vote overwhelmingly for Brexit, were putting down a marker signifying their cultural rather than religious heritage. Small wonder that the popular refrain is frequently heard in Essex and elsewhere: “I don’t have to go to church to be a Christian”. Any understanding of a creator God in their lives has found expression in occasional personal prayer and acting in a moral fashion at home, at work and in community. But in the face of grief many find it appropriate to summon those who have

¹²⁵ Burke, 1955: 53

¹²⁶ Bullivant, 2016

¹²⁷ Guest, 2012: 61

¹²⁸ Voas and Bruce, 2004

made it their life's work to remind the community of Christian words of comfort, hope and the eternity of life itself. Meanwhile the way that lives are conducted in the everyday betokens a belief system with certain values identified as Christian.

In the past, people were expected by society, and required by the church, to attend church each Sunday at least once if not two or three times. Holy Days were (and still often are) called Days of Obligation at least by the Roman Catholic faithful. Now in large part there is no such expectation or requirement. Society does not frown on those who see a Holy Day as a Holiday or even a vacation (which to my mind speaks of emptiness). In the past the Church of England in England had the clout to call the nation to a day of 'Fasting and Humiliation' in time of epidemic or national military emergency. No such day was called for in 2020 or 2021 during the rapidly spreading Coronavirus epidemic. Yet still in Barbados and the other Caribbean Islands such days are routinely called by the Anglican Church and respected by the whole community in the face of imminent hurricane or, for example, when the Prime Minister of Barbados announced that he was diagnosed with terminal cancer. The closest the Church of England gets to that now is issuing a social media app encouraging the faithful to specific days of prayer between, for example, Ascension and Pentecost. Such digital initiatives have won awards but in the grand scheme of things tend to pass the great majority of the population by as they depend for their effectiveness on people passing on the link to those who do not belong to that group.

So when 52 per cent of people tick Bullivant's 'no religion' box, is this a cause for concern or a matter of rejoicing that at last people feel free to be honest in admitting that they no longer find the strictures of organized religion helpful? When Brown writes of a "fixed moral core which Britain as a whole used to recognise even when they deviated from it",¹²⁹ one must ask whether people in earlier decades and centuries were merely paying lip service to a culture of Christianity that was dominant and for which they were presented with no alternative. Has there been a shift from public ceremony to private (but no less real) belief in a life after this one, a sense of a creative energy and a conviction that each life matters? And is there still, and will there always be, the need after the death of the

¹²⁹ Brown, 2009: 2

body, for family and friends and indeed the whole community to mark the history and the on-going identity of the one now gone from their company? There may no longer be a law or community consensus requiring people to attend church each Sunday, but still many will have as the soundtrack to their lives a narrative, a myth, a story which speaks of a life following this one which is eternal and free of pain. The often unspoken myth unites the bereaved with the minister and with the community. An imagined reality comforts the bereaved. The triumph of *Homo sapiens* is that “large numbers of strangers can cooperate successfully by believing in common myths”.¹³⁰ The general population of Canvey Island, not troubled by the obligation of denominational liturgy or biblical strictures, lives happily in what George Eliot called “the via media of indifference”¹³¹ and are content to tick “C of E” on forms in hospital or prison. For most of the time we live in a dual reality – disconnected from awareness of the wider world. Family, work, television, holidays and mortgage occupy our senses most of the time. We come together only for sporting fixtures, national tragedies, royal weddings and scandals. Otherwise we are content to exist in our own nuclear space with our own unspoken half-formed private view of anything else. For much of the time we are indifferent to matters of religion. And if such things are thought about in the still hours of the night, they are not discussed. Then when bereavement comes, the other reality of loss, grief and ongoing life takes centre stage and private belief must engage with the wider community. The microscope of finite lives must give way to the telescope of limitless possibility. As Richard Rohr points out, suffering is the only thing strong enough to break down our control systems, our logic and our desire to be in charge.¹³² When the bereaved feel that they cannot cope and cannot make sense of this death that seems to have occurred ‘too soon’, the minister is well placed to celebrate and indeed protect the identity of the one who has now died and that of the bereaved who are left behind. The minister can absorb the questions that have no easy answers about the point of life and whether or not it is to be defined by our accomplishments in the sphere of work, family and material acquisition. Out of such conversation is spirituality given voice and, indeed, wings. For the bereaved, such a

¹³⁰ Harari, 2014: 27

¹³¹ Eliot, 1967: 3

¹³² Rohr, 2016: 125

moment can be nothing less than a paradigm shift ¹³³: a transformation from what was comfortably, if unthinkingly, held, to a new thought process of who or what God is and how we relate to him. (Even in our modern age God is almost invariably referred to as “He”).

And what of science?

It may be said that science now fulfils the space that used to be occupied by, first, magic, then religion, then alchemy and then a belief in solutions as found in totalitarianism. John Cottingham¹³⁴ in his essay, *Transcending Science*, asks the question what it is that people, at least in the western world, are rejecting when they say they are not religious. He suggests that people are rejecting a classical theism which Swinburne defines as an “explanatory hypothesis, which purports to explain why certain observed data are as they are.”¹³⁵ Cottingham rightly concludes that if people have relied on a concept of God simply to explain the way the universe is, then many will have turned to science which does the job very well indeed. As the physicist Brian Cox has claimed, science is “very close” to explaining the cosmos and our own emergence from the unfolding process since the Big Bang.¹³⁶ As hitherto straightforward scientific truths are found to be more complicated with the deepening study of quantum physics, biology and cosmology, so the old lovers’ quarrel between science and spirituality may be found to be an argument over semantics. Science traditionally has sought to reduce mystery and improve understanding. When this was set against a religious view that depended on an invisible and incorporeal entity that operated outside of any concept that we can grasp, it is easy to understand why so many people in our time turned away. Even in the 1970s Don Cupitt, an Anglican priest, dared to say that he could no longer subscribe to the view of God as a “Great Spirit”.¹³⁷ The Dominican writer Herbert McCabe accepted that to call upon God is not to clear up a puzzle but to invoke a mystery.¹³⁸ And it is to this very mystery that ministers of religion,

¹³³ Kuhn, 2012

¹³⁴ Cottingham, 2018: 23

¹³⁵ Swinburne, 2008:16

¹³⁶ B. Cox 2014

¹³⁷ Cupitt, 1981

¹³⁸ McCabe, 2010: 128

by their mere presence in the house of the bereaved, seek to point. 21st century people long for puzzles to be cleared up. Harari suggests that religion focuses on order – creating and maintaining social structures – but science is interested above all in power: power to cure diseases, win wars and produce food.¹³⁹ But for all our access to science and all our reliance on technology, when it comes to death and loss, we still know there is a point past which we cannot go with our intellect. At such time the mystery needs to be embraced with hope and perhaps even joy. This is a spiritual journey which neither religion nor science can independently master. Those who would say that science is all that matters are in danger of surrendering meaning in exchange for power. A purely scientific reading of the evidence of the universe sees a blind process without purpose: the world is no theatrical stage in which the drama of human lives matter. But there is that in human nature throughout the ages and in every culture that knows this not to be the truth. The bereaved may have been bereaved before, but they have not endured this particular loss before. This loved one is dying for the first time. The spiritual journey within or without the context of a religion says that each birth and each death matters and each one is different. This narrowing lacuna between scientific progress and human need for meaning may well be behind the existential angst to which many are subject in the modern world. It is a false dichotomy to see science as providing the big picture of objective and helpful data while religion is relegated to the outfield of subjective, personal, perceived wisdom. Enough is never enough. There is food aplenty and inoculation against disease. But it is not enough. The poor of Canvey Island are no longer emaciated and frail: they are more likely to be obese. The minister of religion has the task of embodying, living and teaching the narrative that each life does in fact matter to a creator God and thus enabling meaning to sneak back into the scientific pointlessness of the universe. This is where, in the words of U2's Bono, in his comment on Rohr's *The Divine Dance*, "contemporary science meets ancient mysticism, and theology meets poetry".¹⁴⁰ In the home of the bereaved, the inner and outer worlds of spirituality and science may now converge. The truth can slowly dawn that life and death are related as is everything else in the known and unknown universe. The minister embodies, or should embody, this relatedness.

¹³⁹ Harari, 2017: 231

¹⁴⁰ Rohr, 2016: flypage

So Cottingham suggests that, rather than understanding ‘being religious’ as subscribing to an explanatory hypothesis, being religious should be seen as a mode or manner of understanding the world. A more useful question then might be, “What is it to relate to the world religiously?” Or “What is it to understand things in a religious way?”¹⁴¹ Peterson suggests that the religious person is striving simply to be a good person within the context of his community rather than trying to formulate ideas about the objective nature of the world. Religion in this context should be seen as a starting point rather than the final destination. “‘Thou shalt not’ is necessary for the child but hopelessly narrow for the articulated vision of the adult”.¹⁴² Understanding in a religious way may be intuitive rather than derived from dogmatic teaching. Such an intuitive response to loss and death will find helpful symbols, myths and poetry which help the mourner to cope on many different levels. Such response does not lend itself to cold compartmentalization and labelling as religious or non-religious. For this process Heidegger suggests the term *Stimmung*: a moral and spiritual opening of the self to the presence of the divine.¹⁴³ For most people in 21st century Britain, Christianity is not the only font of morality but, because Christianity has been the major influence for so long in these islands, the values espoused by them still have a Christian flavour even if the content may be found in every major world religion.

The shift from public ceremony to private belief is nowhere more counteracted than in the desire of the apparently ‘unchurched’ to turn to the church in times of grief, to ask the funeral director to invite a minister of religion to perform the funeral rites of one who in life belonged to no church and would in the last census have most likely ticked the box marked ‘no religion’. The traditional language and liturgy of the church give a sense of continuity in a rapidly changing age. It is probably true to say that the mourner’s response is emotional rather than cerebral: the language and liturgy are felt rather than assented to. But ever has it been thus. The funeral liturgy provides in elegant cadences the mature

¹⁴¹ Cottingham, 2018: 29

¹⁴² Peterson, 2018: 102

¹⁴³ Heidegger, 1962: 177

reflection of the ages. It is both poetry and prose. In an age of denial of, or at least distancing from, the reality of death, the language and liturgy help the mourner face the reality of death, loss and grief. Liturgy becomes a sort of scaffolding to keep emotions in check while giving them a voice.

In the introduction to his book, *Continuing Bonds in Bereavement*, Dennis Klass makes the point that we have graduated from the notion held dear by many 20th century psychologists and psychiatrists that for successful mourning to take place the bereaved must “disengage from the deceased, let go of the past, and move on”.¹⁴⁴ He quotes Freud’s letter to a recently bereaved friend, written nine years after his own daughter had died, in which Freud acknowledges that “the acute grief after such a loss will lapse, but one will remain un-consoled”.¹⁴⁵

In Canvey Island it took 20 years for Sue to be able to let go of her daughter’s small green car which reflected her daughter’s personality and name. Her daughter had died of a brain tumour at the age of 21. For 20 years Sue felt a comfort in driving, and caring for, this tangible souvenir of her child. Then little by little she found that it simply reminded her of what she had lost. She asked the scrap dealer to assure her that the car would be scrapped and not sold on to be repaired. Sue could not bear the thought of seeing the car driven by someone else. In those 20 years Sue became involved fully in the life of the church. She was confirmed, her friend was ordained and Sue became Church Warden. Sue has counselled countless others who have been bereaved and has welcomed many into the fellowship of the church with a knowing, unspoken understanding of their pain. Freud was correct: the acute grief has indeed lapsed but Sue remains un-consoled. On the 22nd anniversary of her daughter’s death Sue said to me, her minister, “We are blessed to have you in our lives. You have kept her alive in my heart and made it possible for me to live with this great gaping hole.” The church is well placed to travel with the bereaved over months and years as new realities are fashioned and un-consoled grief is borne.

¹⁴⁴ Klass and Steffen, 2018: 3

¹⁴⁵ Freud, 1992: 383

The church must make use of such opportunities, particularly in these apparently secular times, to acknowledge the on-going grief, the unending inability to be consoled and to help the bereaved to create or at least fashion, in Tony Walter's words "a durable biography that enables the living to integrate the memory of the dead into their on-going lives".¹⁴⁶ This is expressed very simply in an unattributed poem currently popular at funerals called *Weep Not For Me* with the lines,

Shed no tears of sorrow
But in your hearts my memory keep
Long beyond tomorrow.
I'm on my last journey
Removed from hurt and pain
One day you'll take this road
And then we'll meet again.

Another poem with exactly the same title contains the words, "In your memory I live on". The leaders of the church may wish that the bereaved believed in a life that continues quite apart from the memory of the bereaved, but at least any sentiment that speaks of the one gone as living on in any way at all has got to be welcome.

The Church of England's *Statistics for Mission 2014* shows that in that year alone in England, over 146,000 families turned to the Church of England to conduct the funeral of their beloved in church or at the crematorium.¹⁴⁷ By 2017 the figures had fallen to 133,000 funerals; 59% of which took place in church while 41% took place in crematoria.¹⁴⁸ A further fall is reflected in the figures for 2018. In that year there were 128,000 Church of England funerals, a slightly higher percentage of which (61%) took place in Church while 39% were conducted in crematoria.¹⁴⁹ My experience of spending time in the crematorium before the service that I am due to conduct is that the 'slack' has been taken up by Civil celebrants who conduct funerals full time and are content to cater to the often unspoken spirituality of the bereaved by borrowing and adapting the language and much of the liturgy of the church without the trappings and vestments of organised religion. In

¹⁴⁶ Walter, 1996: 7

¹⁴⁷ Church of England Research and Statistics 2014: 8

¹⁴⁸ Church of England Research and Statistics 2017: 3

¹⁴⁹ Church of England Research and Statistics 2018: 3

Chapter Seven I set out the proportions of funerals conducted at a local crematorium by ordained ministers and Civil celebrants and find that 56% of funerals in a three month period in 2016 were conducted by Civil celebrants.

The figures quoted above suggest that even in contemporary times a great number of people still have need of a sacred moment, a sacred space in which to process grief and the major turning points in life that, despite our technology and medicine, cannot ultimately be controlled. TS Eliot suggests that when one comes to a holy place at a holy moment

“You would have to put off
Sense and notion. You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
Or carry report. You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid. And prayer is more
Than an order of words, the conscious occupation
Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying.
And what the dead had no speech for, when living,
They can tell you, being dead: the communication
Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.
Here, the intersection of the timeless moment
Is England and nowhere. Never and always”.¹⁵⁰

Do people turn to the church, or to a Civil celebrant with the vocabulary of the church, for the funeral because they hope the minister, like the Holy Spirit in Romans 8 who, according to St Paul, can translate feeble groanings (in Eliot’s words, “what the dead had no speech for when living”) into prayers acceptable to the God who the loved one, when alive, was not sure existed? I believe the function of the minister is to help the bereaved to see past the sorrow and the loss, to celebrate the joy that was and is and can be again; and to help them in time to accept the continuum of life and death. So Brooklyn, aged 14, could write to me after her Grandmother’s funeral, “you took our words and thoughts and turned them into a beautiful tribute for her. She would have been honoured to have you there to bring us all together in the chapel, where she was welcomed to her new life with open arms”.¹⁵¹ Brooklyn is clear that the funeral is not about letting go of love or

¹⁵⁰ Eliot, 1969: 191

¹⁵¹ D.R’s funeral

grief or memory. It is simply a freeing of a life loved: freeing from a life of pain and illness into the light of a creator, loving God - however imperfectly such a God may be understood. The bereaved have to trust love. They need to feel part of a community. A funeral religiously taken, by whomever, in a real sense enables a continuing relationship with the one who has died. The earthly life is ended but not the relationship. As Klass points out, death changes the role of the one previously alive, “but the dead can still be significant members of families and communities”. The bonds that continue to exist between the living and the departed are not simply feelings or mental constructs, they are, at least for the bereaved, very real indeed.¹⁵² Although the bereaved person may feel alone, the very sense of longing is in itself a relationship with the one now invisible. The dead may be invisible, but they are certainly not absent.

When people turn to a minister of the church they are in part seeking to impose an order on the chaos and apparent randomness of death, loss and bereavement. The ceremonies of the church and the utterances of the minister provide a timeless framework into which the particular grief can be fitted and where it can find a resonance and a confirmation that this death and consequent sense of loss has meaning. Death occurs because of a sickness of body or of mind. Death causes the loved ones left behind to grieve. Grief feels like, and must indeed be, a sickness. When the bereaved wish to have funeral rites in a holy place and/or conducted by one who is perceived to be a holy person, then the bereaved person, whether consciously or unconsciously, is seeking healing. Rappaport points out that the word ‘holy’ probably shares its derivation from the Old English *halig* as well as words like “whole” and “healthy” and “heal”.¹⁵³ And healing along with the imposition of an order on the chaos may be found in an activity which is ongoing and timeless. In short, such healing is found in ritual. And the ritual affirms that each life matters. Indeed, the web of life may be said to be revealed in the ritual.¹⁵⁴ The person mourned is, in the words of Rowan Williams, “the point at which relationships intersect, where a difference

¹⁵² Klass and Steffen, 2018: 4

¹⁵³ Rappaport, 2013: 24

¹⁵⁴ Barbery, 2008: 87

may be made and new relations created".¹⁵⁵ It is in the dark journey of grief, supported by the scaffolding of ritual, that the bereaved can be helped to discover that trust in ongoing relationships – with the one gone as well as with those left behind – is essential as they discover a new way of being.

The church affirms that our respect is due to each person no matter how “great” or “humble” the life lived. Each of us has a presence or a meaning in someone else’s existence. When this is forgotten or ignored then decisions are made about who counts and who does not. Such forgetting or ignoring makes possible the hideous 20th century regimes of Mao, Stalin and Hitler. Auschwitz is the logical result of such thinking. At Auschwitz ritual was subverted to destroy rather than heal. As Ulrich Simon, my undergraduate Hebrew Professor whose family perished at Auschwitz, painfully recounted, “The group’s enthusiasm stamps out effective individualism. It recalls the intoxicating technique of mantic and hysteria. The rhythm of music, the acceleration of movement, the repetitive chanting of slogans, induce a state of mind in which men deem themselves invulnerable to ordinary restraints and dangers. Conventions, criticisms and appeals to reason diminish and finally vanish before a power which possesses the possessed”.¹⁵⁶ Several hundred human beings can methodically be consigned to the gas chambers and crematoria each and every day by way of a practical solution to the thorny ‘Jewish Question’. Ritual is powerful – for ill or for good. Elderly men in Canvey Island remember driving ambulances on the day of the liberation of Auschwitz. One slightly younger man is haunted, not by what he saw but, by what he had to do in the jungles of Malaya more than 60 years ago. If and when such people come to church the minister must do better than mouth banal platitudes about an all-powerful, all-loving God.

And of course the efficacy of the healing ritual is greater than the sum of its parts. People can bring only what they know of themselves to as much of God as they perceive. But then the ritual of words and action weaves its effect. Performance is crucial. As Percy

¹⁵⁵ Williams, 2018: 32

¹⁵⁶ Simon, 1967: 30

phrases it, “beliefs must be performed in order to comprehend the drama”.¹⁵⁷ The words on the page and the rubrics do not a ritual make – just as, in the words of Hilary Mantel,¹⁵⁸ a map is not the journey, a script is not the play, a recipe is not the meal, facts are not the life. The conjunction of person, situation, history, words and music together form the ritual and produce the healing medicine that enables the bereaved to begin to let go of the body of the deceased. And it is in the ritual that what once was human is treated as human still. Thomas Maschio, in his study of Melanesian religious phenomena, goes further. He suggests that emotions such as nostalgia, anger, sadness and grief are creatively transformed during the course of religious performance into a form of cultural memory. Such performances of ritual are about the enactment, expression and even the invention of the bereaved person’s idea of themselves.¹⁵⁹ The spiritual and moral health of a community may be measured in part by the way in which it treats the bodies of the dead. We are held together by what Harari calls ‘mythical glue’.¹⁶⁰ This glue that binds together individuals, families and groups is the self-same glue that has made us masters of creation.

Thomas Long quotes the experience of a woman who needed to find – and dreaded finding – the body of her mother who had been swept away in the Japanese tsunami of 2011. When she did find the body she discovered that someone else had attended the body before laying it out with hundreds of others on the floor of a school: “When I saw her peaceful, clean face, I knew someone had taken care of her until I arrived. That saved me.” It was later discovered that it was a retired Buddhist undertaker who had cared for thousands of tsunami victims whispering to each of them, “You must be so cold and lonely, but your family is going to come for you soon so you had better think of what you are going to say to them when they arrive”¹⁶¹

In the apocrypha we find the book of Tobit which speaks of events in Nineveh under Assyrian occupation two or three centuries before the common era. Tobit gets in to trouble

¹⁵⁷ Percy, 2010: 4

¹⁵⁸ Mantel, 2017

¹⁵⁹ Maschio, 1994

¹⁶⁰ Harari, 2014: 38

¹⁶¹ Long and Lynch, 2013: 89

because he acts as unofficial undertaker for the wretched refugees. He reclaims the bodies thrown casually into a rubbish dump and gives them a decent burial. Tobit acts out of a sense of charity and religious faith but he is also making a political statement to the effect that all Jews matter to their community and to God.

Similarly the Romans were perplexed when Christians insisted on reclaiming the bodies of the executed and giving them a burial. The actions of Joseph of Arimathea, a secret follower of Jesus, are immortalized in the Gospel of John.¹⁶² Theologian Margaret R Miles points out that in Roman society, “corpses were considered ill-omened”. To the cultured Romans, the primitive Christians were misled by a “failure to understand that it is the mind that is to be honoured and cultivated while the human body is to be ignored, disparaged and scorned”.¹⁶³

Aretha Franklin’s coffin was visible and centre-stage for all seven hours of her televised funeral in August 2017. A bright spotlight was trained on the gold casket throughout. But this practice of giving the body of the deceased an honoured place in the rituals attendant upon death, throughout the ages and across cultures, is now under threat in the face of direct cremations and the desire to hold the cremation privately before the public memorial service. When David Bowie died in January 2016 his body was swiftly moved to a crematorium without funeral or ceremony or the provision of any occasion for his fans to celebrate a life and mourn a death collectively. His fans were denied a ritual in which they could have mourned his death and celebrated his life

Grief in a pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic of 2020/21 necessitated the cancelling or curtailing of gatherings for any event including weddings, christenings and funerals. While weddings and christenings could be postponed to a later date, there was no such option for funerals where the body of the deceased would be present. A study of the long-term effects of the lockdown in terms of the actualization of grief occasioned by the pandemic is beyond the

¹⁶² John 19: 38-42

¹⁶³ Miles, 2008: 13-14

scope of this study but we can say that it did cause in the short term a wide cross-section of the population to endure the fact of direct cremation attended by no one or by fewer than ten relatives in the first twelve weeks of lockdown and a maximum of thirty for a while thereafter.

In the course of the pandemic, relatives had not been allowed to visit the sick-bed of a loved one in the final weeks of illness. If they were required to self-isolate they could not even attend the funeral. Some widows and widowers were reduced to looking through their windows as the hearse bearing the coffin of their life-long partner paused for a moment outside the house. In the words of Andrea Cerato, a funeral director in Milan, “This pandemic kills twice. First it isolates you from your loved ones right before you die. Then it doesn’t allow anyone to get closure”.¹⁶⁴ At the height of the pandemic funeral directors were required to handle the body as little as possible so clothes brought in by relatives were laid on top of the body or even on top of the coffin. Few will forget the sight of army trucks conveying coffins from Bergamo in Italy to cemeteries, churchyards and crematoria in other cities as Bergamo had become overwhelmed by the scale of the deaths.

In Essex temporary morgues were built in the grounds of crematoria but, thankfully, did not have to be used except for storing a few bodies from regions that did not have sufficient facilities at the height of the pandemic. Ministers were invited to sign up to a scheme whereby they would be on duty all day at the crematorium simply conducting short generic funerals as the coffins arrived. This plan in the event was not required. Ministers, having sent a copy of the service sheet to relatives to follow at home, conducted the service of their own parishioners accompanied solely by God to whom they were commending the soul of the departed one. Ministers and funeral directors were standing in as family and, occasionally funeral directors would stand in as ministers. Where the number of those attending was limited to five or ten people sitting on socially-distanced chairs, priority was given to the closest relatives even though they might not have been closest in life. The one paying for the funeral became the final arbiter of who would be invited to attend

¹⁶⁴ Bettiza, 2020

the funeral. Neighbours who had faithfully looked out for someone for perhaps forty years were not necessarily counted among that number. One large family I know made the decision that as all of them could not attend the funeral, none of them would attend. One interesting fact is that a number of families instructed their funeral director to exchange the planned expensive coffin for a cheaper model and to refund the difference in price as there would not be anyone outside the family to see it!

At the time of writing, as the vaccination programme is being rolled out, the church expects a wave of requests for memorial services attended by all who wish to hear the favourite music, recount the anecdotes, give thanks for a life, be counted in a crowd and generally acknowledge the loss of one who was loved. Even though technology has allowed people to “join in” by means of video links to cremation services and Sunday worship, the general opinion is that “it is not the same”. People have missed the physical coming together; the power of a gathering of folk united in memory and thanksgiving; the engaging in prayer, hymn and silence; the wearing of clothes signifying seriousness and the forming of a community of sympathy. Care of the dying and the bereaved is the work of a community. We are social animals who are helped by the synchronicity, comfort and timelessness of repetitive activity. In short, whether we are gathering for a wedding, christening, funeral or a football match we are fed by engagement in a ritual. Football fans who have watched matches played “behind closed doors” have echoed the phrase of mourners forced to remain at home and watch the service via a social media link: “It is not the same”.

In challenging times like war or pandemic the task for the minister is to make the ritual, however pared down, effective as a time of healing and letting go for those who are able to be present. In normal times Audrey’s funeral would have been attended by over a hundred people. In the event, her family were allowed six attendees. As the cortege left her home, neighbours lined the streets. Her two children, her son-in-law and daughter-in-law and two grandchildren followed the coffin in to the crematorium chapel, representing themselves and all the lives Audrey had touched in the 86 years of her life. That evening her daughter was able to write, “It is hard to put into words just what that meant to us all

this morning. It really was the most perfect service Mum could have had". The action of the neighbours standing in silent respect, the liturgy of the funeral service with music and poetry, the résumé of a life well lived and prayers to an unseen but sensed God, followed by the closing of a curtain, was sufficient for the day to enable a family to honour a much-loved grandmother.

The Co-op funeral company was quick off the mark in July 2020 when they advertised memorial services which would allow the bereaved "to arrange a separate service fitting to the person who's died, after government restrictions around funerals have been lifted. This means family and friends can come together for a service to remember your loved one." The advertisement went on to say that two options were on offer which needed to be taken up within 12 months of the restrictions being lifted: *a Celebration of Life Service* arranged by the Co-op and attended by a funeral director; or a *Family Memorial Tribute* in which a member of staff would help a family arrange their own service. The cost of these options was £700.00 and £395.00 respectively and would include a memorial canvas, service sheets (50) or invitations, a floral tribute, memory pins (20) and thank you cards (20). Celebrant fees and venue costs would incur extra charges. Clearly if the church does not offer a ritual to fulfil its function of engendering hope in the world in the aftermath of loss, others will.

The familiar in ritual

Rappaport sees ritual as the ground from which religion grows and he defines ritual as "the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers".¹⁶⁵ In my context of ministering in an Essex parish, I take this to mean that the hitherto fairly unchurched bereaved, in times of loss and bereavement, turn to someone who will say and do things that they themselves have not the confidence, education or means to utter and do. Furthermore, the ministers are uttering words and performing actions that they themselves, for the most part, did not devise. Often ministers in the house of the bereaved will be presented with the order of service from a previous funeral and asked to devise the next funeral on similar lines with the same

¹⁶⁵ Rappaport, 2013: 24

prayers, hymns and music. The ritual is more than the words uttered or the actions performed. When the bereaved entrust the body of a loved one to the ministrations of a funeral celebrant or ordained minister the whole experience, properly carried out, is a means of healing memories, easing present reality and giving hope for the days, weeks, months and years to come. So Dion could write in an email after the visit to plan her beloved Mum's funeral, "You have made a very sad event feel like it will be handled with grace and care".¹⁶⁶ In the planning of the funeral, Dion had begun to experience an identification of her bereavement in the care which the church was taking in ensuring that her mother's story would be told and that her mother's life would be celebrated and valued. What Dion needed, and what the church offered, formed a unity. This is what Rappaport calls "higher-order" meaning.¹⁶⁷ So it was no surprise when several months after the funeral Dion and her family appeared in church for an evening service on what would have been her Mother's birthday. The church had sanctified the funeral: the church would sanctify the difficult day of the first birthday ever on which Dion and her family were without the physical presence of a much-loved Mother.

When the unchurched come to a service they need to find the place and the language familiar. Several people have described (re)turning to Church as a "coming home". The wording of the *Lord's Prayer* was modernized in 1980 but woe betide the minister who at a funeral uses anything other than the 'traditional' version easily recognized and valued by the unchurched mourner. The traditional version of the *Lord's Prayer* is seen by those on the fringe of the worshipping life of the church as positively canonical. Even if we have not set foot inside a church for ten years, we need to know that the familiar is still familiar and that God has not changed, even if we have.

People will often choose a funeral director or a minister or a church because that is the funeral director, the minister or the church to which they always turn when loss occurs. They looked after the great grandparents, the parents and the little brother when they died. Grief is eased by the familiar and the personal. Increasingly the church must recognize

¹⁶⁶ J.G's funeral

¹⁶⁷ Rappaport, 2013: 71

that people are free to choose from many cultural possibilities of which the traditional funeral is only one. And while this is true we must also realize that most people and, indeed, most communities, tend to explore only a tiny fraction of the horizon of their possibilities.¹⁶⁸ In moments of grief people tend to revert back to what they did last time they were in this situation or to what the people of their community tend to do.

The foregoing speaks of trends and attitudes found in the nation as a whole with some reference to certain people and situations in Canvey Island. I turn now to the particular history of the community of Canvey Island in Essex, the population expansion, the provision of places of worship, burial practices and the evolving role of ministers of religion.

¹⁶⁸ Harari, 2014: 62

CHAPTER FIVE

The Churches of Canvey Island, Essex, England

This chapter charts the way in which the population of Canvey Island grew by fifteen thousand per cent in the 20th century. This work traces the evolution of people's engagement with the church - from the 17th century when the church, with a building literally at the centre of the community, had total control of the rites of passage of the entire, small population - right through to the current decade of the 21st century when, for a major proportion of the now large island population, there is great awareness of, and gratitude for, the life and work of the church in the community even though this does not translate into active week-by-week engagement with the rites of the church.

We shall see in succeeding chapters that the change in Canvey's population, numerically and in terms of education and mobility, mirrors that of the country at large and the life of the Church of England. We look first at the society the new settlers in Canvey Island found, the provision that was created for them for worship and how the settled community interacted with the church in general and their vicars in particular.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century the Dutch Engineer Cornelius Vermuyden was engaged to build a sea wall and drain the marshland of six islands which formed Canvey Island in the Thames Estuary in the County of Essex. The Islands were used for grazing of the Long Tailed Sheep. Their milk was used to make cheese.

In 1631 a small timber chapel was built and the Bishop of London authorized the Dutch Church in London to appoint a Minister to conduct worship in the Dutch language for about 200 Dutch people who remained in Canvey after the sea wall was completed. The chapel was rebuilt and dedicated to St Catherine in 1712. By then a number of English families had settled in Canvey and many of the Dutch had resettled on the mainland. Worship in St Catherine's Church was now conducted in English.

The church was again rebuilt in 1745 and dedicated this time to St Peter. Sunday worship

was offered once a month. Baptisms, weddings and funerals were still conducted on the mainland in Essex. By 1792 there were about 200 people living in 50 houses in Canvey Island. Five stained glass windows were added to the church in 1862 along with a pulpit and communion table.¹⁶⁹ The small church was evidently considered to be adequate as no major additions were made to it until 1875. The parish registers show baptisms in Canvey from 1813, burials from 1819 and marriages from 1861. Until 1881 the island was apportioned between nine different parishes on the mainland with regard to grazing rights and tithing. These parishes were, Prittlewell, Vange, North Benfleet, South Benfleet, Pitsea, Bowers Gifford, Laindon, Hadleigh and Southchurch. Throughout the 19th century the families of the one being baptised in the chapel at Canvey were said to live in the bit of Canvey that ‘belonged’ to the mainland parish:

1821 Oct 13 th	Charlotte of John and Sarah Dean	Canvey Island, Prittlewell
Nov 4 th	Frances Ann of Thomas and Frances Staner	Canvey Island, Vange
Nov 10 th	Elizabeth of John and Hannah Rayment	Canvey Island, Pitsea
1822 July 9 th	William of John and Mary Carter	North Benfleet, C.I. ¹⁷⁰

Then in 1881 Canvey Island was made into a separate ecclesiastical and civil parish. Canvey Island became an address in its own right. Henry Hayes, who had been the Curate-in-Charge sent from St Mary’s, South Benfleet on the mainland for nine years, was appointed the first vicar. The Vicar of Canvey Island now lived in his parish among the people for whom he professed to have the Cure of Souls. Until 1964, when a more modest vicarage was built, the vicars of Canvey lived in an immense vicarage set apart in style and grandeur from the other dwellings of the island. In 1875 the parish church was again rebuilt and once again dedicated to St Katherine (this time spelt with a K). It was when a vicarage was built in 1881 that the separate parish of Canvey Island was created. The building of the vicarage depended on the generosity of a local landowner. So from its very foundation the parish depended on the twin seats of power – the church and the manor house on the mainland. As Callum Brown has said, “The two were not at odds, but in

¹⁶⁹ Acres, 1947: 5

¹⁷⁰ From the Parish Registers now lodged at the Essex Record Office, Chelmsford

cahoots. Any threat to the one was a threat to the other, and for this reason the landed elites had immediate cause to wish their people in obedience to the church as they would have them in obedience to themselves".¹⁷¹

From then to the present day curates, vicars and rectors have been appointed particularly and solely to the parish of Canvey island. And in each generation, through two World Wars, economic vicissitudes and two pandemics, we have sought to preach the gospel to the whole population in fresh and appropriate ways. We have been required to interpret the present time and decide how best to relay, teach and nurture our perceived eternal truths of the Gospel of Christ in a way that is relevant and accessible to people with an astonishingly wide range of histories and abilities. This is particularly true in the ministry to the bereaved. This task is what Wesley Carr has called interpretive ministry.¹⁷² It is true to say that in the latter part of the 20th and the early years of the 21st century our focus has not been entirely taken up with relaying, teaching and nurturing. More than a little time and energy has been taken up with the maintenance, upkeep and enhancement of our buildings. Modern specifications with regard to insulation and the requirements of Health and Safety have often meant that repairs and enhancements are more expensive than the original building.

Build My Church

The families of the majority of the inhabitants of Canvey Island originated in East London. Robin Gill¹⁷³ has demonstrated the Church of England's focus on building new Churches. Such focus did not factor in the numbers of people actually attending church. As the population of London grew between the two World Wars the largest housing estate in Europe was built in Becontree on the border of London and Essex. Many families now living in Canvey Island paused for several years in Becontree on their sojourn from East London – what social scientists and the established church increasingly saw as a godless city - on their way to more idyllic open spaces of a new community with a church building

¹⁷¹ Brown, 2009: 17

¹⁷² Carr, 1985

¹⁷³ Gill, 2003

at its centre. My own research into the history of Becontree shows that as the population moved there from East London in the 1930s, the Anglican Church built no fewer than 10 Churches to cater for the influx. Two of these churches were entirely financed by wealthy women – Miss Wills, a spinster, paid for St Alban’s Becontree, and Mrs Keene, a widow, paid for St John The Divine, Becontree. The cumulative seating capacity of the ten churches was some 4,000. Small congregations and harassed Parochial Church Councils had to work out how to heat and maintain such cathedrals to episcopal optimism. As early as July 1930 the Bishop of Chelmsford was complaining that only a fraction of the population attended the parish church.¹⁷⁴ A journalist in 1936¹⁷⁵ reported that there were ten weddings in one morning in a local parish church. But legal and societal necessity did not translate into a desire to attend and share in Sunday morning worship. Since the work of Robert Raikes towards the end of the 18th century, schools on Sunday provided some education and security for children who were required to work all the other days of the week. Between the two World Wars of the 20th century most children in England went to Sunday school even though their parents did not go to church. After the second war the parents still did not go to church and most children gradually stopped being sent to Sunday school.¹⁷⁶

The same situation of energetic building obtained in Canvey Island. The population of Canvey in 1900 was fewer than 300 persons. But the vicar, The Rev Joseph Romanus Brown, saw fit to build a mission church at the east end of the Island. The church was opened on 5th November 1910. The new church was later dedicated to St Anne. This was a mere seven years after the Leigh Beck Baptist Church was opened in the same area of the island. The congregation of Anglicans now had two Churches to maintain. The Baptists opened a second church in 1926 in the Winter Gardens area of Canvey. St Anne’s church was rebuilt and a vicarage added in 1974. The 1926 Baptist Church was rebuilt in 1980. In 1938 a Roman Catholic Church was built and dedicated to Our Lady of Canvey and the English Martyrs. An Anglican Convent of the Good Shepherd which had been in

¹⁷⁴ Daily Herald, 1930

¹⁷⁵ Daily Herald, 1936

¹⁷⁶ Gill, 2003

existence since 1924 was taken over by the Roman Catholic Church. The Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses was erected in 1990. There is also a small Salvation Army Citadel and the Elim Pentecostal Church had a presence for a while. For the past few years there has been a Black-led Pentecostal congregation. A Parish Room was built on to the side of a new Church of England primary school in the 1980's. The Parochial Church Council (PCC) is required to pay its share each year in the running and maintenance of the whole building.

Four years after Canvey Island was made into a separate ecclesiastical and civil parish a journalist working for *The Globe* newspaper delivered himself of the opinion on 12th September 1885 that, "It would be difficult to find a place of similar extent throughout the length of England which contains fewer points of interest than Canvey Island. It is a terra incognita to everyone except its three hundred inhabitants and an occasional sportsman or misguided excursionist." However, before that century was out, an ambitious entrepreneur by the name of Frederick Hester took advantage of the agricultural depression and bought great swathes of land in Canvey Island. He divided the land into plots and set about selling them at Fenchurch Street station in London for £5.00 a plot. Potential landowners were beguiled by visions of an island mono-rail and of exotic summer and winter gardens complete with immense glass houses – an echo of the fabulous Crystal Palace in the Great Exhibition masterminded by Prince Albert in Hyde Park in 1851. Hester proposed to turn the Canvey lake into a little Venice complete with gondolas, and the whole island was to be illuminated with electric light. A library and reading room were proposed and each bungalow was to be linked to the mainland by telephone. Canvey commuters would have the convenience of their own branch line of the railway.

Hester went bankrupt in 1905 and most of his dreams came to nothing. But for the first half of the 20th century a number of wealthy landowners who lived in London kept a holiday home – a simple rough-cast bungalow – on Canvey Island. This was used at weekends and during the summer months while their main residence continued to be in London. The air of Canvey Island was felt to be beneficial. Indeed, as early as 1909 Miss Clara James opened *The Social Institute* - a home for overworked young women from

London. Wealthier landowners supported the local church in Canvey Island as they did their Parish Church elsewhere. So the brass book-rest still in use on the altar of the Parish Church was presented to the old St Katherine's Church in 1929 by "Edward Hanslope Cox (of Friern Barnet and of this Parish)" in memory of his wife Eleanor. A glance at the Baptism registers shows the dual residences of the fathers of the infants being baptised:

1884 Edward Cox	Canvey and Chancery Lane	Law Stationer
1890 James Farrow	Barking and Canvey	Railway Porter
1893 Charles Crane	Stratford and Canvey	Railway Guard
1899 Richard Balshaw	Upminster and Canvey	Carpenter
1900 Walter Miles	Horndon and Canvey	Carriageman

To take the year 1884 at random, of the eleven other baptisms in St Katherine's Church, ten of the fathers are described as labourers and one worked for the coast guard.¹⁷⁷

A journalist writing on 5th January 1883 reported that the Christmas Day services "were well attended and the communicants at the two celebrations numbered twenty-seven."¹⁷⁸ In 1891 there were 57 inhabited houses in Canvey Island. In 1900, some 293 people farmed and raised families in Canvey Island. By 1911, 583 people lived in Canvey Island. In August 1924 over 42,000 passengers booked tickets at South Benfleet station which was across the creek on the mainland. Most of these people visited Canvey Island. The only way on or off the island was via stepping stones when the tide was out or by means of paying a ferryman with a small boat at other times. This advanced the argument for a bridge to the mainland which finally was installed in 1931.¹⁷⁹ The number of people resident on Canvey Island had risen to 3,532 by 1931, to 9,000 in 1947 and 16,000 by 1960. This last increase owed much to the fact that the London areas of Walthamstow and Dagenham built overspill estates on the island and people, having confidence in the new sea wall and the bridge, flocked from their overcrowded accommodation with outside toilet in exchange for the cleaner air and commodious facilities of Canvey Island. By 2016, some 40,000 people called Canvey Island home.

¹⁷⁷ From the Canvey Island parish registers

¹⁷⁸ Southend Standard and Essex Weekley Advertiser, 1883

¹⁷⁹ Essex Newsman, 1924

Time to expand?

In 1960 the Anglican congregation of St Katherine's moved out of the old church building into a bright new building dedicated to St Nicholas. The old church of St Katherine had been deemed too small for the growing population. Plans had been in train to build a new church as early as 1935 when land was purchased in Lionel Road, in the new town centre. Further land was purchased in 1936 to give space for a church hall. The outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 put a temporary stop to the Church of England's plans to build a bigger church in Canvey Island and in April 1955 the site was seen as no longer suitable for a new parish church.

By the end of 1942 the building fund for the proposed new church had stood at £174.16.8. This fund continued to exercise the Parochial Church Council (PCC) Minutes for the next 24 years. On 11th May 1953 the PCC noted that if the new church building was to become a reality, £5,000.00 would need to be raised over the following five years. This would prove to be a tall order for a small congregation. In July 1956 the PCC agreed to sell the land in Lionel Road to the Ministry of Works for £665.00 and the Urban District Council offered the parish a corner site on Long Road. Long Road is the main road from the original village to the new town centre. In the event, the originally earmarked land in Lionel Road was sold for £880 in January 1958. The efforts of the congregation had raised nowhere near the required £5,000. Because the new proposed church site in Long Road would be near the rapidly expanding housing estates, the Diocese of Chelmsford made a gift to the Parish of £4,000.00. The Church of England in the 20th century was keen to subsidize the building of churches which then left small congregations with tremendous bills for maintenance and repairs. Indeed, a special meeting of the PCC was held in the Vicarage on Wednesday 13th May 1959 to consider the financial difficulties of the Parish.

In December 1960 the new and larger parish church of St Nicholas was opened. The Building cost £16,500.00. The PCC took out a loan of £3,000 over ten years at 4% interest. To save £1,500.00 the church was made one bay shorter than originally planned. And the final £2,000.00, in the tradition of generosity on the part of wealthy women that we touched on earlier, was given by a member of the PCC, Mrs Dorothy Glennie, who was

invited to lay the foundation stone. £2,000 was a significant amount of money in 1960.¹⁸⁰

Now the Anglican congregation was saddled with the maintenance of three churches: the new St Nicholas', the 50-year old St Anne's and the 85-year old St Katherine's which continued to be used for funerals when the burial was to take place in the old churchyard. This would prove a dreadful strain on the parish finances. The new church had no burial ground. Burials continued to be conducted in the old churchyard which was extended three times – in 1947, 1987 and again in 1992. Britain is the only European country not to reuse graves every set number of years. The residents of Canvey Island might not have been flocking to church on Sunday mornings but they still required that they be buried in consecrated ground by a clergyman of the Church of England. Very occasionally in recent decades, the funeral director has intimated that even the clergyman could be dispensed with – it was the sacred ground that was required. The Churchyard was finally closed by Order of Council in 1998. Since then responsibility for the maintenance of the churchyard grounds has passed to the parks and leisure department of the local council. A secular authority now cares for a space that continues to be sacred. The interment of ashes and reopening of existing graves for members of the same family continues to this day.

Frustratingly, in the 1950s and 1960s the parish registers record only the number of people who actually received the bread and wine of communion at each service of Holy Communion and there is no record of others attending that service or the services of Matins and Evensong. But a sense of how many people reckoned themselves to belong to the Church, in the years preceding and following the building of the new church of St Nicholas, may be gleaned by noting the number of communicants at Easter and Christmas.

¹⁸⁰ About £46,300 in 2020

Year	Easter	Christmas
1955	189	324
1956	191	94
1957	143	136
1958	108	113
1959	129	126
1960	139	154*
1961	147	143
1962	158	145
1963	156	164
1964	145	166

*The first Christmas in the new Church.

Figure 5.1 Easter and Christmas communicants in the old and new parish churches 1955 to 1964. Source: The service registers of the Parish of Canvey Island.

It would appear from these figures that the large new church building set in the rapidly expanding community made no difference, at least in the early years, to the number of people becoming communicant members of the church. And this should have come as no surprise. A large number of the people of Canvey Island had migrated from Walthamstow in East London. At Easter 1950 in the Parish Church of St Michael's Walthamstow, a building that easily seated four hundred people, there were 35 communicants at the 7 am Mass, 87 at the 8 am Mass and just one (presumably the Priest) at the 11 am Solemn Mass.¹⁸¹ Nationally between the high point of 1956 and 1984 the number of Easter communicants in the Church of England as a proportion of the population fell by "1.3 per cent per annum (a total of 36.4 per cent)... reaching a level in 1995 some 60 per cent lower than at the start of the century".¹⁸²

Full of optimism that this trend could be reversed, the Parochial Church Council of Canvey Island resolved to hold a renewal campaign in May 1965. The Easter and

¹⁸¹ From the Parish Registers of St Michael's Walthamstow

¹⁸² Brown, 2009: 163

Christmas communicant figures for the following four years were as follows:

Year	Easter	Christmas
1965	165	169
1966	131	167
1967	109	162
1968	114	154

Figure 5:2 Easter and Christmas communicants in St Nicholas' Church following a renewal campaign, 1965 to 1968.

Source: The service registers of the Parish of Canvey Island.

Clearly, the renewal campaign had made no appreciable difference to the number of people receiving Communion at the two main festivals of the Christian year as celebrated in Canvey Island.

As shall be demonstrated later, East London in the second half of the 19th century, had the lowest rates of church attendance in the country. The new settlers in Canvey Island, fresh from East London, were not about to overturn more than a hundred years of tradition by joining a church community. They were content however to send their children to Sunday school and to enrol their children in the choir. In February 1954, £80.00 was spent at St Katherine's Church on 24 new cassocks for choir boys. That's a big choir for a small church and a not inconsiderable sum to spend. At the same time the congregation of St Anne's mission church was confident that another six boys could be found to make up a choir there. After the opening of St Nicholas in 1960, a Sunday school continued to meet at the old St Katherine's Church and another Sunday school, named St Christopher's, met in the Women's Institute Hall. In the 21st century, numbers attending Sunday school nationally have fallen off dramatically. As we shall see later, Sunday has become the day for shopping and sport. Another difficulty about expecting children at Sunday school in the 21st century is that, in the case of split families, Sunday is often the day on which the children go to the parent with whom they do not live. When this is coupled with the reduction of religious assemblies in many schools to a thought or quote of the day, we can see that there exists in Canvey Island two or three generations of people unschooled in the basic language of church practice and belief. Couples planning to get married in church

struggle to name two hymns that might be sung at the wedding while bereaved families turn to old faithfuls like the *23rd Psalm* and *Abide With Me* to lift the occasion from the merely spoken word.

As people settled in Canvey Island and forged a new identity they came with a working theory of life and death. They had their view of what happened to a loved one after death. For many the theory was shot through with inherited teaching of judgment, heaven and hell. For some the theory was simply expressed by the phrase, “when you’re dead, you’re dead”. The church had no mean task of ministering to this mass of humanity in all its complexity, ordinariness, joy and tragedy.

The Vicars of Canvey Island

The early 20th century vicars of Canvey Island, ministering among farming and labouring parishioners, were for the most part highly educated men and some were of noble families and, indeed, minor gentry. They came to serve in rural outposts like Canvey Island at no little social and financial cost to themselves and their families. The Revd Reginald Chute (vicar of Canvey Island 1927-28) was a graduate of Queen’s College Oxford where he studied Classics. Hubert Arthur Stanley Pink (1935-38) studied at Selwyn College and Westcott House Cambridge. Watson Hagger (1901-1909) was Mathematics Master at Portsmouth Grammar School before ordination and headmaster of Sunderland Boys High School for eight years after ordination. Edward Bonamy Dobree (1929-35) whose family feature in Burke’s Peerage, was a graduate of Ridley Hall, Cambridge. Ministering among labourers and farm hands, for whom life expectancy was not great, they did not make the mistake of thinking that “ordinary little people – perhaps because their lives are more impoverished, deprived of the oxygen of money and savoir-faire – experience human emotions with less intensity and greater indifference.”¹⁸³ As far as can be gleaned from the recollection of the very elderly, it appears that, with selfless devotion such vicars ministering in a largely rural community wept with those who wept and earned their place in the affections and respect of their parishioners. They appeared to reflect the love of God by sharing the ordinary rhythm of life with parishioners whose lives were marked by

¹⁸³ Barbery, 2008: 70

hardship, physical labour, illness and infant mortality. At the induction of the Revd Hubert Pink on 7th December 1935 the Bishop warned him that a vicar of Canvey Island “was faced with a long, patient, uphill task and it would require courage and unswerving loyalty”.¹⁸⁴

Faith, Hope and Charity

The fact that the Church of England is the national church has meant that, generally speaking, vicars have been seized by their pastoral responsibility for all the people in the parish and not just for those who show up on a Sunday morning or evening. The 19th and early 20th century vicars were practically the sole dispensers of pastoral care. They doled out charity to the needy. This aspect of practical charity was revisited in 2020 by the formation of a food bank in St Nicholas’ Church in the wake of the lockdown occasioned by the pandemic when a million people across the country lost their jobs. When Canvey Island became a separate ecclesiastical and civil parish in 1881 it was the vicar, the Revd Henry Hayes, who masterminded the bringing of running water to the island with the installation of the parish pump just outside the church. It was he who caused the village school and the village hall to be built. It was he who acted as foreman to the jury at make-shift Coroner’s Inquests held in the Red Cow Public House when, for example, the body of some unknown unfortunate was washed up on the Canvey shore. In 1906 his successor, the Revd Watson Haggard, found himself speaking up for the parishioners who lived in cottages and found that they were “growled at” by farmers when they tried to access the water. The farmers contended that the water was for their cattle.¹⁸⁵ These ministers were the successors of those ordained persons who in former times had more power to ensure the dying got to heaven than the local doctor had to ease physical suffering. These vicars took seriously their commission for the Cure of Souls in their keeping. When the Revd Joseph Romanus Brown arrived in Canvey Island at the end of 1909, he said in his farewell letter to his former congregation on Foulness Island:

“My Dear People,
After all that the goodness of God has prepared for us in your hearts and lives, the severance of our ministry comes with no little sorrow. Eight years and a quarter the

¹⁸⁴ Chelmsford Chronicle, 1935

¹⁸⁵ Daily News (London), 1906

responsibility of your spiritual guidance has been with us! God forgive all deficiencies and bless in continuance the labours put forth in His Name ...”¹⁸⁶

There is no mention here or reference to the fact that five of his eight children had died aged between one week and eight years old before he arrived in Canvey Island. His ministry was what he could do for others and not what they could do for him. He was the servant of the people of God. The people of God were simply all who lived in his parish, and his ministry to the bereaved was instructed in no small measure by his own experience of suffering and loss. How poignant then that the very first two funerals he conducted in Canvey Island were of Rosie Cripps and Evelyn Potton aged 3 years and 13 months respectively. Some idea of how the small community of the time took the vicar to their own hearts may be gleaned from a newspaper report stating that the Rev Brown’s first service in Canvey Island was held at 11.40 pm on New Year’s Eve 1909 “attended by a large congregation assembled to encourage the new vicar in his ministry”.¹⁸⁷

Joseph Brown, ordained in 1896, had studied, not at Oxford or Cambridge but at the London College of Divinity. He was the exception in terms of level of education rather than the rule in the Church of England. But, highly educated or not, since time out of mind, the vicar was the default go-to person to mark the moments of birth, marriage and death. The vicar was there for everyone who lived in his parish: everyone who sought not God particularly, but looked for some compassion and gentleness as the First World War raged. But everything was about to change with universally available education, increased mobility and the rise of the welfare state. The vicars of hitherto rural Canvey Island who came after Joseph Brown in the unfolding of the 20th century would have to face the need to adapt their ministry to the needs of the people of a more settled suburban community who were not confined for their entertainment, education or spiritual nourishment to what the Anglican village church had to offer. The battles fought and won by the church, with regard to mass poverty and illiteracy, were now increasingly forgotten history. Parishioners were now people who in the course of two

¹⁸⁶ J. R. Brown 1909

¹⁸⁷ Southend Standard and Essex Weekly Advertiser, 1910

world wars had had a taste of the harsh reality of life and were not to be easily appeased with the ancient cadences of Matins and Evensong. Where some 18th and 19th century political theorists used religion in their ideas for a practical end: i.e. it had a functional utility not least as a benign pacifying influence on often wretched lives, promising as it did that the humble and meek shall be exalted in the life hereafter, thinkers like Edmund Burke saw religion as a good in and of itself that was incidentally bound to the political reality of feeding the poor and defending the nation.¹⁸⁸ As the 20th century progressed, so the defence of religion in general and the church in particular as being “useful” wore increasingly thin. At this time some ministers of religion felt redundant: the welfare state was doing what they had done and were doing it better. Some felt that by turning to the welfare state the people were exhibiting a decline in religious belief. But human uncertainty and vulnerability can never be erased and indeed, should never be ignored. – particularly in a time of loss. The minister can help the bereaved understand that we are wired for struggle, that we matter, we have a place in the universe and that our very vulnerability is the wellspring of joy. All of this of course requires a very different mind-set from that which has obtained for so long. But it is a mind-set at which many who have nothing to do with organised religion have already arrived. The bereaved will always need to make sense of loss, to fashion a narrative that imposes some order on the chaos of the visitation of death at any age and in any circumstance.

The people of Canvey Island who turn to the church in time of grief do not all belong to the community of Canvey Island in exactly the same way. It is possible for people within the same community to relate to that community differently and even for those who belong to the same group to relate to that group in different ways. So within a community or group one might be deemed to be an outsider with regard to certain aspects of activity and belonging while being seen as an insider in others. So, for example, a member of the local yacht club may have little to talk about with a member of the local drinking men’s club, while two members of the same club may relate to that club very differently indeed in terms of being part of the organising committee or just showing up each time the club is open. But when either of them is faced with, for

¹⁸⁸ Burke, 1955

example, the loss of a child, such superficial differences disappear and the minister becomes the backlash between seemingly different worlds.

Each of these people engages, consciously or unconsciously, in ritual. Some, as in footballers taking the knee before a match, are public. Others, like supporters wearing their 'lucky' pants or sitting in the same seat at home for each match, are more private. But they are all rituals. Once we accept that rituals are social constructs rather than divine imperatives we can find freedom and light in creating our own rituals to suit our understanding of what we are honouring.¹⁸⁹ The church of the early 20th century in Canvey Island provided connection to a place and to a network of relationships. As Percy writes, "the geographical and social reality for people was in one place. Born, buried and baptised – all in the same place as your ancestors were ... The parish dominated human associations".¹⁹⁰ The people of Canvey Island, no longer constrained by strict dictates of church and society, continue to create and adapt words and rituals to help themselves and their families come to terms with the death of a loved one. As we shall see in the next chapters, it is up to the church to play catch up.

¹⁸⁹ Myerhoff 1982: 129ff

¹⁹⁰ Percy, 2010: 165

CHAPTER SIX

Forty years – all change

It is impossible to overstate the scale of the changes that occurred with regard to the place of the church in the community as the 20th century progressed and the 21st century unfolded. This chapter will show just how dramatic the changes were and the effect those changes have had on the community of Canvey Island. It is important to reflect on these changes as they have real and particular consequences when it comes to people's practical response to death and attendant grief and the nature of the rituals devised to mark such moments.

In 1978 when I was ordained a Deacon and began serving my curacy in South-East London, the cracks had already begun to appear in the monolithic omni-presence that was the Church of England. True, the only alternative venue for a wedding was a small affair in the local Registry Office and the only music played at funerals was on the organ, the readings were always Biblical and every funeral had a hymn or two. But the Sunday congregations were already quite elderly and small in number. Sunday schools were struggling. The days of six million of the nation's children enrolled in Sunday school in 1911 seemed like another world. The requirement for a religious assembly in every school each day was honoured more in the breach than in the observance. Christian religious education was transmogrifying into a comparative study of religions. The Vicar and Curate were still invited to conduct assemblies in primary schools, but from secondary school onwards there was no obvious connection between people's experience of everyday life and the life of the church. Most of the children sitting on the floor reciting the *Lord's Prayer* at primary school morning assembly in South-East London in 1979 were, in fact, Sikh or Muslim. Pluralism in our cities was a fact of life as post-war immigration had changed the face of our urban nation, and the church was slow to acknowledge and then embrace the fact. The number of Christian baptisms each year had fallen dramatically and confirmations were few and far between. Nationally the number of Church of England baptisms as a percentage of all births fell from 60.2% in 1956 to

46.6% in 1970 to 19.8% in 2000.¹⁹¹ The fall continued to baptisms requested for only 13% of live births in 2008 and on down to 8% in 2019.¹⁹² Rather than seeing these figures as proving a lack of religious sensibility I suggest that these figures have more to do with the separation of the church from natural day-to-day rejoicing at the wonder and joy of new birth as many churches have insisted on parents attending church for set periods of time and even courses to ensure they grasp the church's understanding of the rite of baptism. There is nothing like a six week course to flatten the miracle of childbirth. Nor have matters been helped by the insistence of many churches that baptism should take place in the main Sunday Eucharist which necessitates confirmation in order to be fully involved.

In 1994 sundry luxurious venues were licensed for the conduct of marriages. Crematoria installed machines for the playing of cassette tapes: the bereaved could tailor services to suit the personality and tastes of the one who had died, and the church became just one of many providers of funerals and weddings.

In 1997 I became Rector of Canvey Island in Essex, a community of some 40,000 people, many of whom, as we have seen, had moved out of East London following the Second World War. Indeed, the overcrowded and war-weary London Boroughs of Walthamstow and Dagenham made re-housing such an attractive offer in the 1950s that many families accepted the offer with alacrity.

As the people moved from East London to Essex they brought with them a memory or, at least, a folk memory, of the place of the church in community: an expectation that the vicar would come when called; a natural turning to the church in times of sorrow and rejoicing. Legendary stories continued to be told of hard working, charismatic East London priests like John Groser of Limehouse and Chares Lowder of London Docks. Two or even three generations have been born since the original folk moved out of East London and something of that expectation of the church has endured. But the decline in

¹⁹¹ Brown, 2009: 6

¹⁹² Church of England Research and Statistics 2019: 15 Fig 10

the numbers of people routinely turning to the church as the 20th century became the 21st cannot be ignored. In 1976 the parish church of Canvey Island conducted 235 baptisms. The baptism of six infants on most Sunday afternoons throughout the year, particularly between March and September, was fairly standard. In 2016 the total number of baptisms had fallen to 135. And 33% of these baptisms were of adults.¹⁹³ When these adults were babies in the 1990's the Church had already ceased to feature practically in the lives of their parents. But now that these new adults had children of their own or were wanting to accept an invitation to be a Godparent, it was time to click on the website, look up the telephone number and get in touch with the local vicar.

In 1926 the parish of St Martin's Becontree, mentioned in the previous chapter, on the border between East London and Essex, presented no fewer than 43 candidates to the Bishop for confirmation. The following year another 23 were presented and yet another 48 people were confirmed the year after that.¹⁹⁴ In 1994 that Becontree parish had amalgamated with two other neighbouring parishes and by 2020 the number of confirmands, mainly children, being prepared across the former three parishes was down to a total of 12. In the event this confirmation was cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Of course it must be realised that in the years between 1926 and 2000 the ethnic and religious make-up of the population of Becontree had been altered by the influx of other-faith populations and black Pentecostal congregations. The ethnic make-up of the people has changed but the Church of England buildings remain: large, visible reminders of how things used to be. In 2012 the London City Mission commissioned the London Church Census which covered church growth from 2005 to 2012. This showed that the number of people going to church in London had grown in that period by 16%. This growth was driven largely by London's ethnic diversity.¹⁹⁵

In 1975 the Parish of Canvey Island, made up almost exclusively of white working class people whose families had moved from places like Becontree, presented twenty-three

¹⁹³ Figures gleaned from parish registers of Canvey Island

¹⁹⁴ Figures from the parish registers of St Martin's Becontree

¹⁹⁵ Available at <http://brierleyconsultancy.com/statistics.html>

persons for confirmation. Twelve of these were children. By 2015 the parish no longer encouraged the confirmation of children. Instead children were prepared for their First Communion. This initiative left the Sacrament of Confirmation to be received as an adult rite. In 2015 nine children were admitted to First Communion and eleven adults were confirmed. So, at first glance it would appear that the numbers of those seeking to take the next step after baptism has remained unchanged. But it must be realized that in the intervening forty years the population of the island grew from some 20,000 persons to over 40,000. Nationally, in the ten years to 2019 the number of Church of England confirmations fell 47% from 25,000 to 13,500, of whom 24% were under the age of 12.¹⁹⁶ The population of Canvey Island may have doubled in forty years, but the number of those seeking Confirmation remained static.

Year	Population of Canvey Island	Confirmation/First Communion
1931	3,532	7
1947	9,000	5
1975	20,000	23
2015	45,000	20

Figure 6:1 The number of people being confirmed or making their First Communion in the Church of England in Canvey Island set against the population of Canvey Island 1931 to 2015. Source: The parish registers of the Parish of Canvey Island and Canvey Island Archives.

Gill¹⁹⁷ shows that the number of those being confirmed in England fell sharply after 1960. In 1872, some 121,000 people were confirmed. This was 28 per cent of the population aged 15. In 1911 this had risen to 244,000 – 38 per cent of those aged 15. By 1999 this had dropped to 37,000 – a tiny fragment of those aged 15. And not all of that decline can be attributed to the practice of admitting children to communion and making confirmation an adult decision.

Keeping track of a church's worshipping community is more complicated than simply

¹⁹⁶ Church of England Research and Statistics 2019: 19

¹⁹⁷ Gill, 2003:127

counting those who attend on Sundays or at mid-week communions. But clearly on the national stage, attendance at Church of England services fell in the ten years to 2019. Canvey Island is one of the ten percent of Churches whose congregations grew in that time while forty-one percent of churches recorded falling attendance figures. Meanwhile ninety new church congregations were formed across the country with an average weekly congregation of nine thousand people.¹⁹⁸

But this is different

It might be felt reasonable to suppose that if people have no contact with the Church at the time of the birth of a child, this will affect the decisions they make with regard to the type of ritual they will opt for at the time of a death of a loved one. And yet of the fourteen families that have asked me to conduct the funeral of their baby in Canvey Island, only two had planned to have the child baptised. So when Zoe's third child died suddenly in the womb at 36 weeks of gestation, even though neither of her other two children had been baptized, Zoe had the funeral director call me. I had conducted the funerals of two of her grandparents and her father. Similarly, when Charlotte died at the age of 15 in a hospice for children, even though her parents had not had any of their three children baptized, they asked that the funeral director invite me to bless their daughter's body at the hospice before Charlotte was taken to the funeral parlour.

Why was it so important to Zoe and Charlotte's family that they seek the ministrations of a priest when the absolutely worst thing had happened? Were they tapping in to some communal memory of what one does in such situations? Were they, even though they had no confessional, particular, day-to-day faith themselves, needing to be encouraged by one who clearly had? The bodies of their children could not be healed, but their conversation suggested that they knew instinctively that some aspect of the children lived on. They would grasp the biblical words, "The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them"¹⁹⁹. And it was the soul that I was called to honour even as the parents took leave of the body of their child. The minister shows up at the place of

¹⁹⁸ Church of England Research and Statistics 2019: 3

¹⁹⁹ The Wisdom of Solomon 3: 1 (NRSV)

grief with strong medicine which makes it possible to put beloved bodies in the ground or consign them to the flames.

The shift in practice we have seen with regard to baptism is also found when it comes to Holy Matrimony. The role or absence of the church at the time of marriage might be thought to colour the choices made in the face of bereavement. But again my experience has been that Registrars are alright for weddings in plush surroundings but when it comes to a funeral, the church or at least a minister who can embody and enunciate a sense of on-going life, is needed to be visible, up-front and centre stage.

In 1986 the parish of Canvey Island solemnized the marriages of seventy-one couples. By 2016 the law of the land had changed to allow marriages in several secular venues and the number of couples getting married in the parish church, despite the growth in population, was now down to seventeen.²⁰⁰ The church nationally is no longer perforce the main purveyor of holy matrimony or of any of the other major rites of passage. Nor do many people feel the need for the blessing of the church to seal their relationships. Many live together for years before, if ever, getting married. The concept of “living in sin” belongs to another age and I cannot believe that a vicar in the 21st century would now describe in the baptism register a newly baptised child as being “the bastard son of...” as happened in former years. But there are some vicars of course who still refuse to baptise the child of parents who are not married.

With regard to the conduct of funerals, in 1936 the vicar of Canvey Island interred forty-eight bodies in the churchyard. In 1976 the parish conducted the interment of ashes and bodies of one hundred and four persons. By 2016, the full churchyard having been closed by Order of Council except for re-openings and some ashes interments, the number of ceremonies was down to thirty-nine. But that year parish clergy conducted the funerals of another two hundred and sixty persons at the crematorium and in private and municipal cemeteries.²⁰¹ (Southend Crematorium was opened in 1953 and Basildon Crematorium

²⁰⁰ Figures gleaned from the parish registers

²⁰¹ All figures from Canvey Island parish records.

in 1998). Clearly a substantial number of people still required the church to be involved in the obsequies of loved ones. But the ground had, literally, shifted. The sacred space is no longer simply to be found in the consecrated area of a church. It is more often found in secular establishments built expressly for the disposal of bodies and ashes.

Callum Brown, who casts doubt on the view of the city as an unholy place, dates the measurable and dramatic decline of Christianity as a significant influence on English lives firmly in the 1960s.²⁰² Gill suggests that the decline in church-going and church affiliation did not begin in the last part of the 20th century or after the Second World War or even after the First.²⁰³ The decline has been steady and dramatic ever since the high point of 1851 when the National Census for England and Wales was published. The number of clergy, the number of those enrolled at Sunday school, and the actual number of people attending Church, have all declined dramatically since then. In the years since 1851 the comfortable assumption, held since the Elizabethan Settlement of 1559, that everyone in England is an Anglican has proved more and more ridiculous.

There is a school of thought that suggests the very language and teaching of the church, if not purposely designed, had the effect of encouraging those in different social strata of society to be content with their lot and accept that others were better than they and, indeed, existed in order to tell them what to do. As the church taught that salvation could not be achieved through human effort but only through the salvific effect of the death and resurrection of the Christ, a passive acceptance of how things were was required. A verse of the popular hymn, *All Things Bright and Beautiful*, has now been removed from most hymn books:

The rich man in his castle
The poor man at his gate,
God made them high and lowly
And ordered their estate.²⁰⁴

Similarly the Catechism in the old Book of Common Prayer of 1662 asked the question,

²⁰² Brown, 2009: 1

²⁰³ Gill, 2003

²⁰⁴ Alexander 2017

“What is thy duty towards thy neighbour?” The answer given read in part:

To submit myself to all my governors, teachers and spiritual pastors and masters: to order myself lowly and reverently to all my betters ... not to covet nor desire other men's goods; but to learn and labour truly to get mine own living, and to do my duty in that state of life, unto which it shall please God to call me.²⁰⁵

So clearly, if a vicar's parishioners were poor and living a fairly wretched life, there was not a lot the church could do about it except to dole out charity. People were where they were because that was the state to which almighty God had called them! The obvious wealth of the church, the different status in which vicars lived, the existence of rented pews and the requirement to dress well for church were not guaranteed to endear the Parish Church to the working classes. The *Black Lives Matter* protests across the world in 2020 were surely in large part a challenge to the view that one must simply accept the lot into which one was born.

As has been seen, the large influx of people to Canvey Island came from East London in the early part of the 20th century. The entrepreneur Frederick Hester had aimed his dream of a Winter Garden and exotic animals at the middle classes of London but as his dreams evaporated and the price of land continued to fall, plots of land were purchased by people of limited means. Many of these working-class people established disused vehicles or 'jerry built' shacks on their land for use as weekend accommodation. This shack development greatly annoyed the small established community and gave Canvey Island a bad reputation which persisted for many years. There were three exceptions to the general working-class make-up of the new arrivals. We saw in Chapter Five that the Anglican clergy were largely drawn from the upper middle classes of society. Similarly, teachers immigrated on to the island having been raised and educated in middle class backgrounds. And, finally, the people of Canvey Island took to their hearts doctors from Eastern Europe and Burma who settled in Canvey after the Second World War. To this day the names of Lintner, Sonnek, Machacek, Kamdar and Aung are recalled with gratitude for the dedication of an old-fashioned kind of doctor who came out at all hours, remembered each of their patients by name, and ministered to two or three generations of the same family.

²⁰⁵ Church of England

Gill has shown that East London featured among the lowest churchgoing rates in the country.²⁰⁶ In 1903, Shoreditch and Bethnal Green had churchgoing rates of only 15 per cent and 16 per cent respectively. This was largely unchanged since 1851 when the respective rates were 14 and 19 per cent.²⁰⁷ If any of the large East London churches were full they were full of middle class people who travelled to them. Church was not somewhere that those considered as of ‘the lower orders’ were seen to belong. When people emigrated from East London to Canvey Island and other parts of Essex in the 1950s and 60s, joining a church congregation was not high among their priorities. This lack of signing up to an organised church must not be seen as being synonymous with an absence of religious sensibility. A number of those who later joined the worshipping congregation in Canvey Island, perhaps having come to the church requesting baptism for their baby, brought with them pleasant memories of a tangential relationship with the church in East London through school visits or Boy Scouts and Girl Guides monthly parades, nativity plays and carol services. These pleasant memories had furnished them with second-hand information of holy things. In the event of death, the task of the minister in the home of the bereaved is to help them open up to the subjective reality of life, death and the possibility of eternal life. As the saying goes, God has no grandchildren, and the presence of the minister in the face of bereavement can help the bereaved recognise and realise that they are all in fact children of God. Thus, matters of religious truth will become exciting because the bereaved see that such truth includes them.

Charles Booth, writing at the very beginning of the 20th century, declared that in working class areas, “the vast majority attend no place of worship.”²⁰⁸ The working class of London had long felt excluded from the Sunday rituals of the church. Sending their children to Sunday school was as organised as many would get. The formality of language and appearance meant that many made an effort to be part of a worshipping congregation only at Christmas and Easter and for baptisms, weddings and funerals. For baptisms, the

²⁰⁶ Gill, 2003: 126

²⁰⁷ Gill, 2003: 129

²⁰⁸ Booth, 1903; Vol 7:4

bar of engagement and belonging was set very low indeed. A week's notice was to be given; the minister could not refuse or delay the baptism provided the godparents were themselves baptized and provided that at least one parent was standing at the font with the baby and godparents at the appointed time. In England as in the Caribbean islands of the commonwealth the work of church attendance was often seen as women's work. In Barbados, traditionally the mother would make the effort to put on Sunday best while the father waited outside in his home clothes reading the paper - if he left the house at all. Again in Barbados, a derogatory term for one who is poor or ill-dressed is '*Baccra Johnny*': those who by their colour, social standing or mode of dress were confined to the *back row* of the church. As Percy notes, "dress codes in any church ... carry and convey unspoken messages about the ethos of worship ... that are seldom articulated."²⁰⁹

So the people, newly arrived from cramped and crowded East London into the open spaces of Canvey Island, unsurprisingly concluded that the church would be found to have very little relevance in the life of the community around it.

But Canvey Island is in many ways an unusual community in that it is entirely surrounded by water at high tide. The first bridge to the rest of Essex was not built until 1931 and a permanent road as recently as 1972. So in the thinking of the community, they are 'islanders'. The storms and high tides of 1327, 1376, 1448, 1527, 1791 and 1881 affected the small number of farmers who kept sheep. Embankments were built to ameliorate the ravages of the sea at the next spring tide. And in the 21st century there is certainly among the older folk a real sense of community particularly because of the dreadful east coast floods of 1953 which killed forty-nine residents. And where there is a sense of community a church community can thrive. As Mann says, "Even in this most individualistic of times, it is community that shapes – family, church, civic or national".²¹⁰ And, conversely, the church plays no small part in shaping, and being shaped by, a community. Urban communities were fractured as original inhabitants were re-housed in a more green and pleasant land and waves of immigrants changed the culture of the city. But the people of

²⁰⁹ Percy, 2010: 2

²¹⁰ Mann, 2017:71

Canvey Island, having a common heritage in East London and having a sense of belonging forged by the floods of 1953, soon formed themselves into a community.

The church is well placed to reflect in word and liturgy the history, the hopes, the failings and the triumphs of the community in which it stands. The passing of the liturgical year forms the perfect backdrop for, and indeed sharpens the poignancy of, ordinary lives. And so it is with the seasons of life. The church is open and welcoming to mark the moments of birth and marriage and death. The church space is available in times of local and national crisis. The church receives many requests to conduct a service of blessing following a marriage in a civil setting and to officiate at a memorial service following a funeral in another part of the country or overseas. The traditional Churching of Women is no longer required by society but a service of thanksgiving for safe delivery is still appreciated and valued. As was mentioned earlier, in the months of lockdown occasioned by the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020/22 the food bank in the parish church became a daily lifeline for hundreds of people who were struggling to feed their families and themselves. The early 20th century vicars would have been proud.

East Coast Floods

For many in England and, indeed, across the world, Canvey Island was put on their personal map when an appeal went out for blankets and other necessities following the floods of January 31st/February 1st 1953. This event was and is seminal in the consciousness of the people who live in Canvey Island. There is a slight, but fading, sense in which those who came to the community as early as 1954 are seen as newcomers as they cannot share first-hand the memories of those dark days in 1953. The forty-nine people who died in the floods could not be buried in the churchyard as the waters took several weeks to recede. They were buried three miles away on the mainland in a cemetery, a corner of which is in some sense, forever Canvey Island. The night the floods came was the night following the opening of a new hall for the community. The hall was named the War Memorial Hall as the community sought practically to pick themselves up from the devastation of the last war and improve the quality of their lives and their civic amenities.

James Runcie in his novel, *Canvey Island*, says of the time following the floods, “It took six weeks to get the island back to normal; there were flooded buildings with walls collapsed and the roofs off, farms drenched with salt water, people with nothing to wear. The Mayor of London set up a National Flood and Tempest Distress Fund. The army and the navy were mobilized, and the Queen Mother made a Royal visit with Princess Margaret”.²¹¹

On the mainland, just before the floods, a new secondary school had been opened. But for six weeks the King John School was not used for teaching but for giving shelter to the refugees from Canvey Island. This is where the Queen Mother and Princess Margaret found those who had lost everything. This visit forever endeared that generation to the Royal Family. Six weeks to get back to normal but nearly 70 years later, the memory and the legacy of that time lives on in the narrative of those who survived and those who have come to the island in the years following.

Before the floods of 1953 there were two main communities in Canvey Island. Each was clustered around the Anglican Churches of St Katherine’s and St Anne’s. And between the two communities stood the Roman Catholic Church built in 1938. Roman Catholics from across the island were required to travel to this building having been told that it was a sin to enter a church building of another denomination.

In these early years of the 21st century, the 40,000 inhabitants form a series of Venn Diagram-like interrelated communities spread right across the island. There are now nine places of Christian worship: three Anglican churches, one Roman Catholic, two Baptist, one Methodist, one Salvation Army and one Black African. In addition there is a Jehovah’s Witness Hall, a Spiritualist Church and a new synagogue converted out of a redundant secondary school. The synagogue is the centre of a new previously mentioned community of ultra-orthodox Hasidic Jews who have transplanted themselves from the expensive real estate of Stamford Hill, North London.

²¹¹ Runcie, 2006:37

What shall we do at the weekend?

With the influx of the working class from East London came a better standard of living and, for the first time, disposable income. Visits to the Caribbean and even the coasts of Spain and Greece were still beyond their practical imagination. But an increased income would buy a very satisfactory touring caravan, complementing increased car ownership, so that time could be spent over the weekend and through the summer holidays in another part of Essex or in Suffolk. The designer Sam Alper, born in East London in 1924, made caravans affordable to the burgeoning consumer society. Having left the ancestral territory of East London, families were free to travel and make a temporary home wherever they chose. Once the preserve of the middle classes, the caravan was now within reach of the working classes. Legislation gave workers more free time along with increased freedom to choose when to take their holidays. The combination of working long hours and being away at the weekend did not lend itself to commitment and belonging to a church that meets for worship on Sundays and which has council meetings and wedding preparation on weekday evenings. By the 1970s the touring caravan gave rise to the static caravan. Families would escape to their caravan after work on Fridays and return late on Sunday evenings totally untouched by the rites of the church.

While the residents of Canvey Island were heading for other coasts at the weekend, slightly less well-off people from East London were coming to Canvey Island for a day's holiday, a weekend break or the whole summer holiday. They rented a rough-cast bungalow or a static caravan in one of the two large caravan parks on the island. Even when their stay included a Sunday it did not occur to them to find the local church – that is not what they did on their hard-won and precious holidays. Their interest in the church, in common with many on holiday, was limited to a look around the church in the course of a family walk, but there was no desire to return on a Sunday to join in Matins, Holy Communion or Evensong. So the church lost the residents of the island to their touring caravan holidays and it lost the visitors to their static caravan sites. The clergy and people of the church in the 1960's did not actively conduct any kind of outreach to the visitors.

The church was findable and open – it was up to visitors to make the effort to come.

With very few exceptions in the Anglican congregation of Canvey Island, if one adult in the household shares in worship in church, it is the woman rather than the man of the household. And for those who did not go away at the weekend the priority of preparing the Sunday lunch trumped the expectation of the local vicar that families should attend Matins at 11 o'clock. Such people have never relied solely on the church for their religious experience. There is always what Sarah Williams has called “the elusive and eclectic dimension of religious life”.²¹² Spoken and written material indicates that a variety of religious rituals and patterns of thought have co-existed with belonging, however occasionally, to a church congregation. Williams writes in her study of women in south London that “apparently incompatible narratives of religious belief ... drawing upon both church and folk customs of some considerable longevity” have been embraced simultaneously.²¹³

Normality after war

When the floods covered a large section of Canvey Island in 1953 the Second World War had ended less than eight years before. Eight years is no time at all for a nation to begin to heal. Many of those who came to Canvey Island had served in the war. Their contribution might not have been spectacular but it was a contribution nevertheless. Returning to civilian life was difficult. The men had to readjust to a new normality. The women had had a taste of work – in munitions, in factories, in driving ambulances. Now they were expected to return to the role of housewife and mother. Similarly, after the end of the First World War the vicar of Canvey Island, writing in the parish magazine, thanked the women of the choir for their service and trusted that they would now return to their proper place in the congregation!

The Church of England congregation was grieving particularly at the end of the First World War as Robert Monteith, a young Lay Reader at St Anne's was killed in action on

²¹² Williams, 1999: v

²¹³ Williams, 1999: 104

the 6th September – two short months before the war ended. Forty-six other young men of Canvey Island did not return from the First World War. When it is realized that the population of the island then was some three hundred people, the relative scale of loss is apparent. In November 2018, forty-seven trees were planted in memory of the men of Canvey Island who did not return from the First War. The cost of purchasing, planting and maintenance was raised entirely by public subscription in five months to mark the hundredth anniversary of the end of that war. The appeal was launched, managed and achieved by the Anglican Church on Canvey Island.

In both world wars all had had a taste of the randomness of death and injury. Many had at first been glad to receive back their loved ones but soon found that the one who returned was markedly different from the one who had set out to defeat the enemy. For six years the men had attended Church Parades. The chaplains had tried to encourage them. But those who were there at the liberation of the concentration camps, those who had landed in Normandy on D Day and the days following struggled to see the relevance of the church in particular and of organized religion in general. And if they accepted that there was a God, they didn't like him very much. What loving God would allow the horrors they had witnessed and the privations to which they had been subjected?

Church and State

Peter Berger points out that Britain is an interesting example of the separation of church and state “where this separation is a social reality that is still denied in the official definition of the state”.²¹⁴ The Queen, who at her coronation took an oath to “maintain in the United Kingdom the Protestant Reformed religion established by law”, is still head of the Church of England and twenty-six senior Anglican Bishops still sit, fully robed, in the House of Lords. But in January 2020 a Bill proposing that this tradition be abolished passed its first reading in the House of Lords.

Percy points out that, although there is detachment from formal obligations of religion, it

²¹⁴ Berger, 2014:90

still persists as part of public life.²¹⁵ One local surviving tradition is that the Rector of Canvey Island is called upon to be chaplain to the mayor of the borough and say prayers before Council meetings. The Rector is also expected to say grace before the monthly men's dining club meeting. Prince Charles is said to have intimated that if and when he becomes King his title would be less 'Defender of the Faith' than defender of all the faiths represented in his realm. The automatic placing of certain Bishops in the House of Lords is under threat if the Humanists in parliament have their way. In February 2020 the All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group (APPHG) published a report *Time For Reflection* which seeks to abolish the Lords Spiritual and to put an end to prayers before the start of business in the House of Commons and the House of Lords. The report points out that the only two sovereign states in the world which give seats in its legislature to religious representatives as of right are the United Kingdom and Iran. The logical outcome of this trajectory is that, in the words of Grace Davie, "engaged Christians are likely to become one minority amongst others, but will have the weight of history on their side ... in what might be termed a hierarchy of minorities."²¹⁶

This is all far removed from the days when the church wielded absolute power over the inhabitants of England. Time was when the Civil Service was open only to members of the Church of England and only Anglicans could sit in the House of Commons or study at Oxford and Cambridge. The Religion Act of 1592 called for imprisonment without bail for anyone over 16 who failed to attend church or who persuaded others to do the same. The Conventicle Act of 1664 forbade religious gatherings (conventicles) of more than five people outside the auspices of the Church of England. And the Conventicles Act of 1670 fined any person attending a conventicle five shillings for a first offence and ten shillings for a second offence. The fine went up to 20 or 40 shillings for anyone who allowed their house to be used for such gatherings. Evangelicalism at home became hazardous work: preaching in the open air, handing out leaflets and unregistered Sunday schools were resisted by the established church. It was safer to pour such energy into the foreign

²¹⁵ Percy, 2010:29

²¹⁶ Davie, 2015:224

mission fields where “O’er heathen lands afar thick darkness broodeth yet”.²¹⁷ As recently as October 1926 the Portsmouth Evening News²¹⁸ reported that the Rector of Abbots Morton (one Harold Lawson) had banned two women and a man from church for attending a week-day service led by a lay preacher. He accused them of a “deadly schism” and “gross sins against the Holy Ghost”. Happily, the good villagers of Abbots Morton responded by boycotting the church.

And now we live in an age when two or three may gather together peacefully, unless they are plotting the hurt of others, without fear of being banned from a congregation. The parish church of Canvey Island is open all day and people feel free to wander in, sit awhile, mutter a prayer, write a message on the prayer board and light a candle even if they never appear for a Sunday Eucharist.

Far-reaching changes in the lifestyle of individuals and in the relationship between Church and state have combined to cause the church to change its thinking in recent years: to find ways of being more available in different ways and in different times to respond to the needs and expectations of those who now live in Canvey Island with fresher air, a larger house, indoor plumbing and the means to go away for weekends while working and to go abroad for as much as six months over the winter months following retirement. Despite these changes I agree with Davie’s view that “churches still have a place at particular moments in the lives of British people, though they are no longer able to influence – let alone discipline – the beliefs and behaviour of the great majority of the population.”²¹⁹ The task of the church in the present age is to reconnect the practice and doctrine of religion with the rhythm of daily life as it is lived in the present age, complete with the competitive reality of lucrative television deals for Sunday football matches, rather than as it was a hundred years ago.

What’s happening on Sunday?

²¹⁷ Hensley, 1867

²¹⁸ Portsmouth Evening News, 1926

²¹⁹ Davie, 2015: 3

The Shops Act of 1950²²⁰ made buying and selling on a Sunday illegal. In 1986 the Shops Bill was defeated. This would have enabled widespread Sunday trading in England. Then on 5th July 1994 Royal Assent was given to the Sunday Trading Act.²²¹ This came into force on 26th August that year and allowed shops to open while restricting the opening hours of larger stores (those over 280 metres square) to a maximum of six hours between 10am and 6pm. Large shops were excluded from opening on Easter Sunday or Christmas Day when that fell on a Sunday. The Christmas Day Trading Act made it illegal for large shops to open on Christmas Day at all.

The Sunday Trading Bill was vociferously opposed by the Lord's Day Observance Society and others. The USDAW trade union finally agreed to Sunday trading on condition that Sunday working would be strictly voluntary. Those who seek not to work on Sundays soon find that they are passed over for promotion in favour of someone who is available seven days of the week. So, for example, Pauline and Val who belong to the worshipping community on Canvey Island, find themselves on the rota to work at the local supermarket on most Sundays and must settle for attending Evening Prayer at 6.30 when their shift is over.

Eric Liddell refused to run competitively on a Sunday in the Olympics of 1924. Except during the Coronavirus of 2020 and its aftermath, a casual drive past any leisure or sports centre on a Sunday would find a packed car park and hundreds of people gathering for football, swimming, athletics, gymnastics and any competitive sport that one could name. The queue of cars waiting to get into the local recycling centre is lengthy. An older generation was hard put to find any occupation apart from church or quiet reading on a Sunday. Now attendance at church is a minority interest. And what family, wanting to encourage their children to be active, would refuse the invitation of their coach to take a full part in Sunday training and competitions? The book of Exodus with its charge to rest ("remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy; for six days you shall labour and do all your

²²⁰ Act of Parliament 1950 - 14 Geo 6 C 28

²²¹ Act of Parliament 1994 - c 20

work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God”)²²² does not feature in the planning of most contemporary non-Jewish families in Essex or elsewhere in Britain. Nor is this desire to choose freely what one may do on a Sunday a recent development. As early as March 1939 a poll of Canvey Island residents on whether cinemas should open on Sundays resulted in 1,076 residents in favour of the proposal with 247 against.²²³

So it is clear that as the 20th century evolved and the 21st century has progressed, the community of Canvey Island in which the church stands and to which it seeks to minister, has changed almost beyond recognition. But the church prides itself on continuity and an unchanging character that reflects the unchanging nature of God. While this trait will not cause the community to flock through the doors on a Sunday morning, it will lend a stability and continuity to a community in the face of constant and unceasing change. The message of the church which speaks of the hope of eternal life still has some resonance particularly, as we have seen, at the moment of loss, bereavement and grief. This hope must both arise out of and find its place in the central proclamation of the church – a proclamation that is essentially unchanged, though packaged very differently, with varying strains of threat and encouragement, enmity and love, in successive ages.

²²² Exodus 20:8-11

²²³Chelmsford Chronicle, 1939

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Church's central selling point

The Church exists to proclaim, among other things, the hope of eternal life. The inconsolable grief of which Freud speaks,²²⁴ needs to hear that one day, even if not until the next life, the grief will be lifted. The religious person and the allegedly non-religious person both have to confront the reality of the death of a loved one. In speaking of eternal life the church is bold enough to apply the very terms of thought which the popular image of contemporary people would seek to deny. In my view the denial is only apparent and not real. Generally speaking, we are simply spectators and bit players in the drama of other people's loss. We are 'grief adjacent'²²⁵ rather than 'grief stricken.' Theories of life and death are easy to ignore or dismiss. As Ulrich Simon says poignantly when speaking of the horror of Auschwitz, "Until it happens to be my pain, or it is 'my son Absalom' whose death I lament, we can erect castles in the air against the reality of suffering".²²⁶ When the fact of death enters our own home and our own life then the need for reassurance coupled with the experience of an on-going love for the one gone combine to fashion an actual theory of what has occurred and its significance for the present and the future. No longer is death a neutral un-concerning fact. This death has meaning. It is now an affecting reality that requires a response, an acceptable theory and, dare one say, a theology. One of the definitions offered for the word 'Hope' by the Oxford English dictionary is, "To entertain expectation of something desired". The one who hopes actually expects to receive that which is promised. Without that expectation, hope is simply woolly optimism. The church proclaims that the bereaved may *expect* eternal life. It is this (what one funeral liturgy calls "sure and certain"²²⁷) hope that distinguishes the ministry of the church from the ministry of the Civil celebrant. The pastoral care in which the minister engages is pastoral care with a purpose: there is a gift to share – a Gospel to proclaim. This hope of eternal life is offered by Christianity to everyone regardless of

²²⁴ See page 68

²²⁵ In the words of Nora McInerney. Cf later in this chapter.

²²⁶ Simon, 1978:15

²²⁷ A. Council, 2000: 15

wealth, age, gender or status in society. It is such hope that buoys up the bereaved in the darkest of days. As Miriam Margolyes, an atheist, says in a documentary about confronting her own mortality, “Hope is the chink in the curtain that lets the light through.”²²⁸ As the soil fills the hole or the curtain slides round the coffin, hope remains. For the same programme Miriam visited an Australian inventor living in Holland who is patenting a machine which will enable terminally ill people to end their life without assistance from anyone. Miriam met with several people who have put their name down to receive the machine when it is ready. The machine is called SARCO – short for sarcophagus! Miriam was amazed at how positive the people were. They had made the decision that when their life became intolerable they would end it. Far from denying life, they were celebrating and championing the quality of a life worth living. We shall look in Chapter Ten at the church’s view of assisted suicide.

Since the gradual separation of the Church of England, and indeed all churches, from the communities in which they stand, people have found different ways of expressing deep feelings and desires particularly with regard to death and what is required of funeral rites. This separation was noted in the middle of the 20th century by William Inge, sometime Dean of St Paul’s Cathedral, who said that he became aware in the 1880s that “the centre of gravity in religion” had shifted away “from authority and experience”.²²⁹ Modern people are no longer in large part content to rely solely on tradition and authoritative instruction. By modern I mean the age that has witnessed the divergence into separate institutions of schooling, health care, and matters of religion. Such people have travelled, read and experienced so much more than their grandparents ever did, and are more likely to hold their own beliefs – a synthesis of traditional religion, popular culture and a sense of the spiritual that sometimes finds no more concrete expression than the conviction that “there is more to life than this”.

The church has its own particular vocabulary which is not found in the community at large. The church speaks easily of Eucharist and redemption, advent and rogation,

²²⁸ Margolyes, 2019

²²⁹ Davies, 2015:37 quoting W R Inge 1934:34

absolution and collects. So on casual observation it may seem that those ‘inside’ the church and those ‘outside’ the church are speaking of different things. But the longings and desires of human beings have not changed since humankind became sentient beings, even if the vocabulary has. People still need to make sense of life and death. They still need to construct a narrative of continuity between past, present and future. They still need to feel a sense of individual worth and a sense of belonging to a greater whole. Most people in 21st century Essex would, I find, still disagree with Jacques Monod’s dire dictum, “The ancient covenant is in pieces; man at last knows that he is alone in the unfeeling immensity of the universe, out of which he emerged only by chance.”²³⁰ Many still hold dear to the belief that there is a sentient being in the universe who cares for our welfare and may be prevailed upon to assist us. The church is able to help people not only in *what* they experience but in *how* they experience seminal events in the life of a family, an individual, a community. The church helps people not just to endure bereavement but to contemplate on the experience of loss. The church can and should help people to see, in Richard Rohr’s words, “the beyond of things”.²³¹

When the rituals of the church are accessed by the general population it is because the church in that locality has been true to itself in being a place of welcome and blessing to all: a place of coming home. At a time of loss and bereavement, when the mourner comes to the church or at least to the minister and finds a compassionate welcome in the ritual of the funeral, there is, in the words of Lévi Strauss, “a union (one might even say communion in the context) or in any case an organic relation between two initially separate groups, one ideally merging with the person of the officiant and the other with the collectivity of the faithful”.²³²

So when Jason, from Canvey Island, died in a road traffic accident at the age of 51 in the Philippines where he had lived for five years, his family and friends, who would not consider themselves members of any church, did not hesitate to telephone and ask that a

²³⁰ Monod, 1972:22

²³¹ Rohr, 2016: 122

²³² Rappaport, 2013:45 quoting *The Savage Mind*, 1966:32

memorial service of thanksgiving for Jason's life be held in the parish church in Canvey. There was standing room only for the service. One comment on the parish Facebook page that evening said, "It was good to see so many people there but best of all the vicar did Jason and the community proud with the service and the memories and the words. Thank you for giving the Canvey man an excellent send off." Lévi Strauss would have called the event a communion. But the faithful in this context were not people who would feel able to assent to a Christian or any other creed. They were an assembly of ordinary, for the most part working-class, people gathered in shock and in grief that tragedy should visit them in the death of one who had been so full of life, generosity and laughter. They expressed their humanity by taking time to come together in memory and in the realization of the fragility of life. They wanted the church to provide the space and the time – a safe, sacred space and a safe, sacred time – in which they could express their grief and find a sense of continuity despite the tragedy that had befallen their community of friendship which had spanned 40 years.

As Stephen posted on Facebook after the apparent suicide of a friend, "Laughter is infectious and so is sorrow: we share both". The church's role on this day was to help the gathered friends find, in the words of Malcolm Guite, "expression for grief without losing hope, to help us honour the dead with tears, yet still to glimpse through those tears the light of resurrection".²³³ Modern ministers should not underestimate the difference we can make, and do make, to a life bowed down with grief, shock and loss. Our contribution is not insignificant in maintaining the health, mental and physical, of those who have not grown up with the language and assumptions of a church-going community. However modern we may be, however dependent we become on electronic gizmos and the internet of things, dying remains, and will always remain, a human reality that must be attended to before, during and after the event.

Other moments of contact with the Church

Experiences of bereavement and the need to arrange funerals do not occur in a vacuum. Such times are part of everyday life in family, community and nation. When the bereaved

²³³ Guite, 2017:ix

are confronted with decisions about the degree to which a funeral service should be overtly or implicitly religious, they will have in mind their general impression of the church, what it stands for and how it practically portrays its message. A large proportion of the apparently 'un-churched' is confused as to why the church has spent so much time and energy debating matters like whether women could become priests and bishops; whether one can be married in church with a former husband or wife still living; the status of civil partnerships and whether the union of a same-sex couple can be called a marriage. The church has often not helped itself by appearing to be woefully out of touch with modern, scientific understanding of sexuality and human nature and by flying in the face of its own teaching about God's love for all creatures. The bereaved will have experienced first or second hand the quite hostile reaction of the church to the request for a remarriage after divorce or for a baptism of a child whose parents do not belong to the worshipping congregation or for a funeral service for one who has died by their own hand. They might well have come away with the distinct impression of the congregation as a private club and of themselves as not being worthy enough to belong.

It is remarkable that as recently as November 2002 the General Synod passed a motion²³⁴ allowing the marriage of a divorcee in church. Nor was the motion carried unanimously. In the House of Bishops, 27 were in favour and 1 was against; in the House of Clergy 143 were in favour and 44 against. And it was nothing less than incredible in the view of the 'unchurched' that, among the lay voters, 138 were in favour and 65 (a huge 47%) were against.

The motion was carried with the proviso that incumbents would not be obliged to conduct such a marriage if it were against their conscience. In 2016, of the seventeen weddings conducted in the Church of England in Canvey Island, six of the marriages involved at least one divorced partner.²³⁵ In 2014 the Parish held its first annual celebration of marriage. The church was full. And not only were there people who had been married in the Church of England but several who had been married in Registry Offices or Free

²³⁴ GS1449

²³⁵ Figures from the Parish Registers of Canvey Island

Churches because at the time they were not allowed to be married in an Anglican church following a divorce.

People who have lived together for years still come to the church for marriage and, when asked why they want to be married in church, answer stumbingly about wanting to make their relationship “right”. A fruitful discussion may be had about what this word ‘right’ means. Is it right as opposed to wrong, that is, is there still some vestigial suggestion that the couple has been living ‘in sin’ and marriage would put an end to that and bring them into a state of grace? Does this couple feel that their lifestyle was not consistent with their distant and far-removed understanding of Christian teaching? Or is the word ‘right’ suggestive of wholeness – a tidying up of surnames, a public commitment that this family is a cohesive whole and not an *ad hoc* temporary arrangement out of which either party might walk at will? People such as these have the choice of turning to the church (or not) at a time of bereavement.

While the balance of the mind is disturbed

And just as the church eventually catches up with society’s view of the worthiness of remarriage, so eventually the church caught up with society’s view of life, mental illness and death. The still authorized and much loved 16th Century Book of Common Prayer says that the funeral service may not be used “for any that die unbaptized or excommunicate or have laid violent hands upon themselves.” English Law decriminalized attempted suicide in 1961.²³⁶ Twenty-two years later Canon 1184 of the Roman Catholic Church permitted Christian burial for those who had died by suicide. It took until February 2015 for the General Synod of the Church of England to allow full funerals for suicides.²³⁷ Even then the vote was not unanimous – the Measure passing by 262 to 5. It takes a while for modern knowledge of medicine, psychology and understanding of depression to make its way into a fresh appraisal of Biblical, Patristic and medieval theology. As Edwin S Shneidman wrote, “Suicide haunts our literature and our culture.

²³⁶ The Suicide Act 1961 (9 & 10 Eliz2 c 60)

²³⁷ GS1972B

It is the taboo subtext to our successes and our happiness".²³⁸ This sense that suicide is a sin perhaps explains the careful wording of the coroner on the death certificate of a 17 year-old Canvey man, John Crow, who went missing for five weeks in 1914 before his body was found. Newspaper reports of the time suggest that it was clear to everyone that John had died by suicide, but had the coroner made that ruling then the vicar of the parish, the Revd Joseph Brown, would not have been able to bury him in the churchyard. The coroner wrote under Cause of Death, "Found dead apparently drowned on the foreshore of the River Thames there. But as to how he came into the water and so met his death there is no evidence to shew".²³⁹ John was buried in St Katherine's Churchyard according to the rites of the Church of England on 7th March 1914.²⁴⁰ Conversely, fifteen years later, in May 1929, the body of Henry McPherson Clark, proprietor of the *Canvey News* was not buried in the Churchyard, the inquest into his death having determined that Mr Clark had died from potassium of cyanide which he had purchased and administered himself. The fact of suicide was not mitigated by his wife's testimony that for twenty years he had suffered from neurasthenia as a result of a serious accident and, consequently, very little worry could cause him to become deeply depressed. The running of his little newspaper had proved a bigger venture than he had first imagined.²⁴¹

But a study of the burial registers and coroner's reports suggests that adherence to Canon Law was a matter of interpretation and the pastoral sensitivity of the Incumbent of the day. So we see that in fact two of those who had "laid violent hands upon themselves" were interred in the Churchyard in 1914 and another two in 1930 and 1933 respectively.²⁴²

One hundred and eight years after John Crow's death, suicide is the leading cause of death among men under the age of 50. After that, heart disease and cancer take over.²⁴³ The

²³⁸ Shneidman, 1998:127

²³⁹ Essex Weekly News, 1914

²⁴⁰ Burial Registers - The Parish of Canvey Island - now held at Essex Record Office, Chelmsford

²⁴¹ Chelmsford Chronicle 1929

²⁴² Burial Registers – The Parish of Canvey Island - now held at Essex Record Office, Chelmsford – when cross-referenced with newspaper articles

²⁴³ Mortality Statistics 2014. ONS

church at last has come to terms with this reality and church ministers will now occasionally find themselves present in the house of sudden and unexpected grief in the face of tragic and, to the bereaved, unnecessary horror. Until senility takes over I shall carry etched in my memory the sight of a young man on the floor of his mother's house with the rope around his neck. As I prayed with them I was struck by the professionalism with which the noose was fashioned and the reality that this young man meant to do what he did. And where ministers of the church are absent, or are slow to be present, others are swift to step in. Civil celebrants, Humanists and Spiritualists will always take up the slack when the church forgets to do the things of God. Such alternative conductors of funeral rites have grown up in the culture of 21st century England and have to hand the language and concepts of Christianity from which to pick and choose. The mourner is increasingly unconcerned with the provenance of ordination or licensing or authorisation. What the mourner requires is someone who will listen to their story and honour the life and the love of the one now gone. Spirituality and the narrative of meaning do not comprise a zero sum game. There are enough resources for everyone.

The sense that suicide is somehow outside the reach of God's grace persists. Why else would Vicki be visibly and dramatically relieved when it was suggested that the funeral of her son, who had hanged himself at home, could and should be held in Church? For Vicki and her community the death of her son was a disaster. The very word 'disaster' in its origins has something of the cosmic about it – ill-starred. Vicki felt caught-up in forces that were too big for her to process. This was the first time she had ever seen a dead body. And it was that of her son. She had enough to deal with without the church seeming ambivalent about the nature of her son's illness. The church was absolutely the right place for her and her family and his friends to gather and try to answer with Thomas Hardy:

“Why did you give no hint that night..

That ...

You would close your term here, up and be gone

Where I could not follow?”²⁴⁴

Occasionally, when planning a funeral, the mourners will cagily mention that another

²⁴⁴ Hardy 1976:338

relative died X years ago. When gently pressed they will disclose that that death was by suicide and follow immediately with words like, “but please don’t say so at the funeral – not everyone knows that”.

Vicki had no time to say a proper goodbye to her son: she had come home one ordinary evening and found him hanging from the loft at the top of the stairs. The body was taken to the coroner where she could not follow. It was up to the church to provide a space and a time where her goodbyes could be uttered, felt and joined to the eternal births and deaths, welcomes and farewells of life itself.

It was not until 2017 that General Synod formally and finally removed any obstacle to the conduct of the full Christian funeral service for those who committed suicide or died unbaptized. The rule change with regard to Christian funerals for the unbaptised came as a surprise to many clergy who had been burying the unbaptised with the full panoply of Christian rites for years. It is interesting to observe that on 16th November 1896 the vicar of Canvey Island was careful to make a note in the burial register when he buried a three month old baby stating that the child who had been born into the Leppell family was “unbaptised but registered ‘Sidney’”, and that the child had been “buried with a special service”.²⁴⁵ The inverted commas around the child’s name suggests that, in the vicar’s view, the child was allegedly, rather than actually, called Sidney. Only baptism would have given him his name in reality. Whatever the form of the “special service” for the funeral, even in 1896 the Rev Hayes knew that he was commending this child to a loving God within the confines of the church rules as they obtained at the time. One hundred and twenty one years later, General Synod caught up with this truth. I shall turn in Chapter Ten to a consideration of the view held by society and by the church with regard to assisted suicide and euthanasia.

Not all mourners have wonderful memories of perfectly happy relationships with no

²⁴⁵ Burial Registers - The Parish of Canvey Island - now held at Essex Record Office, Chelmsford

regrets. Many are troubled by opportunities missed, affection withheld or wrongs actually done. The last verse of Hardy's poem quoted above acknowledges the need for healing of memories and the need for peace for the one gone and the one left behind

Why, then, latterly, did we not speak,
Did we not think of those days long dead,
And ere your vanishing try to seek
That time's renewal?²⁴⁶

Atheists, like Hardy, along with agnostics and convinced Christians alike, need to find some healing and some peace of mind. The church is well positioned to offer space and time to make a start on the process. In 21st century society the need for the church to speak to everyone is a particularly acute challenge as opinion polls suggest that ever more people are 'coming out' as atheists.²⁴⁷

Forbidding remarriage of divorcees and refusing sacred ground for the body of a suicide might have been effective tools in controlling populations and keeping the great mass of the uneducated in order at least on the surface. But such measures really do not hold sway with the majority of contemporary Essex protestant humanity. The church increasingly has seemed out of touch and not living up to its own message of hope and inclusivity in the divine economy.

Education

The Church itself was responsible for bringing education to the masses when National Schools were founded in 1811 to provide a near universal system of elementary education based on the teachings of the Church of England. Edward the Sixth in his short reign founded Grammar schools so that boys and girls might be well educated in the protestant way of thinking and living. In the mid nineteenth century in London it was the London City Mission and sundry churches that founded the Ragged Schools to get children off the streets and out of poverty by dint of education. The church continued to have a significant presence in education through religious instruction, Sunday schools, school assemblies

²⁴⁶ Hardy 1976:339

²⁴⁷ Bruce, 2002:193

and training colleges, not to mention Anglican foundations like King's College London of which the present author is a graduate. Parish vestries doled out charity to the poor of the parish. By 1851, according to the National Census, Anglican primary schools were responsible for the education of some seventy-six percent of England's children. There is some irony in the fact that society, having been in receipt of education at the hands of the church for 200 years, has led the way in rejecting the more judgmental and harsh aspects of church regulation and rule. The people of Canvey Island, having their roots in the poverty of East London are not many generations away from the reality of the novelty of education, the ability to read and the sense of having a voice. The Education Acts passed between 1870 and 1944²⁴⁸ paved the way for free but compulsory education for the whole population to secondary school age. The state took over and developed what the Church had begun.

In view of the above, it is remarkable that a great number of people still ask the funeral director to contact the local vicar to conduct the funeral service at the crematorium or in church. Many such do not have the vocabulary of the church. Having contracted out the care of loved ones in their final days to hospital, hospice or visiting members of professional agencies we, as Kathryn Mannix, the palliative medicine pioneer, puts it, "have lost the familiarity we once had with that process, and we have lost the vocabulary and the etiquette that served us so well in past times, when death was acknowledged to be inevitable".²⁴⁹ The majority of people in Canvey Island currently have no practicing confessional faith. They would tick the 'no religion' box mentioned in Chapter Four. But many still turn to the church. In 2014, 31% of deaths in England were followed by a Church of England funeral. This was down from 41% ten years earlier.²⁵⁰ Forty years ago the local vicar was the first port of call for the undertaker planning a funeral. Now funeral directors sell a package of services – the range of coffins is vast, there is a choice of venue, vehicles and reception. The coffin can be borne in a horse-drawn or motorized hearse or placed in the sidecar of a motorbike or on the back of a flat-bed truck depending

²⁴⁸ The Education Act 1944 (7 and 8 Geo 6 c.31)

²⁴⁹ Mannix, 2017:2

²⁵⁰ Church of England Research and Statistics 2014:8

on the occupation or whim of the deceased and family. And they offer a personal service tailor-made for the person who has died *or* a traditional church service! It is this last false dichotomy that clergy now have to overcome.

Civil or religious?

In forty years there has been a remarkable rise in the number of civil funeral celebrants who offer a personal celebration of a life, a celebration that is unencumbered by attachment to a particular denomination or even religion. Laws governing who might legitimately conduct a marriage do not apply to the conduct of funerals as a funeral is neither a legal requirement nor a sacramental rite. Interestingly, such funeral celebrants will include a hymn and the *Lord's Prayer* if requested. In a sense, by using the familiar cadences of known prayers and hymns, these celebrants are acting in the shelter of the church. They suit the funeral directors very well - they are able to respond to any request quickly as their diaries are not full of parochial and diocesan meetings. Nor are they driven by the bishop's insistence that clergy take a day off and that they should set aside days for retreat and spiritual direction. Civil celebrants may be people of faith or none. Their job is simply to provide the kind of funeral that the family of the deceased request. Civil celebrants, as distinct from humanist celebrants, provide a service that is neither anti-religious nor explicitly linked to a particular denomination of creed. They are happy to leave the question of the existence of God to one side as being fruitless. But because of the context in which they work, they are willing to incorporate themes, music and language from the Christian heritage. One survey in 2014 found that 60% of funerals taken by Civil celebrants had some religious content, an increase of 20% on a similar survey in 2009.²⁵¹ Civil celebrants may be seen as modern-day dissenters as they give those categorised as "non-churchgoers" a way of not even appearing to submit to church authority.

As Alan Stanley says, the starting point for the planning of the funeral is neutral, "on which the family's preferences can be built without predetermined outcomes"²⁵²

²⁵¹ *Funeral Service Journal*, 2014: 22

²⁵² Stanley, 2015:4

Increasingly funeral directors who used to ask “What religion was he?” now ask, “Was he particularly religious?” to which most families would answer, “No”, leaving the arranger the opportunity to suggest a local funeral Civil celebrant who will do a “nice personal service”. Were the arranger to ask a different question such as, “Would you like a prayer included?” the answer would almost invariably be “Yes”, leading more naturally to contact with a minister of the church. Some ministers of the church have failed to notice that the world has changed, that they are simply one choice among many. Choosing the one to conduct the funeral is but one choice the bereaved family can now make amidst a huge number of choices in designing the funeral that reflects the life of the one deceased and is memorable for family, friends and the rest of the community in which they will continue to live. Funeral directors are keen to work with businesses that provide bespoke coffins with pictures illustrating the hobby of the deceased along with matching stationery for service sheets et al. Which and what sort of minister or celebrant will best reflect the life of the one now gone is simply one decision of many to make.

As we have seen, the central selling point of the church with regard to funeral ministry is the offering of hope and a structured provision of on-going pastoral care. Stanley suggests that the church should encourage more lay people to conduct funerals but that these people should not be authorised Readers or Licensed Lay Ministers as they will still be “bound by the same legal and moral constraints to offer a Christian funeral, focused on witnessing to the resurrection and commending the deceased to God’s care in that light”. He advocates, rather, that ordinary lay people should be able to conduct funerals bringing their own personal faith perspective in much the same way as a Christian teacher in a state school does. “Faith is not the starting point for people’s expectations of what they bring to the job in hand”.²⁵³ In 2018 the Anglican Diocese of Chelmsford in which Canvey Island lies, began the process of identifying suitable lay people to assist with funeral ministry. But an early question arose with regard to what such funeral takers should wear. Those responsible for training were of the opinion that cassocks or albs should be worn so that the funeral ministers looked like church people. Others thought this would be a mistake as the Civil celebrants are accepted as lay people who take funerals well without

²⁵³ Stanley, 2015:5

any robes of office.

In my view Stanley makes too much of a distinction between what the Civil celebrant is able to offer and the official line that the Christian Minister is “duty-bound to push”. The mere fact that it is a Christian Minister with suit, clerical collar, simple badge or robes leading the service is testament to the fact of the presumption of the presence of Christ underlying the whole occasion. I suggest that the good Christian funeral-taking minister will leave the family and friends to arrive at their own understanding of the nature of this life and (if any) the next. The funeral is hardly the time to be overtly preaching at the bereaved. Rather it is a time to act out the care, compassion and unconditional love that the minister believes Christ has for all God’s creation. And this may involve the minister allowing the family to incorporate music and poetry that ministers would not themselves choose but that, nevertheless, help the family to celebrate the life now changed. If a family is not allowed to have a piece of music or a song or hymn because it is judged to be insufficiently Christian, forever afterwards the family will remember what they were *not* allowed to include rather than what was actually said. When the church had a virtual monopoly on the taking of funerals, several ministers made lists (and some still make lists) of what hymns were allegedly sub-Christian. Hymns like *Morning Has Broken* and *Jerusalem* feature in such lists. In 2018 the Anglican parish of Canvey Island inherited a funeral from a neighbouring Roman Catholic parish because the parish priest there refused to allow any recorded music in his church. The family walked out of that planning meeting in search of a church that would allow the final wishes of the nominally-Catholic deceased to be honoured. That parish alienated an entire family and its linked community. It seems to me that there is plenty of time for preaching and teaching in the weeks and months after the funeral if the bereaved family is encouraged to join in the worship at a local church to hear the name of the loved one mentioned in the prayers on the Sundays before and after the funeral and at the annual Bereavement or Longest Night service.

The churches’ follow up

Several churches invite bereaved relatives to a bereavement service usually around the time of All Souls’ Day at the beginning of November. The parish of Canvey Island holds

three such services a year, in addition to All Souls Day, to which the families of those who died in the previous four months are invited. The service is partly candle-lit and the name of each person whose funeral was conducted in that period is read aloud. Several parishes have reported a rise in the number of people attending and valuing these services. One theory for this phenomenon is that as the funeral itself becomes inexorably a celebration of life with upbeat music, bright clothes and end-of-suffering messages, so the bereavement service a few weeks or months later might be the first time permission has been given for the bereaved actually to grieve. The bereavement service contains a section headlined “Act of Remembrance”. I was moved by the comment of one widow who, on arrival, said, “I have come to a service of remembrance, but I never forgot”. What the church is doing on these occasions is intimating to the bereaved that our care did not end with the funeral. We are also giving the bereaved a wider context in which to grieve and, indeed, we are giving them permission to grieve. As the days following a death have given way to weeks and months, so the bereaved gradually come to the realisation that this new state of loss is permanent. This new shock is summed up well in the poem by Donald Hall:

You think that their
dying is the worst
thing that could happen.
Then they stay dead.²⁵⁴

The morning after such a bereavement service I received the following email which I quote almost in full:

“I am so relieved that tonight was everything I was hoping and needing it to be, and more. Since you first mentioned it a long time ago I have been waiting for this evening to arrive. I was really shocked by how many people had passed away in such a short space of time. For once I didn’t feel utterly alone. I have learned a lot tonight and taken so much away with me, to think about, to comfort me and to try to live by.

I feel very sad, but I also feel the calmest I have felt since (name) died. I feel more peaceful than I thought I could feel at the moment. And I feel happier, although it feels very odd to say that and it doesn’t really make sense because it contradicts how I think I should be feeling.

The whole service offered meaning to life and death that I hadn’t really thought about before. The words and prayers were tender, poignant and comforting and our remembrance and thanksgiving was very soothing...

²⁵⁴ Hall, 2000

I don't know why but I always feel like I have to apologise if I am caught crying in front of someone, but tonight I didn't feel like I needed to say sorry to anyone which was a relief, which is just as well as I was crying before the service even began...

I didn't have to feel guilty about needing or wanting to find comfort in faith which I haven't found or even looked for before...

I need to stop thinking I am odd and instead follow what my heart is telling me: that it's not everything and everybody around me and outside of me that should be dictating how I should be dealing with losing (name), but actually it's what's inside of me that will help and guide me and show me how to learn to live my life without (name)..."

Hospices and crematoria have also found that the bereaved find it helpful being invited to return to the place of death or the place of the funeral to attend a bereavement service.

Contemporary society in Essex and elsewhere is in danger of trivialising the need to grieve and to face questions about the nature of life itself by making the funeral into a celebration of life or going straight to a memorial service without a coffin. There is a fundamental difference between these acts of worship. Seamus Heaney in an interview put it very well when he said, "Memorial services are different from funerals. Funerals are closer to the bones, as it were; they have to deal with the rent in the fabric. The memorial service has more to do with the recompense of reputation, sometimes maybe with its retrieval. It's closer to the obituary notice than to the eternal questions."²⁵⁵

Some cultures still set aside a time for mourning with particular customs, rituals and appropriate clothes to wear. In Britain there was indeed a recognized time to weep and a time to celebrate. Mourning clothes acted as a kind of green 'L. plate' to advise others that the wearer was embarking on a new and unfamiliar journey. In 21st century Britain we are, to quote Malcolm Guite, "rushed straight to the celebration and even that is no consolation, for we all have to pretend that there is nothing to be consoled about".²⁵⁶ Without any outward, physical sign of mourning grief in this period becomes hidden.²⁵⁷

This loss of visible signs of mourning is particularly problematic in the modern age as the

²⁵⁵ O'Driscoll, 2010:473

²⁵⁶ Guite, 2017:ix

²⁵⁷ Gorer, 1965

interval between the death and the funeral can be as much as three or four weeks. Many families feel they are in a state of “limbo” (yet another Christian concept whose vocabulary has been appropriated). In this period, economic reality means that relatives must go back to work (particularly if they took time off in the final stages of their loved-one’s illness); Council properties must be cleared of the possessions of the recently departed and a temporary normality must be maintained even though there has yet been no funeral. In this period the church can make a real contribution to the life of the bereaved. The mourner can know that the church does not have to wait for the funeral in order to be praying for all involved in the grief; the name of the departed can be read aloud in the Sunday services; the funeral service and the eulogy can be planned and conversations had which at least begin the process of healing.

On 21st December 2017 the Parish of Canvey Island held its first Longest Night Service particularly for the families of those whose funerals the clergy team had conducted. Letters were sent to those bereaved in the previous year outlining all the Christmas services and drawing attention particularly to this service. The Longest Night Service, designed for those who cannot face the glare and seemingly unending noise of Christmas is, in effect, a carol service shorter than the traditional carol service with only the quieter carols like *Away in a Manger* and *O Little Town of Bethlehem* and a mixture of Biblical and secular readings acknowledging the pain of loss and grief. The invitation was very well received and the service attended by over a hundred people. For some it was a moment of closure which was denied them in the upbeat rhythm of the funeral.

The relentless celebration of life can be seen as a denial of death. So often the minister is told, “He wouldn’t want us to be sad”. And this is probably true. But one of the things that makes us human is the ability to love a particular person in a particular place over a particular time. When that person has gone – through death or even divorce – the absence needs to be processed and the loss recognized and grieved. And so, when conducting a wedding in which the bride or the groom is previously widowed, the couple appreciate the mention of the previous partner in the prayers as the one now gone has contributed in no small measure to the life of the bride or groom now standing once again at the chancel

step.

In his poem, *Death*, W B Yeats suggests that a dying animal has neither fear nor hope. But man spends so much of his time either dreading death or hoping for life after death that, in a sense, in the course of his life he dies and rises again many times. Yeats concludes,

“He knows death to the bone
Man created death”.²⁵⁸

Although contemporary people might feel in the gut that the life of the one gone continues elsewhere and elsehow, they still need to find a way to grieve the loss in this life. Whether or not persons see themselves as religious, they still need to acknowledge the difference an absence through death makes in the small and large ways in which the life now ended impacted on their own life whether for a short or a long time. It is a matter of shared humanity rather than a consensus of shared religious opinion that defines us.

Nor is this process completed swiftly. In some senses the bereaved spend the rest of their lives adjusting to the new reality of life without the physical presence of the one who has died. So Lucy aged 25, five years after her father’s death at the age of 50, can write,

Dad, I have learned that there is no other side to grief.
There is no pushing through anything – which you are led to believe.
Grief is not a task to complete and move on,
5 years later and the heartache of missing you is still so strong.
Grief is rather a new part of me, a change of my being,
a new definition of myself and a new way of seeing.²⁵⁹

And David, writing on what would have been his Mother’s 88th birthday, says.

“When someone you love dies the love you feel doesn’t die with them. Love finds a new expression, grief. Grief is what you feel when love has nowhere to go. Grief is what’s left when love becomes homeless.”²⁶⁰

Similarly Nora McInerny, speaking in a TED talk podcast about the death in a short space

²⁵⁸ Yeats, (1929) 1994

²⁵⁹ “Dad, I have learned” (@Lucy, 15 February 2018)

²⁶⁰ “When someone you love dies” (@David, 14 March 2018)

of time of three members of her family, says that she has made it a career to talk of her loss and to help others come to terms with their grief. She stresses the importance of being able to talk about your own particular dead person. Many in the world are “grief adjacent” but not yet “grief stricken”. She does not find the phrase “move on” helpful as she does not want to move on from her life with her husband. The loved ones are still present. Her dead husband contributed to making her the person who was attractive to her new husband. She is not moving on *from*, she is moving forward *with* him. Her love for her new husband and her love of and grief for her lost husband are not opposing forces: they are strands of the same thread.²⁶¹ When it is your grief – when it is you in the front row at the funeral - you realise it is not a moment but a new reality. Not all wounds are meant to heal.

Statistics

In 2016 the Church of England’s Research and Statistics department of the Archbishop’s Council published a report, *Statistics for Mission 2016* covering the previous 10 years detailing the number of Church of England Baptisms, marriages and funerals as a percentage of births, marriages and deaths. All showed a decline but the decline in the percentage of funerals conducted by Church of England Ministers showed the most dramatic decline. Baptisms declined by 5%, marriages (figures available to 2014) were down by 4% and funerals had declined by 13%. This figure is even more surprising when set against the fact that average weekly attendance in church as a proportion of population declined in the same period by just 10%.²⁶²

²⁶¹ www.ted.com/talks/nora_mcinery (McInerny 2018)

²⁶² Church of England Research and Statistics 2016:16

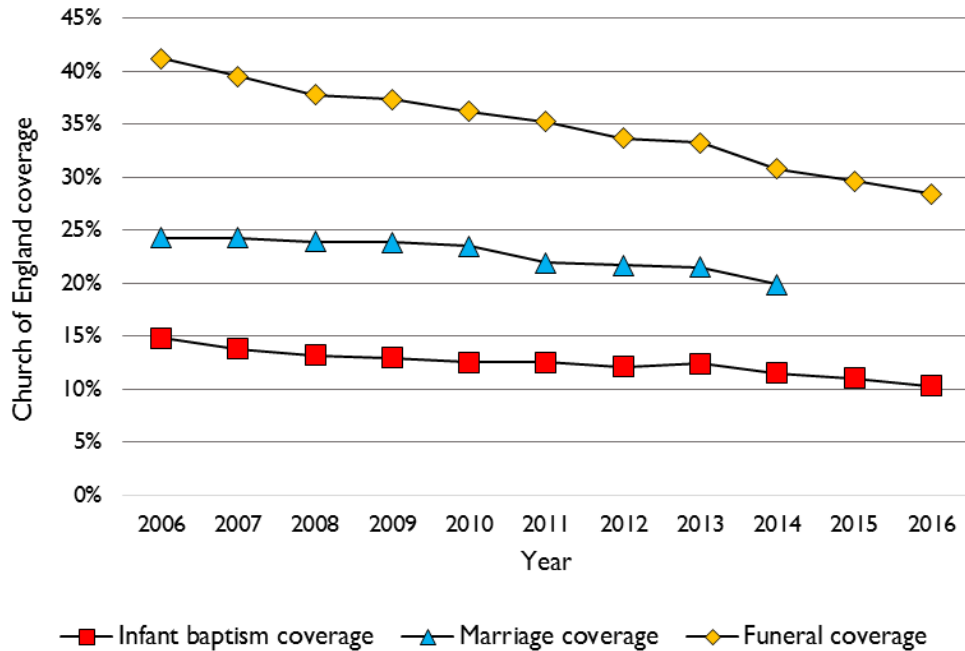


Figure 7.1 Church of England infant baptisms, marriages, and funerals as a percentage of all births, marriages, and deaths, 2006-2016. Source: Statistics for Mission 2016:15.

The report supports my experience of the relationship between the church and the people of Canvey Island by acknowledging that “None of these measures tells the whole story of the life of a church.”²⁶³ The church is required to understand and minister in a variety of contexts. The equivalent report in 2014 warned that “Trends over recent years should be viewed in the context of longer-term historical patterns which demonstrate that participation as a proportion of the population has been steadily declining over the last 50 years.”²⁶⁴

In 2019 The Church of England’s worshipping community amounted to 1.2% of the population rising to 4.1% at Christmas. The average weekly attendance stabilised at 1.5% of the population.²⁶⁵

²⁶³ Church of England Research and Statistics 2016:8

²⁶⁴ Church of England Research and Statistics 2014:7

²⁶⁵ Church of England Research and Statistics 2019:9

The Church of England wanted to celebrate the fact that people form a worshipping community that does not necessarily meet on Sundays. When these were taken into account it was found that the numbers had risen slightly to 1.12 million people, 20% of whom were aged under 18 years old.²⁶⁶ Furthermore, the Church of England had more than doubled its monthly reach on social media – from 1.2 million in 2017 to 2.44 million in 2018. During the lockdown occasioned by Covid-19 in 2020/21 I observed that Durham Cathedral for example regularly had over 120 people tuning in to Morning and Evening Prayer.

In response to the figures released in 2018, the Bishop of London, Sarah Mullally, pointed out that millions encounter the church in their daily lives, through its commitment to the most vulnerable - from foodbank provision to night shelters, lunch clubs and community cafes. She confirmed that churches are running or supporting more than 33,000 social projects across the country. Again in October 2019 in addressing the House of Lords she affirmed that, “The Church is a builder of, and a presence in, communities, and is well placed to support people as they journey through life and, in fact, towards death.”²⁶⁷

Very little of this work will result in increased figures in parish registers. Canvey Island’s Anglican church and the Salvation Army provide food banks. The foodbank at St Nicholas is set up with some provision outside the church door so that anyone in need may come at any hour and help themselves without the ignominy of having to show their face. It may be that one or two unscrupulous people who are not in need also benefit in this way, but the church feels that is a price worth paying to prevent the embarrassment of those who have suddenly fallen on hard times. In the lockdown of 2020/21 members of the congregation formed a rota to cater for the queue of people each day who came to the food bank in need.

In 2020 Ruth Perrin published a study of fifty people who were born between 1981 and the mid 1990s. She found that these members of the Millennial generation, of which just

²⁶⁶ Church of England Research and Statistics 2019:8

²⁶⁷ Mullally, 2019

three percent have an active Christian Faith, are working on developing their faith well into the third and fourth decade of their life.²⁶⁸ Perrin found that this generation has little concern for the history of particular denominations or of theological argument. Rather they seek a faith that is of relevance to their current lives as they strive to settle in work, friendship groups and a family life of their own. They find that their more secular friends are not antagonistic but, rather, cannot see any point in having a faith and are possessed of very sketchy clues of what may actually go on in a church. This generation has unlimited access to online, particularly Pentecostal, services and finds comfort, assurance and direction in the theological teaching offered there. But, crucially for an awareness of what is going on in Canvey Island, Perrin finds that the members of this generation find rest from the upbeat Pentecostal worship in the formal liturgy of the parish church where they can quietly be themselves with their unfolding sense of joy and sorrow, hopes and disappointments. A church that focusses in large measure on faith in the context of social justice and on matters threatening the world will become a home for members of the Millennial generation.

The Christian church clearly continues to have religious and cultural significance within the context of daily life without widespread reference to gathering for worship on Sundays.²⁶⁹ The Church's central selling point of hope is more widely accessible than ever. The parish to which and in which the church must minister is no longer solely geographical and physical. The boundaries denoting in which church building people may get married will be the last historical barriers to fall.

Availability of Ministers

The trend in the rise of Civil celebrants, rather than ordained ministers, conducting funerals is assisted by the fact that many clergy opt to take Friday as their day off – the very day that is most popular for funerals. Having the funeral on a Friday means families do not have to endure another weekend without laying a loved one to rest. Another advantage of a Friday funeral is that people travelling any distance do not have to rush

²⁶⁸ Perrin, 2020

²⁶⁹ Woodhead, 2012

back home for work. Civil funeral celebrants are happy to oblige.

In Basildon Crematorium in Essex, of all the funerals conducted on a Friday in 2018, a small percentage were conducted by ordained Church of England ministers engaged in Parish ministry. And increasingly it is not just on Fridays that traditional ordained stipendiary Ministers are absent from the crematorium. I made a study of the ministers conducting funerals in the three months between 9th September and 9th December 2016 at Basildon Crematorium. There were 507 funerals. Of these, a mere 23% (115) were conducted by stipendiary Church of England ministers. A further 16% (82) were conducted by self-supporting licensed Church of England ministers. This took the involvement of the Church of England to 39%. Another 5% (28) of the funerals were conducted by ministers of other denominations. An astonishing 56% (284) were conducted by civil funeral celebrants'. As the crematorium organist remarked when the final figures were collated, "The Church of England has some serious thinking to do!"

The paucity of ordained clergy at the crematorium is set to become more pronounced as the National Church directed that from January 2020 all fees due to clergy for funerals conducted at the crematorium must be paid directly to the Diocese rather than the parish with no part of the fee being retained by the Parochial Church Council. The justification for this is that the PCC has no responsibility to contribute to the maintenance of the crematorium. This move is seen by many churches as stating that the PCC is no longer responsible for funerals at the crematorium or any place that is not the church building. One funeral director who is married to an Anglican priest wrote in a letter to the Church Times, "If all the funeral fee is now payable to the diocese, with no contribution to the parish, then there is even less incentive for busy clergy to take time out from parish duties to conduct crematorium funerals ... as a result the church is missing out on an important ministry to the bereaved."²⁷⁰

All this goes on behind the scenes and does not impact the radar of the majority of people. And so it may be surprising that, despite a veritable supermarket of choices available,

²⁷⁰ Andrews, 2019

many in Canvey Island still turn to the Established Church to perform the funeral rites. They want the funeral to be more than just the disposition of the body with a résumé of the life lived. What is required is some suggestion that the life now ended continues in another dimension; that the farewell of separation is temporary and that a loving creator has in his safe keeping the one now parted from our mortal sight. The church must recognise and proclaim that this hope is open and available not just to the gathered Sunday congregation but to all human beings who exist in any relationship with one another and who wish publicly to affirm that even “if all comes to nothing, this one’s life, this confident, creative, compassionate life has brought meaning out of the abyss, and in celebrating it today we will not let it go to waste.”²⁷¹

So when charismatic, exuberant Adam was murdered, having got himself on the wrong side of drug dealers, I found myself saying at his funeral,

Adam smiled, loved and danced
Free-flowing. No rules.
The rhythm was in his head. The beat was his life.
Someone else decided to end the music.
Stop the dance. Clear the floor.
The physical dance ended. But not the energy.
Not the memory
The energy and the memory live on. ²⁷²

Those who loved Adam and deeply grieved the circumstances of his death needed the church to help them find meaning in his life and his hard death, to celebrate his life and offer some hope in the continuity of their memory and indeed, his life. I sought to assure the grief-stricken that there was indeed an unseen, divine hand reaching out to Adam, inviting him to join the eternal dance, murmuring in his soul that he was loved from eternity and will be loved throughout eternity yet to come. The Christian minister can affirm that all shall be well in the long run but we also need to help the bereaved through the horror of the short run. Thus we are faithful to the central selling point of the church: hope.

²⁷¹ Holloway, 2019:117

²⁷² The author’s personal composition, now on the fly page, Book of Remembrance, St Nicholas’ Church, Vol II

This hope, as I say, is available to all who wish to access it. Christian ministers need to make themselves available, to be the backlash, not just for those gathered on Sundays but, to all who seek that hope particularly in times of joy and in times of sorrow. We ministers are living embodiments of the truth that the ebbing of active Christian participation over the last few hundred years has not meant that God has been abandoned nor has God abandoned his creation. It is true that the old wineskins have burst beyond restoration, but there is, I believe, a new and rich wine which permeates every aspect of ordinary life in the modern age. This wine we may call hope; and the church should be glad because that is what we are (or are supposed to be) about. Those who see themselves as custodians of the truth will stop their ears and pick up stones. But it has ever been thus.

I turn now to the wishes of one who, while she was dying, left clear instructions as to what should happen with regard to her funeral, with the result that the central selling point of the church found tangible expression as her family took leave of her physical body.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I am not afraid

In this chapter I tell the story of one, and allude to the story of others, who called upon the church to conduct the funeral having not had any sense of belonging to a worshipping congregation. Before the illness and death, these people would have been described as living quite secular lives untroubled by religious requirements of ritual or belonging. And yet each of them called out to the church to bridge the divide between Sunday practice and the pastoral imperative to care for the sick and the sorrowful. The church was called up to slot its ministry into the ministry of pastoral professionals like hospice nurses, district nurses and funeral directors. We shall see that the words of the dying and of the bereaved borrow and adapt terms from the language of the Christian church. The church is called to recognise and bless the adapted language which is offered in new, apparently secular, contexts in the ministry of the dying to the soon-to-be bereaved and in the ministry of the bereaved to each other and to the memory of the one now gone.

When people are faced with a terminal illness during which they are lucid and able to plan how and where they want their life to end and what kind of funeral they would like, they usually, in my experience, plan the funeral with the desire that those left behind should find the occasion to be an uplifting experience – as satisfactory as the fact of death and loss will allow. They want the funeral to major on the fact that the suffering is over, death is not the end, and a new and glorious life has begun. Suffering has not removed, and cannot remove, the smile ingrained in the heart of the one who has been loved. This is what Mannix calls “an act of parental love that is bequeathed to the future that they themselves cannot enter”.²⁷³ So I come now to a consideration of what was going on in the minds of Lin, Ellen, Jenna, Debbie and Terri when planning for, and responding to, the fact of a funeral.

Lin was 67 years old when she died in 2015. Four years earlier she had been diagnosed with Adrenal cancer. Matters were complicated by diabetes. Lin had married her husband

²⁷³ Mannix, 2017:155

nearly forty-nine years earlier in a Registry Office in East London. They had known each other since the age of ten when they sat next to each other at school. Together they raised three children. Lin's work was mainly secretarial and clerical. She was efficient, methodical and practical. When the children were little she would work nights at the local bingo hall to supplement her husband's income. As the family finances became more comfortable they would go on cruises, particularly to mark significant wedding anniversaries. Lin took pride in her appearance and she had a remarkable sense of style. She dressed well and collected fine pieces of jewellery which she gave away to friends and family in the weeks before she died.

At no time in Lin's life did organised religion of any sort play a part. And yet as the cancer progressed Lin became aware of being ministered to by angels. The word 'Malachim' lodged itself in her mind. Mysteriously she felt aware of the reality of the archangels Michael, Gabriel and Raphael. She was comforted by the conviction that an angel was sitting on her bed. In the days before her death she wrote letters to individual members of her family in which she expressed the quiet, certain belief that another life would follow her death - a life in which she would be aware of what was going on in the lives of those she left behind. In the words of Rossiter Raymond's poem there was no doubt in her mind that

"Life is eternal and love is immortal and death is only an horizon,
and an horizon is nothing save the limit of our sight".²⁷⁴

And just as religious images and concepts came to Lin's mind, so Ellen who had no active confessional faith was able to say a couple days before she died at the age of eighty-eight that she could hear the bells ringing and see the path where she would be going – and that the path was beautiful.

It is interesting to note that in Lin's letters there is no hint of fear of the unknown or any sense of being judged and punished for the way in which she had lived her life. There is no sense of needing to appease an unseen God who may or may not have required formal

²⁷⁴ Raymond

acknowledgement of his existence in the course of Lin's sixty-seven years. The next life in her view consisted entirely of peace, harmony and beauty and a total absence of pain. Such spirituality is not and never has been confined to the dictates of the church.

We cannot escape the realisation that Lin was clear that in her dying there is "a change but not a leaving ... a conjoined past imperishably present"²⁷⁵. She was certain that she would continue, not just to be aware of but also, to be involved in the lives of members of her family. I think she would agree with Laertes who said of his sister Ophelia that she would become "*a minist'ring angel*"²⁷⁶

I shall turn in Chapter Fourteen to a consideration of a modern understanding of angels particularly among those who would not say they belong to any Church. But for the present suffice it to say that Lin commandeered the concept of angels to express what was otherwise inexpressible – the power of love: love that survives this mortal life, love that wordlessly communicates a legacy to those left behind by a wife, a mother, a grandmother.

Lin indicated to her husband that when she died I should be asked to conduct her funeral. Nine years previously I had conducted the funeral of his niece who had died suddenly at the age of thirty-two and, more recently, the funeral of his father who had died aged ninety-two. Lin wanted a minister who would strive to make the funeral a celebration of life; one who would celebrate the bread of common humanity. Both the previous funeral services had been conducted according to the rites of the Church of England but with no separate sermon slot as I believe that the whole service and indeed the very fact that there is a priest conducting the service is testament enough to the Gospel teaching that God is involved in this time of grief, sorrow loss and relief. The most useful preaching is done by the minister simply showing up at the worst of times – at the sick bed, in the hospital in the middle of the night, at the funeral home, in the living room of the bereaved, at the crematorium, church or graveside. We cannot undo the disaster but we can do our bit to express human compassion and practical help. We walk alongside the bereaved and keep

²⁷⁵ Nicholas Evans, *Walk Within You*

²⁷⁶ Shakespeare, 1980: 903, Hamlet, Prince of Denmark: Act V Scene I

open the distinct possibility of hope. Like the friends who carry the sick man to Jesus, we can bear those paralysed by loss and grief to the threshold of new light and healing. Lin wanted a minister who would do justice to her life and her loves. She wanted the funeral service to be accessible and helpful and healing for her children and grandchildren. She knew that her life had meaning, coming at a juncture between what was and what would follow. She knew that it is in the personal biography that “we seek to make sense of our lives and live them as we may”.²⁷⁷ And she wanted her own words to be delivered at the funeral. Just as the National Health Service has come to assume that patients will take charge of their own health, the church is gradually coming to the realisation that the church cannot dictate to people how they should manage their own spiritual health but can merely provide resources for them to adopt and adapt as they see fit.

Lin was clear that her body was dying but that she herself - the essential Lin - would survive. And the Lin of the new life was a continuation of the Lin of the old life without the body formerly wracked by disease. How did Lin know this? Whence came such certainty? She attended no catechetical classes; she was not confirmed in any church. And yet she knew. Some Christian folk of an evangelical persuasion, taking an Arminian stance, would say that Lin was mistaken, misguided. They would say that, as she had never made a confessional statement of faith in the Risen Christ and his salvific death on the Cross, she should not have been certain of anything. Some would quote in support of this contention the words of Jesus as recorded in St John’s Gospel, “No one comes to the Father except through me”²⁷⁸, while I would find in the same words an assurance that what Jesus did he did for all people whether individuals make that explicit confession of faith or not. In my view, those who would tell or even intimate to Lin’s family that she will not have gained access to a heavenly eternal life are guilty of bad theology. And, as William Paul Young writes, bad theology is like pornography - transactional and propositional, rather than relational and mysterious. Such theology “dehumanizes God and turns the wonder and the messy mystery of intimate relationship into a centrefold to

²⁷⁷ Davies, 2008:18

²⁷⁸ John 14: 6 (NRSV)

be used and discarded”.²⁷⁹

Lin would have said that she was a Christian - a non-church-going Christian: attending church for christenings, weddings and funerals. She would say that she believed in God. Humankind has debated and fought and imprisoned each other over what that might mean. As Gerardus Van Der Leeuw says near the beginning of his magisterial work *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, “We must realise that “God” is frequently an extremely indefinite concept which does not coincide with what we ourselves usually understand by it”.²⁸⁰ Certainly Lin’s idea of God did not require her to join a worshipping congregation, sustained by the sacraments of the church. And yet when she died she wanted the church to be there visibly giving some context to her life and bringing comfort to those she unwillingly left behind, assuring them of a continuity of her life.

These are the words that Lin asked should be read at her funeral:

“To all my family I love you all. I love you all so very much and I am so, so proud of each and every one of you.

I would like to pass on a few words to you all today. Thank you for being here to say goodbye.

I hope my journey has already begun and is taking me to explore and understand things none of us could know about or even begin to imagine.

I believe our life on earth is not the only life we have. I believe we go on. Believing this has given me great comfort and I am not afraid.

I would just like to say also, try not to let the stresses of a busy life take you over. Remember to see the simple things around you: watch a bee on a flower; smell the roses growing in a front garden when you pass by.

There is a beautiful world out there: make the most of it and do what makes you happy.

To all my family: I love you all so very much and I am proud of each and every one of you.

I am taking your love with me and leaving you mine.”

It may be noted that all the verbs are in the present tense even though it was written with the intention of being read at the funeral. The present indicative participles are plenty. She speaks of hope and of journey. This surely is a religious statement.

²⁷⁹ Rohr, 2016:21

²⁸⁰ Van-Der-Leeuw 1986: 23

Some might say that Lin's letter differs little from a suicide note in the sense that she embraces the approaching death and she seeks to offer comfort to those left behind in that she assures them she is no longer suffering and that the love they shared is eternal. The main difference of course from a suicide note is that Lin's death is inevitable: she has not chosen to have the cancer and all medical options for staving off the death have been exhausted. But then again when we look in Chapter Ten at the suicide of a seventeen-year old boy, it may be argued that his death also was inevitable given the relentless bullying over many years and that it occurred despite the countless interventions of his parents and mental health professionals.

Lin was adamant that she wanted a minister of the church to conduct her funeral as a celebration of her life. In an age in which we are known by the National Health, the Inland Revenue, the banking system and our own computers as a series of numbers, letters and sundry characters, a minister who will treat each funeral as a unique occasion reflecting the personality of the deceased, is highly prized by many in our society. In an age when a 'strong' password is one which bears no relation to those seeking access to their own data, the use of a deceased person's nickname is refreshing and life-affirming. Person-focused funerals are a very far cry from the relatively short, traditional Prayer Book funeral in which the name of the deceased is hardly mentioned in favour of the general "this our brother/this our sister". As Douglas Davies writes, "the traditional Christian emphasis upon sin, divine mercy and an afterlife in heaven tended to devalue earthly life, probably on the basis that it had been the arena of sin rather than a sphere of pleasure. Forgiveness for the past rather than thanks for its enjoyment took ritual precedence".²⁸¹ The Christian Church was seen to devalue the importance of this life in favour of the next and eternal life. But Lin, along with hundreds of thousands of people currently living and dying, sought for herself and her loved ones a celebration of her life, however imperfectly lived. And she sought an acknowledgment by an officer of the church that the life now ended here continues elsewhere - not just in the hearts of those left behind but in a separate existence where memory and love have an unbroken continuity. Similarly Jenna could send a text when her grandmother died a little more than a year after Jenna's Mum, "Nanny

²⁸¹ Davies, 2002:226

passed away in the early hours. She's with her husband and daughter now". No 'if', no 'but', no 'maybe'. Jenna is certain that this is so.

In the same way, addressing her mother directly, Debbie could say in her tribute to her mother, "I'm trying to take comfort in knowing that you are now with Daddy and he will look after you as he's always done".²⁸² The only doubt here is in the possibility of comfort for the survivor. Debbie is certain that her mother and father are back together. And Terri, standing resplendently in her police officer's uniform could stand by the coffin of her beloved grandfather and say, "Although we can no longer hear your voice, or see your smiling face, we know deep down in our hearts that you are still around". Terri is confident that she will be aware of his presence in nature: "Every day you will surround us, with the singing of the birds, the rising of the sun and the falling of the stars". Finally she says, "You have done all you could down here Grandad, we are proud to set you free".

²⁸³

Lin, Ellen, Jenna, Debbie and Terri belonged to no church congregation. They would say, with Dostoevsky's atheist Ivan, "Some human deeds are dear to me, which one has perhaps long ceased believing in, but still honours with one's heart, out of old habit ... Such things you love not with your mind, not with logic, but with your insides, your guts".²⁸⁴ The cancers that claimed Lin along with Jenna's mother and grandmother, Debbie's mother and Terri's grandfather, and Ellen herself, cannot be explained or understood in the context of an eternal, all powerful God as seen in the life of Jesus the Christ; but Lin, Jenna, Debbie and Terri focus simply on the love as found in the relationships each had. They discern from that experience that love and, therefore, life is eternal. Theological truths they will leave for others to discuss. Each of them would say that, despite the existence of cancer, this is a beautiful world and the lives now lost and mourned were worthwhile, valued and valuable. These lives enabled and inspired other lives. And what knits together the lives past and present is simply love. Each of these families turned to

²⁸² From the eulogy delivered on the day

²⁸³ S. B's funeral

²⁸⁴ Dostoevsky, 1990:230

the church for the funeral rites because they perceived that the church speaks of enduring faith, hope and love: the greatest of which is love. In short they would agree with not only Ivan but the Elder Zosima who enjoins, “The more you succeed in loving the more you will be convinced of the existence of God and the immortality of your soul”.²⁸⁵ As David McPherson says in his essay *Transfiguring Love*, “The religious path here is not just faith seeking understanding but also love seeking understanding, where such love helps to transfigure the world for us such that we can come to see the world in religious terms, i.e. where the sacred or reverence-worthy character of the world comes into view.”²⁸⁶

The Church of England in Canvey Island supports Lin’s view that she had no need to be afraid. In their relationship with the dying and the bereaved, ministers mediate continuity and a sense of wholeness. At the time of grief and loss the minister’s business is not about preaching or encouraging people to come to church but, rather, the modelling of compassion and pastoral care which speaks more eloquently of the love of God for everyone. This often leads to a desire for the bereaved to come to church and be part of the fellowship offered there. But that is not, and should not be, the reason for a minister’s pastoral care. The minister stands at the boundary between the ordinary and the holy. In their very presence, ministers bear witness to the otherness of eternal life even in the mundane and the painful. The encounter between minister and the dying and the bereaved may well help all those involved to appreciate, perhaps for the first time in their lives, the reality of God in their lives. Bridging the gap and sanctifying the halting or confident words and rituals of those who do not obviously belong to a gathered congregation is the ongoing task of the church in Canvey Island and everywhere else in the 21st century.

No Fear of Damnation

Lin, Jenna, Debbie and Terri are bereaved people of their time and their community. The people of Essex in the 21st century are more free than they have ever been to work out their own understanding of life, death and, if any, eternal life. What seems to have been evolved out of the equation is any sense of fear of punishment in an afterlife as a

²⁸⁵ Dostoevsky, 1990:56

²⁸⁶ Ellis, 2018:86

motivating force in the quest for the meaning of life particularly in the face of bereavement. I now look at some statistics of people's stated understanding of their relationship with God and the degree to which the absence of any sense of a threatened exile from the garden of eternal life has freed them to be honest with regard to embarking on the journey of that eternal life.

Belief in God

The Equality and Human Rights Commission produced a briefing paper showing the shift in attitudes between 1991 and 2008 with regard to how people verbalized their view of their belief in God.

	1991	1998	2008
Believe and always have	45.8	47.6	36.7
Believe, didn't before	5.9	4.2	5.1
Not believe, did before	12.1	11.6	15.2
Not believe, never have	11.6	13.2	19.9
Can't choose	22.7	21.7	21.7
Not answered	1.8	1.7	1.5
Total (%)	100	100	100
Base	1222	815	1975

Figure 8:1 Belief in God, Great Britain, 1991, 1998 and 2008 (percent) ²⁸⁷

Davie's research suggests that although more people have some sort of belief in some sort of God, there is a shift from belief in a personal God towards a less specific formulation. ²⁸⁸ Such people have no daily or weekly link with their local church while at home, but when on holiday will be disappointed if the cute local church is locked or the great cathedral has no facility to light a candle or write a prayer. And such people will not hesitate to gather in a church to mark a tragedy in their community. Davie suggests that

²⁸⁷ Created by David Perfect. (www.equalityhumanrights.com/publication/briefing-paper-1-religion-or-belief)

²⁸⁸ Davie, 2015:74

the important point to grasp here is that in all such activity there is an *experiential* element.²⁸⁹ Some would say that such experience may not be labelled Christian but the bereaved of Canvey Island, whose words and actions are quoted in this thesis, are clear that they belong in the great heritage of Christian experience.

In 2017 over 2,000 people were surveyed by ComRes for BBC Religion and Ethics. 43% said that they believed in the resurrection of Christ. Of the remainder who said they did not believe in the resurrection, 23% described themselves as Christian. Christians made up 51% of the total sample. 32% of these Christians described themselves as “active” (attending a church at least once a month) and 37% never went to Church except for baptisms, weddings and funerals.²⁹⁰ So, according to this survey, it is possible to consider oneself a Christian without being part of a worshipping community or believing in the resurrection of Christ.

My experience of the people of 21st century Canvey Island is that they are anxious that at the end of their life they are not lost in the anonymity of the words of the old funeral service’s “this our brother”. The deceased have a name; they passed this way; their life had an impact on a small or large circle of people. At the same time, any belief in a personal, judgmental God seems to have faded. We are not as easily cowed into subservience by fear of the prospect of hell. Perhaps, as we recognize the imperfections in this life and in the lives of those around us and are able to forgive them, so we expect nothing less from whatever creative force brought our loved one and the world into being in the first place. The writers of the Book of Genesis knew that people are engaged in a search for meaning. We are always seeking to bring order out of chaos – to bring some discipline to the “without form and void” into which the writer of Genesis tells us the Word of God spoke. God commanded that there should be light, and there was light. Throughout the stages of bereavement, the one in the grip of grief searches for light and the minister is well placed to bring a sense of reflected light into the home and the life of the bereaved.

²⁸⁹ Davie, 2015:8 Italics hers

²⁹⁰ Prepared by ComRes Global

So I find that for many people in 21st century Canvey Island there has been a clear shift away from a view of God as being judgmental and unforgiving to a view of God, if he exists at all, as brilliant, forgiving all-cleansing light. Either we are all God's forgiven children or none of us are. In Chapter Seven we saw that until very recently a full funeral service in Church was officially withheld from those who had died by suicide or who had died unbaptized. Now most would side with the words concerning the man who, in life was regarded as not virtuous at all and who died having been thrown from his horse:

“My friend, judge not me, as thou seest I judge not thee: betwixt the stirrup and the ground, mercy I asked and mercy found.”²⁹¹

This search for an understanding of the nature of this life, the next life and the place of judgement is as old as the consciousness of humanity. Although contemporary Essex people are separated by some four thousand years from the Epic of Gilgamesh, they would recognize that author's view of the priorities of life:

Let your stomach be full
Always be happy, night and day,
Make every day a delight,
Night and day, play and dance.
Your clothes should be clean,
Your head should be washed,
You should bathe in water.
Look proudly on the little one holding your hand,
Let your mate be always blissful in your loins. ²⁹²

As Stephen Greenblatt says, this is the wisdom of the everyday: know your limits, savour ordinary life. Siduri concludes: “This is the work of mankind”. ²⁹³

It is important for the church to realise just how far the people of Canvey Island have come in terms of the traditional Christian teaching about heaven and hell. Essex people have grown up with the distant half-remembered echo of the Judeo-Christian narrative of creation. I suspect that the Hebrew people encountered this epic tale in their exile in

²⁹¹ Camden 1975

²⁹² The Epic of Gilgamesh, 10: 82-90

²⁹³ The Epic of Gilgamesh, 10: 90

Babylon. They encountered it and wrote their own version in which the garden rather than the city is the place of paradise. The human created in Genesis is one made in the image of God. He was formed *ex nihilo*. God breathed life into inert clay (adama) to form man (adam).

The authors of Genesis conclude that a man and a woman “cleave” to each other. Indeed they will leave their parents (although Adam and Eve had no parents to leave) to accomplish this cleaving.²⁹⁴ In re-writing the story of Gilgamesh and Enkidu to become the story of Adam and Eve, the authors of Genesis change it fundamentally. The Temple prostitute tells Enkidu that he has become like a god. This is triumphant good news. But in Genesis, after Adam and Eve have tasted the forbidden fruit, it is the very fact that they are evolving to become “like us (gods)” that becomes the ticket for their expulsion from “paradise” (Old Persian for a walled garden) and the loss of eternal life.

In the Wisdom of Solomon, probably written in the 1st century CE, we read,

God created us for incorruption
And made us in the image of his own eternity,
But through the devil’s envy, death entered the world.²⁹⁵

John Barton suggests that Wisdom’s account of the way in which sin entered the world through the disobedience of Adam perhaps underlies Paul’s argument in Romans 5 which became the Church’s scriptural basis for the later doctrine of original sin, whereas Judaism never developed a doctrine of original sin from Genesis Chapter Three.²⁹⁶

And it is this teaching of the concept of original sin and the attendant fear of eternal damnation that the church has used, I suggest, over the centuries to keep people in church; to control who may be buried in consecrated ground and who may not; who may get married to whom; who is entitled to the salvific sacraments of the church and who is not. But 21st century Essex people, as I have said, are generally no longer cowed into belonging

²⁹⁴ Genesis 2:24

²⁹⁵ Wisdom of Solomon 2:23-24 (NRSV)

²⁹⁶ Barton, 2019: 227

through fear. They require that the minister, civil or ecclesiastical, speaks of death as ongoing life unencumbered by illness, frailty, anxiety and hurt. They know instinctively that creator God forgives and has better things to be doing than punishing temporal transgressions with eternal damnation. The Genesis story of the naked couple who feel shame, the talking snake and the forbidden fruit finds little purchase in modern lives expanded by a world view as seen through the World Wide Web and the internet of everything.

Bernice Martin suggests that Philip Pullman's trilogy makes use of Christian sources to give modern stories a structure and a framework of morality".²⁹⁷ His *Amber Spyglass*, a re-evaluation of the Adam and Eve story, won the Whitbread Award in 2007. Pullman said of his character, Lyra, that her sexual awakening "is exactly what happens in the Garden of Eden ... why the Christian Church has spent 2,000 years condemning this glorious moment, well, that's a mystery. I want to confront that I suppose by telling a story that this so-called original sin is anything but. It's the thing that makes us truly human."²⁹⁸ Contemporary Essex people have come a long way from seeing themselves as what the Book of Common Prayer would have them believe they are – miserable sinners. In Chapter Fourteen we shall see how a passage from Pullman's book has been used to good effect in helping the bereaved to process their grief.

Every day at funerals in churches and crematoria across the country, countless people who have had little or no contact with the church write tributes for those who have died. These tributes speak of death as a rest, another dimension in which the one gone can continue to love those who remain behind. The tributes speak of the hope of being reunited. As Tony Walter avers, "the hope of an afterlife was not union with God but reunion with the beloved – still the major form of afterlife belief in Britain today".²⁹⁹ There is absolutely no suggestion that they or the one gone should be afraid of eternal damnation because of sins of commission or omission in the course of the life now ended. So Charlie could say

²⁹⁷ Martin, 2007

²⁹⁸ Pullman, 2007

²⁹⁹ Walter, 1994:15

in his tribute to his grandfather:

“As much as it hurts us all, I’m glad you are finally at rest now and at peace. I hope one day we can meet again, but until then I will look after Nan and the rest of the family for you as you always did.”³⁰⁰

And Courtney could say to her grandmother:

“God needs you now. He saw that you were tired and decided it was time that you needed to rest, so he made you one of his angels. So, angel, I hope you are enjoying paradise, bouncing and dancing on the clouds above. I know you are looking down on us and watching over us, guiding our way, being our guardian angel. We all love and miss you, but when the time comes, we will see you again. Until then rest in peace angel.”³⁰¹

Georgia, a teenager, asked that she might be allowed to sing at her Grandad’s funeral. She wanted to sing the song, *Dancing in the Sky*.³⁰² Georgia’s version of the song was recorded and this is what the mourners heard her sing at the funeral:

Tell me, what does it look like in heaven?
Is it peaceful? Is it free like they say?
Does the sun shine bright forever?
Have your fears and your pain gone away?
Cause here on earth it feels like everything good is missing since you left
And here on earth everything’s different, there’s an emptiness.
I hope you’re dancing in the sky
And I hope you’re singing in the angels’ choir
And I hope the angels know what they have
I’ll bet it’s so nice up in heaven since you’ve arrived....

Georgia agreed to sing the song live at the parish carol service that Christmas and again the following year at one of the bereavement services. The utter stillness of the congregation was testament to the degree to which the lyrics touched the experience of the bereaved.

Neither Charlie, nor Courtney nor Georgia have had any experience of the life of a church congregation on a Sunday. Their only contact with religion has been the occasional school

³⁰⁰ R. S’s funeral

³⁰¹ P. F’s funeral

³⁰² Dani and Lizzy 2016

assembly and attendance from time to time at a christening, wedding or funeral. But what they clearly perceive of God is of one who gives rest to the weary and keeps loved ones safe in a paradise where others will eventually join them. There is not a God to be feared or appeased but, rather, a God of love whose love is reflected in the love of a child for a grandparent. Of course, there is a strand of Christian teaching that would insist that such a view of God is quite simply wrong and that we cannot take an eternal life of bliss for granted if we have not accepted Jesus Christ as a personal saviour. Crematorium services also feature this view put across by a number of church ministers who see a gathered congregation as a golden opportunity to preach their understanding of the gospel. Whether this pushes members of such congregations further away from the church or makes them hungry to join, is a matter to be discussed at another time.

Meanwhile we may say that Lin, Ellen, Jenna, Debbie and Terri along with Charlie, Courtney and Georgia have little truck with the concept of an angry God seeking to punish eternally those who have allegedly transgressed the laws of paradise, the enclosed garden. Rather, their experience of love and loss has propelled them to construct the narrative of a God who heals and who loves unconditionally. Now that a physical life has ended those left behind need to work out what ongoing bonds there may be as they continue to live without the one who has until now always been there. So I turn now to a consideration of how final this separation at death is perceived to be.

CHAPTER NINE

Too final

This chapter asks the question with regard to exactly how final contemporary people are willing to make the leave-taking of one who has died. A review of a wide cross-section of examples gives a sense of just how varied is the response of people in Essex and elsewhere to the fact of the death of a loved one. We shall see that in most of the cases the church is currently absent or, at best, an optional extra.

In recent years most people in Essex have had to make do with invisible cremations which take place out of sight. The equivalent of burial has become a curtain drawn across the front of the crematorium chapel. Hindus and Sikhs still insist on going behind the scenes to witness the actual cremation. Some city crematoria have provided viewing rooms specifically for such families and friends to be able to see the charging of the cremator without trespassing upon modern Health and Safety strictures with regard to allowing the public access near the machinery of cremation. Many feel that the funeral is not over until they have buried the ashes. Traditionally, people in the Caribbean will not leave the graveside until the grave is back-filled with soil. There the hard work of shouldering a casket and shovelling in soil and stone and rock are essential components in going the distance with the dead.

My first experience of a busy English crematorium was shocking. Seeing ministers disposing of an entire funeral service in a matter of 17 minutes and being aware that the next hearse and limousines were queuing on the crematorium driveway was a world away from the leisured several-hour-long community funerals I grew up with in Barbados. I soon saw that the challenge for the contemporary funeral minister is to make each funeral feel unique and of appropriate length within the strict parameters of the crematorium and funeral director's diary.

It is interesting to see that many people in Essex and elsewhere ask that the curtain be left open at the end of a service of cremation. Indeed the question of whether to close or not

to close the curtains is now a standard question asked of the bereaved family when they go to the funeral director to choose the coffin and plan the logistics of the funeral. The ostensible reason for the curtain remaining open is to enable the family and friends to place a flower on the coffin as they leave the chapel. But when pressed, most mourners would admit that for them the curtain is just too final. In *Hamlet*, Ophelia dreads the moment of her father's burial, "To think they should lay him in the cold ground".³⁰³ If the loved one is not buried/taken from sight by a curtain or other means, then in some sense the loved one is not dead. The Toraja of Indonesia, mentioned earlier, do not consider the deceased to be dead until the burial. They are simply unwell or merely asleep. They are still present and treated as though they were a living person. The back rooms of funeral directors in Britain are filled with uncollected ashes. Perhaps by not collecting the ashes and burying them, the reality of death has at least been mitigated if not cancelled. In 1999, one local funeral director, having tried without success to contact the next of kin, discreetly scattered thirty-five sets of ashes in the local churchyard. These were ashes which families had failed to collect over a period of ten years or more.

I observed one funeral in Michigan, USA in August 2017. The splendid casket was placed on top of the grave. The service was conducted around the graveside. It was only after the mourners had all left the cemetery that an employee of the cemetery lowered the coffin into the grave. It occurred to me that if the deceased was not actually seen to be buried, then, for those who loved him, in some sense, he was not dead.

The funeral makes the death real. In many cultures an absence is treated as a death. In Barbados, on seeing a friend for the first time in a long time, one might exclaim, "Are you still living?". Van Der Leeuw speaks of a Talmudic prayer of thanksgiving which one may utter after seeing someone for the first time in over twelve months:

"Praised be thou, O Lord, King of the world, that makest the dead live again".³⁰⁴ It can hardly be a coincidence that the Jewish Jesus puts into the mouth of the father of the prodigal son the words, "This my son was dead and is now alive". The father then instructs

³⁰³ Shakespeare, 1980: 897, *Hamlet*, Prince of Denmark Act IV: Scene V

³⁰⁴ Van Der Leeuw, 1986:201

the servants to kill the fatted calf and launch a party.³⁰⁵ Van Der Leeuw asserts, “Only proper burial makes death valid, he who has not been buried is not dead”.³⁰⁶ In one sense the funerals of celebrities in our own day are intensely public. But generally speaking the public is not invited to the committal of a celebrity’s body. The cameras are allowed in for the service but the burial or the cremation is not for public gaze. In Chapter Ten we shall look at the death and funeral of one who killed himself when he was seventeen. The funeral was attended by some six hundred people but the committal following the funeral was attended only by the young man’s immediate family who were then joined back at their home by several hundred of those who attended the funeral. The gates closed on the estate of the brother of Diana, Princess of Wales, as the hearse carried her body in for her burial. The cameras and the world were left outside. In his poem ‘Local Heroes’, Tom Lynch says, “like politics, all funerals are local”.³⁰⁷

One exception to the general practice of expecting and allowing burials to be private occurred in June 2020 when the family of Alexander Kareem invited the BBC to film the lowering of his coffin into the ground attended by inconsolable relatives. Alex, a black man aged twenty, had been killed in a drive-by shooting. The police concluded it was a case of mistaken identity. Alex’s family wanted the world to see the actual effect on families and communities of gang warfare and the apparently casual snuffing out of young lives on the streets of our cities. They were keen that Alex did not just become a statistic but that he should be seen as a beloved human being in the context of grief-stricken family and friends.

In the case of celebrities, as the burial has not been witnessed, there is a sense in which, at least in the minds of the adoring public, the footballer or entertainer lives on in his prowess on the football field or his quick one-liners. The policeman killed in broad daylight lives on in the hundreds of pictures of a smiling husband and father doing his duty at the Palace of Westminster. Modern technology has made possible a televised

³⁰⁵ Luke 15:24 (NRSV)

³⁰⁶ Van Der Leeuw, 1986:202

³⁰⁷ Long and Lynch, 2013:29

Audience with Les Dawson performed by a hologram of the comedian several years after he died.³⁰⁸ At the end of the show the audience gave the hologram – or, rather, the person it represented – a standing ovation.

In a newspaper article published three days before the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, Afua Hirsch calls the process of making a local event out of a global one “glocalisation”. She adds, “the process of globalization and technological change have been met with an accompanying pressure towards the local, the perceived urgency of preserving narrower identities and customs. Identities are not becoming borderless, they are hunkering down. Globalization is not an identity: The House of Windsor is”.³⁰⁹ The music, pageantry and language of the grand event is simply the local writ large. The big screen gives a context to the more mundane and simple gatherings of ordinary people. As communities fragment and ancient villages get subsumed by modern housing estates, traditions become more, not less, important. As first-hand knowledge of grandparents and great grandparents becomes increasingly hard to come by, so national traditions are perfect as a reality into which individuals can plug to give a sense of continuity to the otherwise unconnected moments of birth, marriage and death. Walter Bagehot, the Victorian journalist and essayist speaking of a princely marriage in 1867, put it succinctly when he suggested that such an event is the brilliant edition of a universal fact and, as such, rivets mankind.³¹⁰ A more contemporary phrasing of the same point is Davie’s suggestion that “the reactions to Princess Diana’s death (or any number of more recent equivalents) are simply ‘writ-large’ versions of what goes on in the everyday lives of individuals and communities all the time.”³¹¹

Solid Joy and Lasting Treasure

Canon B38.4 of the Church of England directs that ashes shall be buried by a minister in a churchyard or other burial ground or area of land designated by the bishop for the

³⁰⁸ *Les Dawson: An Audience That Never Was*, ITV, 1 June 2013, 8.30pm

³⁰⁹ Hirsch, 2018

³¹⁰ Bagehot, 1867:49

³¹¹ Davie, 2015:7

purpose or at sea. But in Essex and elsewhere people are finding ever inventive ways of tempering the finality of death as it impacts on this life. Mourners now feel free to take up the offer of craftsmen to have some of the ashes of the deceased made into a paperweight or a piece of jewellery. For between £125 and £500 a “level spoonful” of ashes can be made into glass and set into a piece of jewellery (silver, gold or white gold). In the words of one company’s advertisement, “Your Ashes into Glass jewellery will remind you that your loved one is with you: in a fleeting thought or a fond memory, a favourite song on the radio or a conversation with a friend. By wearing it or just holding it in your hand, you will connect with your loved one and share these special moments together”.³¹² In the words of one satisfied customer, “I feel so close to her when I wear it or just hold it in my hand.” As Tony Walter states succinctly, “religion has lost its authority in matters of death”.³¹³

But those who seek to make such use of ashes that have already been buried in consecrated ground have hit a brick wall in the form of the Church of England’s Faculty jurisdiction. In this arena the authority of the neo-modern self is constantly challenged.³¹⁴ In November 2019 the Consistory Court of the Diocese of Leeds ruled that modern, previously impossible, means of encapsulating ashes did not provide a valid reason to make an exception to the traditional teaching of the finality of burial. The petition for a faculty to exhume the ashes, which had been buried sixteen years previously, was refused.³¹⁵

In the same way that glass and sundry bits of jewellery containing ashes have grown in popularity in recent years, so too have memorial tattoos. Tattoo artists now advertise a service whereby a small amount of ashes of a loved one is added to the ink before the ink is placed into a needle and applied. This service is even accessed by people who have not necessarily been heavily into tattoos before. They have the tattoo done simply for the

³¹² *Ashes Into Glass* is a trademark of Barleylands Glassworks limited.

³¹³ Walter, 1994:3

³¹⁴ Walter, 1994:55

³¹⁵ Herbert, 2019

purpose of being able to include the ashes. Some opt for the design of a butterfly which, when combined with the ashes of a loved one, encapsulates their belief in the transformed nature of the beloved life and enables them to feel close to the one who has died. My six-year old self, as described in Chapter Two, would recognize the power of such symbolism.

Another company offers *Ashes into Angels*. It offers “a sacred healing service where your loved one’s ashes are lovingly encapsulated into one of our beautiful creations.” The advertising flyer suggests that the craftsmen’s desire is to “unite us all in love. Their belief is that life in all its colour is precious, and that our relationships are precious.”³¹⁶ Setting aside the fact that Canon Law of the Church of England forbids the separation of ashes, there is nothing here with which the Christian minister can argue: the church affirms that life and relationships are precious and endure through death to eternal life.

Yet another company offers to make a wedding dress into a “cherished gown” for the funeral of a child. Each donated wedding dress creates 10 cherished gowns which are donated to hospitals, parents and funeral directors completely free of charge.³¹⁷ The emotional needs of 21st century Essex people are clearly not so very different from the customs of tribes and ethnicities which seem a universe away in time and space from their own. The story of the life now ended will continue to be told. Jewellery, tattoo, angel figure, wedding dress and glass can be pressed into service as props to illustrate the narrative. As the image is seen, new conversations may begin.

Such companies are clearly gearing up for a boom in the sheer number of funerals that will take place over the next ten or twenty years as the baby-boomer generation dies. Ministers of the church need to be alert to this increase in opportunity to live the life we proclaim. Covid-19 has brought forward the date of thousands of such funerals.

In 2013 the Parish of Canvey Island installed a huge stained glass window at the west end of St Nicholas’ Church. Partly to make it a community project and partly to finance the

³¹⁶ *Ashes into Angels*, Isle of Wight, UK

³¹⁷ *Cherished Gowns*, UK Charity number 1172482

scheme, people were invited to sponsor a shard and have the name of a loved one etched into the glass. 1,067 names are now recorded in the Stained Glass which is called *The Tree of Life*. And, because the Church is open all day, people are free to wander in at any time and show others the name in the glass that is significant to them. Fifteen shards were left blank and a dove etched into the glass in memory of those who have passed this way but who no longer have anyone here to remember them. As sunlight shines in during the day and electric light streams out at night, so the shards are illuminated and the community is reminded of the Christian proclamation that “the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God and no torment will ever touch them”.³¹⁸

In Canvey Island volunteers have worked long and hard to enhance the look of the sea front and the sea wall which protects the island at high tide. One way in which this has been done is to offer the bereaved a bench on which a plaque is placed in memory of one who has died. The offer has been taken up by several hundred people and the benches have been installed along the 3 kms of concrete sea wall which has been painted sky blue. A number of families when varnishing the benches have mixed some ashes of the deceased with the varnish and have a real sense of the bench being the final resting place of the one who has died. The importance of the bench as a place of pilgrimage is seen when on occasion a bench is vandalised and a plaque removed. In a sense some of the original expression of grief following a death is transferred to the presence of the bench, and with its vandalism the loss is felt for the second time. The renewed grief and the outrage of the family concerned and, indeed, the whole community is visceral.

Hutchings and McKenzie assert that “The study of material religion begins with things and encounters, without expecting that their religious significance can be fully explained in verbal expressions of doctrine or symbolism”.³¹⁹ Indeed, many who have ashes preserved in glass, jewellery, tattoos or bench would say they are not religious, by which I am certain they mean that they do not find organized religion helpful. But they are certainly spiritual. By preserving ashes in solid form they are giving the memory of the

³¹⁸ Wisdom of Solomon 3:1 (NRSV)

³¹⁹ Hutchins and McKenzie, 2017:5

one gone a new body, a fresh incarnation, to contain the relationship that was fractured or lost at the moment of death. Glass, jewellery, tattoos and bench give substance to hope. They give form to lost expectations of an ongoing life. Some commentators suggest that the disposition of ashes is a secular rather than a religious matter but many relatives in Canvey Island will call on the vicar of the local Church to “say a few words” as ashes are interred, regardless of whether the ashes are being disposed of in churchyard, cemetery, private garden or are given pride of place on a table or on the mantelpiece in the living room. The minister who responds to such a request by quoting Canon B38.4 will not be troubled by that family again.

Not Ready To Be Separated

Harry was nearly nine years old when he died in August 2011. He was his mother’s only child. Back in June 2002 when his mother went for her 20 week scan it was discovered that the baby had congenital heart disease. As soon as Harry was born he was whisked away to Guy’s hospital. His mother did not meet him until he was four days old. The chances of his survival were not good. His family knew that each day might be his last. Each day seemed to bring new complications. Winter was particularly hazardous as he was prone to pneumonia and chest infections. But Harry was a fighter. He was not going to suffer from his heart condition - he was going to live with it. He underwent check-ups every three months and operations every two years. Harry’s mother brought him to the church to be Christened in August 2003 when he was ten months old. She, her partner and her family had no sense of belonging to the church.

At school Harry excelled at sports. He captained the Island Boys Under Nines football team. In Harry’s view, God created the day in order that football might be played. He fitted in; he was one of the crowd. Only when he took off his shirt did anyone know what medical procedures he had endured in his young life. Six weeks before his ninth birthday Harry underwent another operation for a pulmonary valve replacement. He suffered brain damage and died six days later. His family directed that as many of Harry’s organs as possible should be transplanted to save the lives of others.

His family asked the funeral directors to get in touch with the local vicar to conduct the funeral. When I went to their home the house was filled with three generations of Harry's relatives. They spoke of his life, his smile and his determination to wring every ounce of life out of the time he had. They then spent an hour or two in the kitchen having a serious discussion about the meaning of life and the nature of death.

At the funeral they asked that the curtains be left open to allow those who wanted to leave to be able to do so and then the curtains could be closed for those who wanted to stay. Some were prepared for the finality, some were not. I shall return to the ongoing relationship of Harry's family with the church in Chapter Twelve.

As I write this I receive a call from the father of a 17 year old who killed himself some days ago. The interim death certificate has just arrived and dad is dreading how his wife will cope seeing the document which will bring home the fact that her son is not perhaps away on a school trip. He is dead.

Lin's family chose not to see her body after she died. They wanted to "remember her as she was". And, to be fair, that is how she wanted to be remembered - stylish, beautiful, graceful, chic. She did not want her family's last memory of her as being cold, pale and lifeless. Her letters take care to paint a picture of her as being as she was before the adrenal cancer took hold. In the words of the frequently requested (equally loved and detested) extract from the sermon of Henry Scott Holland delivered in St Paul's Cathedral in May 1910 following the death of Edward VII,

"Death is nothing at all. I have only slipped away into the next room. I am I, you are you. whatever we were to each other that we still are...there is unbroken continuity".

In his sermon, entitled *Death the King of Terrors*, Scott Holland explored man's contradictory response to death: the fear of what is unknown coupled with the certainty or at least the hope that life continues. Lin did not dwell on the fear but rather on the continuity.

Incidentally, it seems to me that the Scott Holland passage is detested because the words

have been lifted out of the context of the whole sermon. The words as printed on shiny cards sent by well-meaning relatives and friends can seem to belittle the actuality of grief. The sermon opens with these unflinching words about death: “It is the supreme and irrevocable disaster. It is the impossible, the incredible thing. Nothing leads up to it, nothing prepares for it. It simply traverses every line on which life runs, cutting across every hope on which life feeds, and every intention which gives life significance. It makes all we do here meaningless and empty”. Now that is what the widower and the widow feel. That is what the parents sitting by the coffin of their child can assent to. But these are not words deemed appropriate for a shiny gift card. The voice of the one saying “Death is nothing at all: I have only slipped away into the next room”, cannot be heard in those early days of bereavement. The minister’s job is to balance and honour the reality of present grief with the hope of future acceptance of the continuity and eternity of life.

The long wait

In contemporary Essex society funerals may follow two, three or even four weeks after the death. This may be due to Coroner backlog, pandemic, extremely inclement weather occasioning many deaths at the same time, or a wait for a relative to come from overseas. In this period relatives live with a sense of unreality that the dreadful thing has happened. Milton captures this so well when he writes in a sonnet about the death of his wife,

“But oh! as to embrace me she inclined,
I wak’d, she fled, and day brought back my night.”³²⁰

During the long wait for the funeral the mourners exist in an unnatural normality. Then the funeral comes and, enduring a real-life version of snakes and ladders, they are returned near to square one as though the death has only just occurred. In the days and months of national and international lockdown occasioned by the pandemic of 2020/21 even this leave-taking was denied to those who grieved as wider family and friends were excluded from the gathering for a funeral. And those who expected the open coffin as per their tradition were disappointed to find that the coffin was closed in order to prevent people gathering around it and frustrating the social-distancing requirements. For such people

³²⁰ Milton, 1979

the long wait was extended indefinitely or at least until a memorial service could be organised. Watching the funeral via a webcast did not quite fill the need for shared grief.

Van der Leeuw writes effectively and humorously about how the traditional mourning period grew out of cultures extending the mourning period and delaying the burial because, if the rival chief has not been buried, he cannot return. The mourning period gives the community an opportunity to assess what power has been lost by the death of the Chief and how the society might re-organise itself for the future. The wake (which we now call the reception) after the funeral would frequently be (and often still is) an affair marked by the intake of vast quantities of alcohol and merry making. Life has been assisted “over a critical situation in safety.”³²¹

Funeral reflecting on-going life

Peter died at the age of eighty-five and his funeral was held in the local Church and the committal at the crematorium on 30th December 2016. Peter had joined the church congregation six years previously after his wife died. For many years Peter and his late wife had arranged huge New Year’s Eve fancy dress parties. His favourite song at these gatherings was D.J. Otzi’s *Hey Baby*.³²² I agreed to the unusual suggestion that this song could be played at the Committal. The next evening – the day after the funeral – some 50 members of Peter’s family and friends attended the church’s New Year’s Eve party. When the song was played in Peter’s memory, every single one of the family and friends got up and danced. It was a wonderfully poignant, joyful moment of celebration and release. Clearly life had been assisted “over a critical situation in safety”.³²³ As Davies writes, “It has been the genius of the human animal to turn a biological state of grief, with all its negative consequences, into a positive status of one who has survived to tell the tale.”³²⁴ Peter’s family owed their very existence to him and were able to mark the grief and celebrate the life in the twin activity of funeral and New Year party just 30 hours apart.

³²¹ Van Der Leeuw, 1986:203

³²² Otzi, 2000

³²³ Van Der Leeuw, 1986:203

³²⁴ Davies, 2002:45

The family and friends were again present at the New Year Party the following year. They asked the DJ to play *Hey Baby* and again they got up and danced in memory and in tribute. A ritual of remembrance had been established.

Believing and belonging

Although Peter had belonged to the worshipping congregation of the church, none of his family would consider themselves (in a phrase that makes me shudder) “Church-goers”. They, along with millions of others in our society, would see themselves in Grace Davie’s telling phrase as cheerfully “believing without belonging”.³²⁵ And if one were to examine exactly what it is that they believe, one would struggle to reconcile their belief to any shade of classical orthodoxy within the Church of England. Davie concedes that “the content of belief is drifting further and further from the Christian norm”.³²⁶ The difficulty is in defining what that “Christian norm” ever was. The concept of ‘believing without belonging’ was devised in an attempt to explain and describe the persistence of the sacred in contemporary society despite the undeniable decline in churchgoing.”³²⁷

Peter’s family, like many, are content to operate with a private faith which plugs in from time to time to the more public manifestation of religious practice. They want, and are comforted by, the presence of the church. They will ask a member of the congregation to pray for them when someone is ill or in trouble. They will not think twice about having babies baptized. They will expect that they can be married in church and it would never have crossed their minds not to have the local vicar conduct the funeral of any family member. Church of England figures for 2009 confirm that 43% of adults attended a church or place of worship for a memorial service for someone who had died.³²⁸ And, as Davie points out, such families would be deeply offended if their requests were met with rejection. A refusal to offer either a funeral service or appropriate pastoral care to the family or community in question would violate deeply held assumptions.³²⁹ Such

³²⁵ Davie, 1994: subtitle

³²⁶ As quoted in the Observer 9 November 1997

³²⁷ Davie, 1994:94

³²⁸ Church of England Research and Statistics, 2009; 8

³²⁹ Davie, 2015:82

assumptions see the church as “a cluster of institutions which exist to make provision for a population living in a designated place, local or national, and which is found wanting if it fails to deliver”.³³⁰ So, perhaps, rather than saying with Davie that Peter’s family believe without belonging, it is more accurate to say that they belong but their sense of belonging does not require participation in the Eucharistic sacrament of the Church. Percy finds Davie’s paradigm “*not* quite right”. He prefers to “describe the contours of English belief and its connection to institutions and associations as a matter of ‘relating and mutating’”.³³¹ He affirms that very few people choose to have absolutely no relationship with a religious body of belief or institution. Social and religious memory are transformed through new insights and experiences.

Davie herself developed misgivings as the phrase “believing without belonging” was taken up by a wide range of scholars, as it tended to separate one kind of religiousness (belief) from another (belonging) For such a relationship Davie’s thinking evolved to include the term “vicarious religion”.³³² This term suggested that an active minority perform religious activity on behalf of a much larger number.³³³ While this may be true when someone sends a message to one involved in the daily life of the church asking for prayer for a particular situation, it is not the whole story of the majority of bereaved who adopt and evolve their own ritual, with and without the church, in the time of bereavement.

It is this widespread practice of belonging without regular communal worship and recitation of a common creed with which the modern minister must come to terms. Thanks to the internet, one can now belong to any bank, any society of persons interested in similar things, any group of like-minded people without ever actually meeting them. We have seen that online ‘attendance’ at the acts of worship offered by Cathedrals and Parish Churches shot up during the Covid-19 lockdown of 2020/21. While it is true that the report *British Ritual Innovation Under Covid-19* by the University of Chester and

³³⁰ Davie, 2015:82

³³¹ Percy, 2010:52 Italics his

³³² Davie, 2015:5

³³³ Davie, 2015:6

Manchester Metropolitan University ³³⁴ found that “by almost every metric, the experience of pandemic rituals have been worse than those that came before them”, counting only those who come to church at prescribed days at certain times is to limit the reality of faith in a transcendent being: a belief which is held and valued by millions. The lack of shared conversation and physical mutual support may make the final leave-taking inordinately difficult and simply “too final”. But that is not to dismiss the underlying belief in the sanctity of this life and the probability of eternal life, the description of which we are lacking the words to capture.

The minister is well placed to help the bereaved begin or at least advance the conversation about loss and grief and the reality of a new kind of life without the one who has gone. The minister and others from the church community, in the days, months, weeks and years after the funeral, can help the bereaved into the richness of a life still to be lived, albeit without the companionship of the one who has died. The widow is still a widow, but she can be helped to change the way she sees her widowhood from perhaps dwelling on the loss to focussing on the blessing of the years that were shared and the reality of the person she has become through the years and the adventures of the time spent with her friend, her partner, her fiancé, her husband.

Mum is in the cupboard

We have seen how people’s relationship with the ashes of the one who has died vary enormously – from never collecting the ashes from the funeral directors, to making jewellery, glass ornaments or tattoos out of them. Many people keep the container of ashes at home with no intention of ever parting with them. Some keep them with a view to waiting until the partner has died and then it can be decided what to do with both sets of ashes. Some bury them or scatter them in the garden which was a favourite place of the one who has died. This causes problems if the surviving partner needs to move house because of ill health or is faced with the simple need to downsize. Some people place ashes in a planter in the garden. The planter can be relocated if the partner needs to move

³³⁴ Edelman, 2021

in the future. Some keep the ashes in pride of place on the mantelpiece or by a photo on a table often with a candle nearby. Sometimes when the room is redecorated and the initial grief has worn off somewhat, the ashes get consigned to the bottom of the wardrobe. So much time has passed since the initial grief it is hard for the family to summon the energy and focus to arrange a permanent disposition of the ashes. The practice of retaining ashes for private disposal has gained popularity in the last 50 years.³³⁵ Genealogists of the future will easily access dates of birth, marriage and death but will be hard put to find the place of final disposition of the body in the form of ashes as families adopt ever more exotic ways of remembering in the short term. Having a grave for mourners to visit is still important to many, particularly on significant days in the on-going life of the family. So Michelle went to her Dad's grave on her wedding day; Hannah took her flowers to her Mum's grave after her wedding; and Ken on his wedding day had a chair decorated with flowers reserved for his brother who had died eighteen years previously.

Even when ashes are to be buried permanently in a cemetery or churchyard, funeral directors now advertise a mini urn which matches the larger urn in which the majority of ashes are to be interred. A small amount of ashes is placed in the mini urn which is kept as a souvenir – a tangible presence-cum-reminder of the one who has gone. This practice of course raises another set of issues with regard to the final destination of such an urn when the one who commissioned it has died. One can only wonder how many shops and stalls dealing in second-hand bric-a-brac are actually offering for sale decorative urns, ornaments of glass and jewellery that contain the ashes of the deceased unbeknownst to vendor or purchaser.

Where a husband or wife is estranged from the family of the one who has died, the family may never be able to see the ashes or know where the final place of disposition was. Faced with this situation, Anita's family paid for a bench to be placed in the Rose Garden of the parish church. And it is to this bench that they come to mark significant days in her life, illness and death. It is to this bench that they bring their flowers. It is on this bench that they find it comforting to sit and remember.

³³⁵ Davies, D J and Guest, M, 1999

A few members of the congregation of the parish church have opted to have their ashes buried in the Rose Garden in the grounds of the church. They entrust their physical remains to the care and the physical place of gathering of those whom they call their “Church Family”.

Davies and Rumble argue that when ashes are retained, the ashes come to represent the deceased in an idealized form. Now that the body had been disposed of, “the ashes were set free to symbolize whatever the survivors wanted to symbolize about the dead person”.³³⁶ The portability of ashes has enabled a relationship that was not possible with the disposal of a body in a churchyard or cemetery. The place chosen for the disposition of the ashes says a great deal about the identity of the deceased – whether real or imagined or re-imagined. Mum may be in the cupboard, but she is in the cupboard in the home where her children were born, where she raised her family, from where she set them free to live their own lives and where she died. The matriarch is still in residence.

Some families divide the ashes between family members or between favourite places – abroad and at home. Ecclesiastical law has no truck with such practices. Canon B 38.4(b), referred to above, simply states that “The ashes of a cremated body should be reverently disposed of by a minister in a churchyard or other burial ground in accordance with Section 3 of the Church of England (Miscellaneous Provisions) Measure 1992 or on an area of land designated by the bishop for the purpose.” But the divorced parents of Maddie did not trouble themselves with Canon Law when she died at the age of 14. Her ashes were divided equally between her divorced parents.

The last thing Jack felt he could do for his grandmother was to accompany his grandfather to dispose of her ashes in their favourite holiday place in Mauritius where they had spent many happy times in the forty-five years of their marriage.³³⁷ Jack’s grandfather, like C.S.Lewis, did not see bereavement as “the truncation of married love, but one of its

³³⁶ Davies, D J and Rumble H, 2012:9

³³⁷ Ashes of J & T. K

regular phases – like the honeymoon. What we want is to live our marriage well and faithfully through that phase too.³³⁸

Neither Maddie’s family nor Jack’s family perceived of the afterlife as a place of judgement, purgatory or hell. The grave was not seen as an essential temporary resting place until the archangel should blow his trumpet. Both families were clear that the love and beauty shown in this life guaranteed a life of eternal bliss unencumbered by a body riven with cancer. The ashes would not be needed in any bodily resurrection and so could be kept and scattered as mere, but much valued, souvenirs of a life loved. Neither family could control the inexorable progress of the cancers, but they could control what happened to the ashes – the final tangible, physical sign of a life that mattered. Parents may fall out of love with each other but the love each had for their dead child endures.

Jack and his grandfather made one more trip to Mauritius before the grandfather himself succumbed to cancer eighteen months later. At the time of writing Jack has one more journey to make – to take the ashes of Grandad to Mauritius, convinced that that is where Nan and Grandad will spend eternity together.

Similarly Gary, speaking at the funeral of his father aged ninety-three, some seven years after the funeral of his mother, imagined his Dad saying to his beloved wife whom he had known since they were both fourteen years old:

“No-one could truly be mourning,
If they just knew how grateful I am,
I’m with you and it’s like a summer’s morning,
Joined forever, woman and man”³³⁹

Two weeks later Gary asked me to be present to say a prayer as his father’s ashes were interred with those of his mother in the grounds of the crematorium.

³³⁸ Lewis, 1961:65

³³⁹ J. and J.B

No longer can the church command people's actions with regard to the final disposition of bodies and ashes. Now we must simply respond to the wishes of our parishioners within the Health and Safety laws of the land. We must support and bless the degree of finality which each mourner can bear in honouring the remains of the one now gone. In an age of populism with each person wishing to take (back) control of every aspect of their lives, the church has a good opportunity to respond sensitively, enabling people to mourn appropriately and healthily in the days, weeks, months and years following a bereavement. We do this with the still generally respected inherited authority of the ages. But each of us in our generation must earn that respect afresh when it comes to our response to the needs of people in times of joy or sorrow, alienation or reconciliation. Thus Vicki felt moved to write,

“Thank you for being so pivotal in our family's life this year. For all the help and support following our son's passing. I personally would have been overwhelmed without the care and support from yourself, fellow clergy and church members. Then we had (name) and (name)'s wedding which only came about really following (name)'s baptism and the way you handled the situation.”

Things have moved on from the time when the vicar was the sole go-to person in each community. But just because we are not the sole person anymore does not mean that we cannot be an effective go-to person when needs arise. Mum's ashes may be in the cupboard but the way Mum's funeral, the disposition of her body and the intricacies of her family life are valued and understood is the gift of the church in the 21st century.

At no time is the church's response to grief at the interface between public action and private thought in modern times more tested than in the aftermath of a suicide. I now turn to look at how the teaching and practice of the church is perceived currently.

CHAPTER TEN

Suicide

There was a time when clergy of the Church of England were not permitted to bury in consecrated ground those who had committed suicide. As we saw in Chapter Seven following the death of John Crow, the wording of a coroner's verdict was crucial in determining whether a death was misadventure or intentional suicide. And the consequences for how the church and society coped with this and how they responded to the bereaved family were far reaching. With our increased understanding of mental health issues, the church has had to shift its stance somewhat. This has been led largely by clergy and others who are working at the 'coalface' of daily life among families that they have known for years. Indeed, mental health awareness now counsels against using the word 'committed' in relation to suicide as it carries echoes of sin and crime which are 'committed' with the attendant concept of blame and the need for punishment in this life or the next. In the words of Dan Reidenberg, Executive Director of Suicide Awareness, Voices of Education (SAVE), while speaking at conferences across the world: "When attaching the word 'committed', it further discriminates against those who lost their battle against a disease." Reidenberg recommends the phrase, "died by suicide".³⁴⁰ In my twenty-four years in Canvey Island, even though technically not allowed by Canon Law before 2017, I have conducted the funerals of certainly fourteen people who died by their own hand, but I suspect there have been a few more where the cause of death has been obfuscated.

Felix (mentioned in Chapter Nine when his Mother had to face the reality of the interim death certificate) was 17 years old in April 2016 when he switched on his iPod early one Wednesday morning, plugged in his headphones and lay down on the railway track. Felix was good looking with a smile that lit up the room. He did not have long to wait before the train came, destroyed his body and sent the essential Felix to the next life where there would be no more bullying, no more harshness, no more trying to keep up in a world in which he felt he had missed all the rehearsals. As with many teenagers, Felix had felt

³⁴⁰ Reidenberg, 2019

excluded by others who seemed to belong to the mainstream of life in a way that he never did.

Durkheim, who saw clearly that suicide has a social dimension across different cultures and different religions, distinguished between three types of suicide: egoistic, where those taking their own life felt they were without a support system and had not been enmeshed in a group; altruistic where those who died felt overwhelmed by the pressure of too much expectation by the group to which they belonged; and anomic – literally against the law, lawless and meaningless.³⁴¹ A fruitful discussion may be had as to whether Felix's suicide would be described as egoistic or altruistic. On the one hand, Felix was supported by the love of his immediate family, wider family and family friends, but felt excluded by the group to which he longed to belong – his fellow teenagers. But it may also be said that he was overwhelmed by what he needed to be, what he needed to become, to be acceptable to that group.

Six hundred people came to Felix's funeral. It was held in the Parish Church a few hundred yards from his house. I am not aware that Felix had ever been in the church before. The service was pointed with some of his favourite songs – those whose lyrics were acceptable in a place of worship! His school hymn, *Jerusalem*, and *Lord of All Hopefulness* were sung. The day before the funeral, Felix's family had gone to the funeral parlour and covered his coffin in stickers which reflected his passions like skateboarding and music. As the white English community tends not to have a coffin open during a funeral, and Felix's wrecked body would not have been viewable anyway, a personalised coffin was the next best thing.

In our society flowers are used as a marker or decoration in times of joy and in times of sorrow and shock. Walter suggests it is not a coincidence that flower arrangements at funerals are known as "floral tributes". Such arrangements are tangible expressions of sympathy particularly useful for those who do not have access to the written tributes such

³⁴¹ Durkheim (1897) 1951

as are found in broadsheet newspapers.³⁴² As we travel along our roads we have grown used to seeing wayside shrines marking the place of a fatal accident or the site of a murder. Such flowers are renewed each year on the anniversary of the death or on other significant days in the life of the one who has died. The flowers tend to die and are often left there long after they have ceased to be attractive as no one takes responsibility for removing them - not wanting to give the impression that there is no further need to remember. Increasingly as flowers get ever more expensive, as crematoria dispose of flowers after three days, and as useful causes like the purchase of equipment and research into medical conditions demand our attention, so bereaved families request donations in lieu of flowers.

The retiring collection at Felix's funeral was for a charity that works in schools among those struggling because of bullying, bereavement, domestic violence et al. It was hoped to raise £500.00 to train a counsellor for the charity. On the way out the door the mourners put £2,000 in the basket. It took a long time for the mourners to leave and not just because there were a lot of them. After the casket and the family exited the church, it was as if no one else wanted to leave. It was like a silent, deafening applause. And if this was a kind of applause, what was the applause for? Was it an apologetic solidarity with and for Felix who had endured so much for so long? Was it for the church that had honestly faced his life and his death and the way in which the community had fallen short of humanity at its best? Or was it somehow for themselves – that they had stopped what they were doing and come together and got a glimpse of what we could be? They stood still, not wanting the moment to end: soaking up, embedding what they were feeling before returning to life outside with all its petty hassles, annoyances and joys. They were in a sacred time in a sacred place. Normal time was suspended. Whatever had been urgent before the funeral could now wait. Society was reminding itself that it was better than this – unaware of the depth of despair felt by a teenager who had felt compelled to take his own life in such a dreadful fashion. And this had happened on their watch and in their patch. The book of Samuel says that when Asahel was killed, all those who came to the spot where he died “stood still”.³⁴³ Even in these commercially driven times, in the face of death, society in

³⁴² Walter, 1994: 183

³⁴³ 2 Samuel 2:23 (NRSV)

Felix's community needed collectively to stop and stand still. Had they the vocabulary, they would have said with Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration, "It is good Lord for us to be here".³⁴⁴

It may be assumed that a large percentage of those gathered that day for Felix would say they were not religious. They were in that church because they were part of a community of sympathy – a community gathered in shock realizing that in that coffin could be their own child or sibling. Individual pain was subsumed into a collective grief. Theirs was a community that had no words to express the pain but relied instead on entering a sacred space and infusing it with words and music seldom heard in church, to fashion a liturgy that reflected Felix's life, his age and his personality.

They were there because they were human. They were there to wrap their arms around grieving parents, brother and sister. But the collective experience of shock and sheer horror at what Felix had felt compelled to do was, surely, a religious experience. The church building provided the setting, the sacred space. Douglas Davies suggests that the verbal nature of death rites, particularly when combined with music, is a powerful tool in helping people survive bereavement.³⁴⁵ Certainly this is true of what he calls, after J L Austin³⁴⁶ "performative utterances" such as "... we commit his body to the ground.." Rappaport emphasizes the point that such performative utterances do not depend for their efficacy on the effect they have on those who hear them.³⁴⁷ The committal is accomplished with the words "earth to earth.."; the couple are married with the words "..I proclaim that they are husband and wife.."; the baby is Christened with the words "..I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit", regardless of the faith or wishes or inattention of the gathered congregation. The body is consigned to the flames or the ground with the words of committal however much the chief mourner is incapable of accepting the loss. And it is society that has 'ordained' the minister with

³⁴⁴ Matthew 17:4 (NRSV)

³⁴⁵ Davies, 2002:4

³⁴⁶ Austin, 1961

³⁴⁷ Rappaport, 2013:114

the authority to utter effectively those words. Mourners, engaged couples, new parents and whole communities have entered into a pact with the ministers enabling them to bury, declare married and baptize those whom they bring in times of joy, sorrow and new beginnings. Society and the church have entered into a pact in which the church is expected to have something to say and something to do, even in the face of a death by suicide.

Some may find it strange that I have said it is society that ordains the minister with the authority to utter effectively those words. This truth was borne out when a much loved minister was suspended while an historical accusation made against him was being investigated. During the course of the suspension several families got in touch with him to plead with him to come and conduct a funeral or take some part in a wedding or christening with words like, “we know you are not working officially but can you come as our friend? You have ministered to us at every important moment of our family’s life.”

In this and in many such situations, the national church fails to see the effectiveness of an incarnational ministry which has to do with ongoing relationships within the body of society with shared experiences of life, joy, sorrow and death. The converse is also true: society does not accept a minister just because the minister has been duly ordained by the church. If local vicars do not seem to engage appropriately with their parishioners then people simply turn to a Civil celebrant or other person who they feel will utter the words that reflect and fill their need at the time of joy or sorrow. The minister is an ecclesiastical entity but also a social and an individual being. Society will respond to particular ministers according to their own experience of them and not according to whether they have been officially ordained according to the rites of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. This should not come as a surprise since the whole of Christian doctrine is predicated on the relationship between God and the people of God’s creation. But the traditional tension between law and love, between works and faith, as evidenced in the epistles of Paul and of James has in the 21st century taken centre stage in the modern desire to find fault, accuse, blame and tear people and institutions down with no clear plan for what might replace them. The people of Essex tend to vote overwhelmingly for the value

of love over against the value of law.

I suggest that, generally, the traditional Sentences of Scripture, prayers and readings, in our more secular society, provide merely the backing track and a safe time for people to think their own thoughts about the life and death of the person whose loss they mourn. And it gives them space to reflect on their own mortality. The presence of a minister of religion, licensed, ordained and/or accepted by society, at the funeral – whether in crematorium or church or at the graveside – is testament to the place of the particular life now ended in the pantheon of lives lived before and yet to come.

We have seen that Felix felt life to be intolerable. Before we look in Chapter Eleven at how an evolution in perception on the part of society leads to an evolution in the words used to mark significant moments in the life of an individual and the life of a community, I wish to spend a while considering where society and the church now stand with regard to assisted suicide – the hastening of a death of someone who finds a long and lingering death due to a terminal illness to be intolerable.

Assisted Suicide

The dichotomy between public and private means of dealing with illness and death is nowhere more acute than in the matter of assisted suicide. We saw in Chapter Seven that the General Synod of the Church of England was very slow officially to sanction a full Christian funeral for those who had killed themselves. It is small wonder then that the Church has been implacably opposed to any change in the law that would allow people to assist those who wish to die.

In November 2017 Brendan McCarthy wrote a paper³⁴⁸ setting out the position of the church with regard to assisted dying. In this paper he outlines the official position of the Church of England: affirming that for the good of society and individuals, it is essential that both the law and medical practice embrace a presumption in favour of life. The church acknowledges that this does not mean that life must be maintained at all costs but affirms

³⁴⁸ McCarthy, 2017

that no one ought to be permitted actively to end another person's life. To allow such participation would be to introduce a "novel and dangerous" concept into British law with potentially unforeseen and dangerous consequences. The church affirms that an individual's sense of personal worth or limitation of faculties must not be allowed to take the place of the intrinsic value of every person's life. While extending empathy and compassion to those who find their life intolerable, the church resists attempts to change the law to facilitate their wishes. Alongside the belief in the intrinsic value of every life, the church has a concern to protect the already vulnerable who might be at the mercy of carers and family members should the law be changed.

In March 2019, following the Royal College of Physicians' announcement of the adoption of a 'neutral' position on assisted dying, the Bishop of Carlisle, James Newcome, said, "The Church of England's position remains to affirm the intrinsic value of every human life and express its support for the current law on assisted suicide as a means of contributing to a just and compassionate society in which vulnerable people are protected."³⁴⁹

This simply echoed the motion put forward by General Synod on 6th February 2012 which added that synod while "celebrating the considerable improvement in the quality of care of the dying brought about by the hospice and palliative care movements and by the input of clinicians, clergy and others, (would) encourage the Church's continued involvement in the wider agenda of the care of those approaching the end of their lives and the support of those caring for them." That motion was carried by 284 in favour, none against with 4 abstentions.

The mortality figures for England and Wales as published by the Office of National Statistics shows that 27% of men aged 80 and over will die of heart disease or cancer. Others will live with and die from dementia and Alzheimer's. The third most common cause of death is cerebrovascular disease. For women the outlook is no brighter as degenerative and cerebrovascular disease mark the end of many an otherwise lovely and

³⁴⁹ Newcome, 2019

normal life. For many relatives, this is what a normal death will look like: a slow, debilitating, dehumanizing, often painful, embarrassing, undignified and graceless period of days, weeks, months and occasionally years. Given the enhanced ability over the past century of medicine to keep people alive almost indefinitely, the church, while affirming the intrinsic value of every human life, should be enabling the conversation about whether, just because we can prolong a life, we must or even should do so.

The question of the sanctity of life in the face of suffering is probably crystallised in the relationship between people and animals. The people of England are generally seen as an animal-loving people. Cruelty to animals is abhorred and social media is full of exactly what level of hell should be reserved for people who are cruel to animals. It may be instructive to note in passing that one of the founders of the RSPCA in 1824 was William Wilberforce who did so much to secure the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. The RSPCA website reveals that in 2018 some 129,602 animals were rescued. In the same year the RSPCA secured 1,678 convictions for animal cruelty offences.

General Synod is right to mark the progress made in caring for terminally sick people by the hospice and palliative care movements. But those who watch a loved one dying with no dignity are hard put to understand why, if that were their dog rather than their wife or mother, they would be allowed to help end the suffering, but would be subject to imprisonment if they gave in to the desperate request of the person dying to help them to die. Many families have to endure not just an absence of a much-loved personality, but the existence of an apparently and profoundly different personality – one who uses language and behaves in a way that would have been abhorrent to them in better times. Even when there is no recognition of faces or names, profanity seems to run on a “slightly different circuit from the rest of language.”³⁵⁰

In May 2019 on the national stage, Paul Lamb set out to challenge once again the law against anyone assisting suicide. For thirty years Paul had been paralysed from the neck down following a car crash. He was not terminally ill but wished to choose the time and

³⁵⁰ Kalanithi, 2017:112

date of his death in the face of constant and unmitigated pain. He maintained that since his previous challenge failed in 2014 public opinion had swung more towards his point of view and he was encouraged by the Royal College of Physicians neutral stance on the matter. In his view the law as it stood discriminated against people with disabilities. In December of that year, 2019, Lord Justice Dingemans and Mrs Justice Laing ruled in the High Court that Lamb's case was "unarguable" and should not be allowed to proceed to a full hearing to challenge the law.

In August 2020 an estranged husband was jailed for a minimum of five years and 187 days at Norwich Crown Court for killing his wife who was dying of lung cancer. Cornelius Van Der Ploeg knew of his former wife's desire to end her life while being unwilling to implicate her children. The judge was not swayed by the defence counsel's assertion that the former husband had acted out of love rather than hate. The couple's daughter, while resenting that she had been robbed of precious time with her mother, stated that her father would not have done what he did if her mother "had not been in such a bad way".³⁵¹

On 22nd October 2019 the gold-medal-winning Paralympian Marieke Vervoort ended her life through euthanasia at the age of 40. She accomplished this in Belgium where euthanasia is legal. An incurable degenerative spinal disease had caused her constant pain, seizures and paralysis in her legs. She rarely slept. Marieke was clear that, far from devaluing life, her being able to sign papers eleven years previously had given her peace of mind to enable her to endure her remaining years. She said, "If I didn't have those papers, I think I'd have done suicide already. I think there will be fewer suicides when every country has the law of euthanasia ... I hope everybody sees that this is not murder, but it makes people live longer."³⁵² Although, given the increased incidence of mental stress, I think her hope that there will be fewer suicides is a vain one, it is interesting that she sees the ability to sign euthanasia papers well before the end gives choice and therefore control back to the one who is living with unendurable suffering. The dignity of choice

³⁵¹ Johnston, 2020

³⁵² Moore-Bridger, 2019

is restored to the bearer of the life.

In Canvey Island, Molly and Peter were married for sixty-two years. They were both nineteen years old when they got married. For the last ten years of her life Molly lived with, and suffered from, dementia. She had no idea who Peter was. Hobbies like knitting and baking with grandchildren; holidays in the family touring caravan and trips to Malta and America were long forgotten. Carers and District Nurses ensured that Molly was usually in no physical pain. But they could not prevent the pain of her constant confusion or Peter's pain as he watched his vibrant, practical, fun-loving wife die long before she died. Peter, in common with many bereaved, when planning Molly's funeral, uttered the deeply-felt lament, "We would not allow a dog to live like that". In Canvey Island I have found no concept, prevalent among many Japanese, of a relative's slow and gradual death as being part of the process of them becoming an ancestor. Susan Long posits that for many Japanese people the elderly relative in the grip of dementia, not being fully in the world, is perhaps already god-like.³⁵³

John was an exceptional business man. He built up the business that he inherited from his father into one that served the builders of a large part of Essex well. He and his wife had been married for fifty years before a debilitating stroke left her bed-bound. She could not feed herself, dress herself or communicate verbally. John slept each night in her room at the nursing home to keep his wife company for eight years until she died. For the last five years of his own life his decline was sure and dreadful. For his last year on earth he was curled up in a foetal position in a high-sided bed (in the same nursing home where his wife had been) unable to feed himself or communicate in any way. The days of a simple misplacing of a wallet were now long past: John had ceased to be actively engaged in the details of the life around him. While General Synod asserts the intrinsic value of every human life, John's family, friends and customers are clear that the quality of his life was zero. When he died at the age of ninety-one, there was widespread relief that the indignity of his suffering was over.

³⁵³ S. O. Long, 2004: 58:913-928

In September 2021 Lord Carey, a former Archbishop of Canterbury, and Rabbi Jonathan Romain wrote an essay in the *British Medical Journal*³⁵⁴ in which they stated that “belief in the sanctity of life ... does not mean believing in the sanctity of suffering ... There is nothing holy about agony”. They referred to a 2019 poll of 5,000 people by Populus which showed that 84 percent of British people, 82 percent of Christians and 80 percent of religious people supported assisted dying for terminally ill people who were mentally competent. Also in September 2021 the British Medical Association,³⁵⁵ which represents 150,000 doctors, voted by a slender majority to change its stance from opposition to neutrality which, it said, should not be misrepresented as support.

In October 2021 Baroness Meacher’s Assisted Dying Bill received its Second Reading in the House of Lords. The Archbishop of Canterbury, the Chief Rabbi and the head of the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales had expressed “profound disquiet”³⁵⁶ over the proposals in the Bill. They used the ‘thin end of the wedge’ argument to suggest that, although assisted dying would be limited by the Bill to those with mental capacity who had less than six months to live, and would have to be approved by two doctors and a High Court judge, in coming decades such remedy would be sought by anyone who felt a burden to their family and friends or who felt simply dissatisfied with the way their life had turned out. They called for universally available, compassionate, medical care for every sick person.

A powerful voice in support of the Bill was heard in a letter from the terminally ill Lord Field, a Christian former MP and General Synod Member. He said that he had changed his mind on assisted dying “when an MP friend was dying of cancer and wanted to die early before the full horror effects set in, but was denied this opportunity”.³⁵⁷ All high-minded theories about the ‘sanctity of life’ and the utopia of ‘assisted living’ are challenged by the close-up reality of the indignity of suffering.

³⁵⁴ Romain 2021: 374

³⁵⁵ At the meeting of the Representative Body (RB) 14 September 2021

³⁵⁶ Wilkinson, 2021

³⁵⁷ A. Brown, 2021

The minister comes to visit

After long and lingering deaths such as those noted above, the minister coming to the house must be aware that the bereaved have already done a great deal of ‘letting go’ in the previous months and years as the essential much-loved personality was taken inexorably from the family leaving an emaciated mind and body that the church and state declared had intrinsic value. Generally the minister is not involved in the decision of the medical profession to allow a life to continue even when everyone could see that there was nothing any longer that made the life worth living. But now the minister arrives at the house to plan the funeral and to bring comfort to a family brutalised by harrowing experiences of dementia and fractured personality. The process of reclaiming the personality of the deceased is of first importance in the journey of healing memories. The funeral liturgy, however devised, is the scaffolding supporting this work of reclamation. The personality having been reclaimed, the life can be celebrated in all its complexity and relationship with those who are left behind to grieve and to discover a new normality. So Liam could find comfort in the funeral of his grandmother as he was at last able to get back to the memories of the significant person she once had been in his childhood:

“Recent years have been tough. Very tough. There’s no getting round how hard it was to lose her recognition of me. To feel a stranger in front of someone you love. But despite that I am writing this with a warm smile on my face. Happiness. All I see now is the Nan I knew and loved. Smiling. Sat on the sofa, feet just shy of touching the floor. If I had to sum up my memories in a word, it would be just that: ‘happiness’. That’s not something I will ever forget.”³⁵⁸

For such situations the minister must find new words and music that fit the situation: words and music that allow the family to reclaim the personality as it once was and to help the bereaved cope with the guilt engendered by longing and hoping and praying that this day would come. A poem has recently been written in an attempt to address such emotions. It reads in part:

You didn’t die just recently
You died some time ago.
Although your body stayed a while,

³⁵⁸ T.G’s funeral

And didn't really know.
For you had got Alzheimer's
You failed to comprehend.
Your body went on living
But your mind had reached its end.
So we've already said "Goodbye",
To the person that we knew
The person that we truly loved
The person that was "you"
...
And so we meet in remembrance of
A mind so fit and true.
We're here to pay our last respects
To say that, "We love you"³⁵⁹

We pride ourselves on being a modern, progressive society. And yet there is still a stigma attached to mental illness. As Sally Magnusson points out when writing of her mother's descent into dementia, the word stigma means literally a mark of disgrace made by a pointed stick. This "stigma keeps people isolated, reluctant to admit to symptoms and terrified of being branded. Everywhere in the world names have an effect."³⁶⁰ Whatever life had promised, this in fact is what had been delivered. The church in the form of a minister needs to embrace the fact. The church's historical record of being merciful to those troubled by mental illness is not good. The minister, seeking to ease the pain of those who have endured losing a loved one long before the physical death, needs to be aware that families are not always sure they can count on the church to understand their grief let alone begin the process of healing dreadful memories. And if the church does not fulfil this task then who else is there? In caring for her mother, Magnusson did wonder whether dementia might be a disease to turn "all but the most saintly carer into a kind of monster in the end."³⁶¹ The task after the death is to reclaim not only the personality of the one now gone who was ravished by confusion and loss for so long, but also the personality and equilibrium of those whose daily lives were hijacked in caring for the one now gone: those who cared to the point of exhaustion and beyond.

³⁵⁹ Dick Underwood, 2010

³⁶⁰ Magnusson, 2014:78

³⁶¹ Magnusson, 2014:179

We have seen that the heavy machinery of church law has been ponderous in addressing life as it is actually lived and suffered daily. We have seen that when the rules and language of the church encounter real life situations of pain, suffering and loss, it is the rules and the language that have to change. I now turn to examine the degree to which language, and what it represents, has had to be discarded, modified and recast in recent years to better suit the longings of the dying and the bereaved in the present age.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

New words

As years evolve into new centuries, so new language is required to express old certainties. The Christian message of hope in and through the resurrection of Christ has not changed. But the words chosen and the ritual enacted to encapsulate this truth must, of necessity, evolve to reflect the speech and the understanding of new communities. In order to convey the concept of the Holy Trinity, the Cappadocian Fathers and sundry others of the 4th century Common Era fashioned new words and phrases which are recited to this day. When the Parish Church of Canvey Island marked its 50th birthday in 2010 it seemed like a good idea to celebrate the Eucharist according to the Prayer Book and customs of 1960. The differences from Common Worship were stark and quite alien to those who had joined the worshipping community in the previous fifteen or twenty years. The new liturgies of Series One, Two and Three along with the Alternative Service Book and Common Worship had taken us gradually through the changes of tone, language and, indeed, theology of the gathered, worshipping community. But of course the current liturgies authorised for use bear not a little family resemblance to those which have gone before. Words and concepts have been gradually tweaked rather than invented wholesale. Even Shakespeare, who is credited with inventing several hundred words, admitted that

All my best is dressing old words new,
Spending again what is already spent.³⁶²

It was also Shakespeare who encouraged us to

“Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak
knits up the o-er wrought heart and bids it break”.³⁶³

Teaching and learning initiatives like the Alpha Course and more recent courses like Pilgrim and Emmaus have helped countless people who felt alienated by the rituals and language of the institutional church to engage with matters of life, death and eternity in a new and accessible way. The music of Taizé and examples of Celtic spirituality have reached the parts that Victorian hymns now cannot. Hymns, written in language

³⁶² Shakespeare, 1980: 1116, *Sonnet LXXVI*

³⁶³ Shakespeare, 1980: 865, *Macbeth Act IV; Scene III*

accessible in the modern age, by people like Graham Kendrick, Stuart Townend and Matt Redman have gained acceptance across denominational divides. But rituals must evolve gradually to be recognizable as relevant rituals. As Rappaport points out, “A ritual that has never been performed before may seem to those present not so much a ritual as a charade. Rituals composed entirely of new elements are, thus, likely to fail to become established”.³⁶⁴ Words and rituals change incrementally over several generations. So, for example, the new service devised for the parish of Canvey Island for the bereaved on Longest Night 2017 drew much material from the traditional carol services held a week earlier, but made use of more modern poetry and prose which spoke of loss, grief and hope. Words from *The Amber Spy Glass* seemed to scratch where people itched: “I will love you forever; whatever happens. Till I die and after I die, and when I find my way out of the land of the dead, I’ll drift about forever, all my atoms, till I find you again...”³⁶⁵

Similarly, as Nic, a forensic scientist who as an adult distanced herself from the evangelical Christianity of her childhood, decided to inter her mother’s ashes among the roses in the garden which her mother had tended in all weathers for fifty years, the backing track in her mind was a modern folk song, *Order and Chaos*, with the words:

Gather round for time is turning
This part of my story is closing
As the hour draws near
I wonder, not fear
At the journey that I will be taking.
I might be in the beat of a wing
I might be in the rush of a river
But as year turns to year
I’ll always be here
Through springtime to wintery weather.

Lay me down
Set me free
Oh a part of this world I’ll still be
You’ll not find me in order, but chaos
As I follow the path that time makes us.

³⁶⁴ Rappaport, 2013:32

³⁶⁵ Pullman, 2000:501

I'll leave you the light from the sun
Every beam that fell on my face
Photons and waves
The paths that we've changed
They have all left a mark on this place
And I'll leave you the warmth of my skin
That floats on soaring hearts

Nothing's lost, nothing's found
It all just moves round
And keeps us from falling apart.

I'll leave you the stars in the sky
Both our future and past yet to come
But as all things must, turn back to dust
Then I'll glint in the afternoon sun
We're all made from the same as the earth
And someday we'll roam it together
Particles gliding, dancing colliding
We'll wander entangled for ever.³⁶⁶

This folk song was written for Lady Maisery's album *Cycle* which set out to explore themes of birth, life and death from a scientific viewpoint. Nic finds as an adult that she can deal with the reality of photons, waves and particles more readily than as a child she was expected to swallow wholesale concepts of actual sacrificial death, atonement and resurrection. This helped Nic let go of the physical remains of her mother's body. It is in prayer, poetry and purified prose that we attempt to engage with and acknowledge our higher selves and the unforgotten who have gone before us. New rituals emerge out of old rituals: new words out of old words: new concepts out of old concepts. New and worthwhile practices arise as it were out of a dialogue between those who search and the traditions to which they are exposed. T S Eliot affirms that genuine originality can arise only within an established tradition.³⁶⁷ Sticking rigidly to the old may produce stagnating order while everything totally new may produce chaos. Organisations like the church naturally prefer to stick to what has been in use for ages: that which has been inherited from previous generations, particularly if it is deemed to have been authorised by divine revelation. The older a ritual is said to be, the more it is cherished. Tradition is always

³⁶⁶ Maisery 2016

³⁶⁷ Eliot, 1997

under attack from the evolution of thought and expression: order is always threatened by chaos. The folk song that Nic found helpful maintains “You’ll not find me in order but chaos.” Jordan B Peterson ³⁶⁸ is clear that a meaningful life is to be found on the border between order and chaos. It is on the border that both doubt and meaning can be found. Absolute order or absolute chaos are both hell. We need to feel secure without being bored and yet interested enough to be awake but not so interested as to be terrified. And this is how it is when we seek words and rituals to cover our deepest moments of loss. The Buddhists say that life is suffering. In the time of our grief we need to come to terms with this truth and find words to express it. We are sensitive to the story that is being told around us by our environment. The language of the story has to be intelligible and speak to our condition. People who have no use for the church on a weekly basis still turn to the church to ritualise a time of loss or joyful celebration. At such times the search for meaning can be at its most profound. And each person, even the one who says they are not religious, conducts this search through lenses of belief. No one conducts this search for meaning in a vacuum as though fresh to the task. The search is predicated upon years of experience in a particular family in a particular community at a particular time. As one forgets one is wearing glasses, so the bereaved can forget that they look at life and death and loss in a particular way, fashioned by their experience of life so far. The bereaved need to find expression for their grief in timeless and yet accessible language and concepts. So Sarah, from whom I had not heard since I conducted her grandfather’s funeral two years previously, when she learned that her 8-year-old son had died while abroad with friends, immediately reached for the phone and sent me a text: “David, I am not religious, but I could do with you right about now. If you have time can you please ring me please. (sic) ³⁶⁹

There has been of late a plethora of books published containing modern and, at first glance, more secular poems and readings. Such a one was used at Felix’s funeral. The almost Celtic words of the committal gave six hundred people a voice for inexpressible sorrow. The lines were uttered by priest and congregation antiphonally:

³⁶⁸ J. B. Peterson, 2016

³⁶⁹ On the death of AJ, January 2020.

Felix, into the freedom of wind and sunshine
All We let you go
Into the dance of the stars and the planets
All We let you go
Into the wind's breath and the hands of the star maker
All We let you go
We love you, we miss you, we want you to be happy
All Go gently, beloved one, go free.³⁷⁰

Just as poignant were the words of blessing for the young man's parents and siblings:

May God be a bright flame before you,
A guiding star to lighten your darkness.
May God smooth the way for you
And when it is hard to see, lead you with outstretched arm.
May God shield you and surround you;
Hold your sorrows, wipe your tears,
And when you are ready, lift your faces
And walk with you into the light of a new day.³⁷¹

Similarly when conducting the ritual of burial in a churchyard or cemetery, ministers have at their disposal another responsory which enables the gathered mourners as a community to commit the body to the ground:

Into the darkness and warmth of the earth
All We lay you down
Into the sadness and smiles of our memories
All We lay you down
Into the cycle of living and dying and rising again
All We lay you down
May you rest in peace, in fulfilment, in loving
All And may you return home in God's sweet embrace.³⁷²

These modern prayers have a resonance in today's funeral context because the words and concepts are accessible. They owe more to Celtic roots than Roman Catholic teaching. They do not speak of Greek or Latin Trinitarian formulae. They speak of freedom, wind, sunshine, stars, planets, smiles and memories. The words echo the ancient Jewish and Christian themes of the *Benedicite*. All aspects of creation are invoked to honour this

³⁷⁰ Burgess, 2013:132

³⁷¹ Ward, 2012:276

³⁷² Burgess, 2013:132

moment. They speak of bright flame, light, darkness and earth. They speak of the way ahead being smoothed and they acknowledge the difficulty of seeing any light. They portray God with an outstretched arm and a shield. And in the telling phrase, “when you are ready”, the mourners are given permission to grieve in their own time and at their own pace. Sacred time need not and cannot be rushed. The vocabulary is the vocabulary of the ordinary person un-steeped in Church history and theology. The language speaks directly to the deep, un-worded condition of the mourner.

The blessing quoted above acknowledges that in grief we cannot see the point of anything, and it gives the family permission to admit that everything seems pointless and that they are not ready to walk into the light of a new day. As Douglas Davies writes, “Words make humanity by creating and naming relationships”.³⁷³ When the author of the Fourth Gospel declared that the Word of God had become flesh he was bearing witness to the fact that words have power.³⁷⁴ Words are creative and may be used creatively. Words consecrate. Words are the best tools we have to give flesh to concepts which are felt keenly in the human condition, particularly in the face of death, birth and new beginnings; to concepts which are felt but which are not scientifically observable.

The church building and the ritual of the funeral gave those present at Felix’s funeral space to grieve and the strength and resolve to ‘do something’. Will any of those who attended the funeral come away with a desire to know more about Jesus Christ? Perhaps. Will most of them have a heightened sense of the fragility of life and the importance of community and the vitality of shared values and a common sense of life that transcends this one? Definitely. Will they in the next census tick the ‘no religion’ box? Probably.

Those who would tick the ‘no religion’ box³⁷⁵ still invite the church to officiate at the obsequies of loved ones but they are very clear on the nature of the ceremony to be performed and will make short shrift of the minister who does not provide the celebration

³⁷³ Davies, 2011:213

³⁷⁴ St John’s Gospel, Chapter One

³⁷⁵ cf Chapter Four

of the life, proclamation of the love of God and the acknowledgment of the grief of those left behind all at the same time. The folk who settled in Canvey Island having migrated from East London have very little truck with concepts of hell, punishment or purgatory. So Lucy writing a poem on behalf of her Grandad to comfort her Grandmother could write,

Heaven is truly beautiful
Just you wait and see.
It is time for me to go now
It's ok to set me free. ³⁷⁶

And Hayley could quote a poem called *If I only had five minutes* which ends,

So wait for me in heaven Dad
Don't let me come alone.
The day the angels come for me
Please be there to bring me home. ³⁷⁷

Words for death

I said at the beginning of this chapter that words and liturgy have evolved over the centuries to mark our taking leave of a loved one. The words used by the bereaved to express what has happened when communicating the fact that someone has died change markedly according to the context in which those mourners live. Headstones erected over the graves of Free Church members will often speak of the deceased as having been “promoted to glory”. The minister engaging with a bereaved family in Canvey Island will now very rarely hear the words “he died”. More usually the bereaved will say, “He passed away” or “He crossed over”. This is reflected or modelled in mainstream newspaper announcements of the death of celebrities. For example, towards the end of 2019 Clive James was said to have “passed away” and Jonathan Miller had “passed on”. As Kathryn Mannix pointed out at the time, “The only one with a D-word attached is Gary Lineker’s dog, Snoop. Snoop died”. ³⁷⁸ Many Americans and Barbadians, when it comes to indicating a date of birth and date of death on a funeral service sheet, will put “Sunrise” and “Sunset”. The intimation is clear in all these phrases: the life loved is lost to us who remain but continues to exist in a context that we cannot see. Such phrases would find an

³⁷⁶ B. M’s funeral

³⁷⁷ Campbell, 2008

³⁷⁸ Kathryn Mannix, 2019

echo in works like John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* written in 1678:

'When the day that he must go hence was come, many accompanied him to the river-side, into which as he went, he said, "Death, where is thy sting?" And as he went down deeper, he said, "Grave, where is thy victory?" So he passed over, and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side'.³⁷⁹

Conversely older English versions of St Paul's letter to the Corinthians speak of death as sleep as in "Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep."³⁸⁰ In a more modern translation of the Bible, this verse now reads, "Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died."³⁸¹ As we shall see in our discussion of angels in Chapter Fourteen, while the church moves in one direction, ordinary people tend to move in the opposite direction with regard to the verbalisation of concepts. Mannix also suggests that not only have we stopped using the word 'died', we have even stopped thinking about the certain fact of our own death.³⁸² Her experience suggests that fewer than half of UK adults have written a will and a tiny fraction have nominated a lasting power of attorney. Illness is now described as a battle, the one who is enduring dreadful treatment is called a fighter and death is a battle lost. In many families, even in the face of a prolonged and probably terminal illness there has been no discussion of funeral arrangements and the bereaved have no idea what the one now gone "would want" by way of a funeral. Major surgery is dealt with as though the procedure were a mere trifle to be got over with at all speed. Whereas in former times patients would be given enforced bed rest for six weeks followed by six weeks convalescence in a facility on the coast with bracing air, now one is returned home within 48 hours of the operation. As modern medicine extends life and enables a return to work for those whose illness was previously declared to be terminal, the once familiar process of dying has become overlooked and death seems to be postponed indefinitely regardless of the quality of the ensuing life. Liturgical words and concepts fashioned in bygone centuries no longer necessarily find resonance in modern thought.

³⁷⁹ Bunyan, 1968:295

³⁸⁰ 1 Corinthians 15:20 RSV

³⁸¹ 1 Corinthians 15:20 NRSV

³⁸² Mannix, 2017

Consulting Mediums

The current certainty that the deceased who, despite modern medicine, has merely passed away or crossed over, has led many of those who live in Canvey Island to consult a medium by way of getting some reassurance that the one gone is still OK: that they live on free of pain and are still aware of the ongoing lives of the ones left behind who continue to grieve their loss. One such medium called Grace has a website on which she advertises sessions costing £40.00 which include a “free recording”.³⁸³ When I logged on to the website at 10 am on Friday 10th May 2019, the site had already received 541,362 visitors. Of the last 8,400 bookings, 97 percent of the reviews gave her a five-star rating. Twenty-four hours later the site had received 541,424 visitors and the five-star rating had risen to 97.2%. By 22nd May the number of visitors had reached 541,890. That is 528 people who were seekers or at least curious in 12 days. The five-star rating remained constant.

One of Grace’s female clients posted in May 2019 “Thank you for a very informative reading, with lots of evidence of the afterlife. I came to you years ago and you were the first person, after many years of me trying, to bring my mum through. I have since recommended you to so many people and without fail, every single person has been blown away by your proof and accuracy. Thanks again (name).”

Another posted “I had a fab reading yesterday, very informative and spot on about things that no one knows. Best moment was when my good friend who had passed away came through and Grace told me she had my name...so true...”

One man posted, “I was absolutely astounded at the information Grace passed on to me. Events, names and places in a constant flow of facts! The messages passed on to me that only I knew about were so accurate! I arrived at her lovely home dejected with no hope. I left so happy and with a purpose. Amazing talented lady with great charm and warmth. An absolute godsend. Thank you so much Grace xxx (name)”.

³⁸³ <https://www.facebook.com/MediumGraceKennedy>

None of the comments make clear what their understanding of the next life is or what the next life might look like. They seem to settle for clues that mum is OK because the medium says that mum likes what they have done with the kitchen (which, unbeknown to the medium, has just been decorated). I wrote in Chapter Seven of the central selling point of the church – the hope of eternal life – an eternal life of peace, joy and harmony in the eternal presence and worship of almighty God, the creator of the heavens and the earth. The clients of the medium went away with some hope restored. But since earliest times the Bible warns against turning to mediums for help. The Book of Leviticus is clear: “Do not turn to mediums or wizards; do not seek them out, to be defiled by them: I am the Lord your God.”³⁸⁴ And the Book of Deuteronomy is no less direct: “No one shall be found among you who ... consults ghosts or spirits, or who seeks oracles from the dead. For whoever does these things is abhorrent to the Lord.”³⁸⁵ The Biblical penalty for mediums is severe: “A man or a woman who is a medium or a wizard shall be put to death; they shall be stoned to death, their blood is upon them”.³⁸⁶

A major contributory factor in King Saul losing his throne was thought to be the fact that he consulted a medium, the Witch of Endor.³⁸⁷ The Book of Chronicles confirms this to have been the case: “So Saul died for his unfaithfulness ... he had consulted a medium, seeking guidance and did not seek guidance from the Lord. Therefore the Lord put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David son of Jesse”.³⁸⁸

And when we turn to the New Testament we find Paul commanding a spirit to come out of an enslaved girl who was making money for her masters by fortune-telling. For their trouble, Paul and his companion were dragged before the magistrates, flogged and imprisoned.³⁸⁹ The good burghers of Philippi really could not see what Paul and Silas were making such a fuss about. The Book of Revelation is clear that the spirits used by

³⁸⁴ Leviticus 19:31 (NRSV)

³⁸⁵ Deuteronomy 18:9-14 (NRSV)

³⁸⁶ Leviticus 20:27 (NRSV)

³⁸⁷ 1 Samuel 28: 13 – 14 (NRSV)

³⁸⁸ 1 Chronicles 10: 13,14 (NRSV)

³⁸⁹ Acts 16: 16-24 (NRSV)

mediums are evil spirits, formerly holy angels who, with Satan, rebelled and were thrown out of heaven: “Satan, the deceiver of the whole world was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.”³⁹⁰

So it is no wonder that the church has admonished people for consulting mediums with dark and unspecified threats about transgressing the will of God. The owners of the enslaved girl in Philippi saw their income stream dry up following Paul’s words and actions. On the wall of the ruined Norman Castle in Exeter a plaque records the names of the last four women to be executed for witchcraft in England in the 1680s.

Several hundred people in Canvey Island find comfort and hope in consulting a medium in the course of a week. Has the church through the ages sought to control the source of hope and reassurance that those who consult mediums seek? Or does the church feel that the hope of the medium is not really hope but simply optimism? The clients of the medium are short-changed when compared to the infinite hope of the Christian Gospel. Modern people, like the people of Philippi in St Paul’s day, are no longer afraid of the power of the church but will find solace in the words of a “talented lady with great charm and warmth” she will be seen by many as “an absolute godsend”. Perhaps it is time that the church stopped trying to ban parishioners from consulting those who profess to be mediums but rather enable a conversation about what it is that parishioners seek that they have not found in their church.

It may be argued that refusing to acknowledge the death of a loved one, and preferring to speak in terms of one having crossed over, is not entirely healthy for the one left behind. Certainly in my ministry I am contacted at least once a month by people who have been left troubled by attempts to contact the departed through mediums, séances or Ouija boards. The reason for consulting mediums seems to be to enable the one who has crossed over to cross back to this side of the divide. The comments on Grace’s website quoted above suggest that some clients visit a number of times to top up their reassurance that the one gone is still involved in and concerned about the lives of those who remain. We saw

³⁹⁰ Revelation 12: 7-9 (NRSV)

in Chapter Seven that the attendance at church bereavement and *Longest Night* services has grown in popularity as they, at long last, allow the bereaved to acknowledge that the one gone has, in fact, to all intents and purposes for the one doing the grieving, actually died. The minister, who is particularly called and ordained to celebrate the Eucharist, when working with a bereaved family, needs to ensure that new words and concepts are blessed, broken and shared as they evolve. But they must be shared in such a way that the false hope of daily contact is minimized while the real Christian hope of eternal life is honoured and celebrated.

Meanwhile, those left behind find ways of remembering the one now gone. As we become less parochial and more global in our interactions with one another, so our means of honouring a life now ended will be far reaching and in no way confined to a simple burial plot in the local churchyard. I turn now to a consideration of varied means of remembering with or without the blessing of the church.

CHAPTER TWELVE

A lasting memorial

The people who live in Canvey Island in the 21st century are at most three generations removed from the people of East London who took for granted the memorialisation of the dead with lavish horse-drawn funerals and enduring family graves and wordy headstones.

Affordability of homes, the jobs market, the globalisation of life and the internet of everything mean that as this century proceeds so people's connections with a settled way of living and grieving will inevitably alter. But, however things appear, each will still have a desire that the one loved is remembered in some tangible way. This chapter is concerned with what means of memorialisation, what new icons, are emerging and, indeed, have already emerged, and how these methods answer a need in the one who is bereaved in terms of the continuity of family and community in the narrative of what it means to have mattered – to have lived, loved and lost. As we shall see, this need is most acute in the event of the loss of a child but is present consequent upon any loss of a life that we wish to proclaim as having mattered.

When communities were more settled and generations of families were born, lived and died in the same village, graves could be tended by family or at least by people who had some connection in memory to the deceased. Even today in our peripatetic society, mourners will say that the one died will never be forgotten. But the reality of course is that every community has graves with names now illegible with the passage of time and the effect of rain and sunshine. Many 21st century families have no grave to visit but a simple plaque at the crematorium: a time-limited plaque on a vast wall of fairly identical plaques.

The Ancient Egyptians considered that an alternative kind of afterlife was the act of remembrance and reminiscing. It is said that a Pharaoh would imprint his name deeply into the walls of anything he built, so that it could never fade. For as long as his name was said and remembered, he was in some sense alive. But even where names are legible,

after a time the people buried are no longer known by any living person. In 2020, in the wake of the *Black Lives Matter* uprising, whole communities began to question the validity of some statues in public places as aspects of the person's life were found to be reprehensible to modern sensibilities. Deplorable acts or mindsets became all that was known about the person represented by the statue, and any good they might have done in their life remained unknown or overshadowed. Shakespeare understood this when he had Marc Antony say, "The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones"³⁹¹

In our cathedrals, ancient churches, public squares and country places we see monuments over or near the graves of the great and the good or at least of those whose families, friends or followers had the means to provide expensive monuments. Until the last century even the poorest of people had a grave with, perhaps, a simple cross marking the place of burial. In the case of those whose families could not pay for the funeral, the state buried them in what were dreadfully called 'paupers graves'. Such graves would take a number of simple coffins one on top of the other separated only by a thin layer of earth. My own English great, great grandmother was buried in such a grave in Richmond, Surrey in 1920 when she died at the age of 74. Hers was one of 3 burials in that grave on that day with another two bodies added to the grave in the following month. Still the bereaved families had somewhere to go in the weeks, months and years after the funeral of their loved one. Yet today, with the advent of direct cremation, the simplest and cheapest option for disposal of a body is becoming in North America quite the fashionable choice. And it is surely ironic that the very generation that does not have to worry about survival or where the next meal is coming from, should turn away from the contemplation of the fact of death by turning away from encountering the fact of a dead body. Those who came before us dealt with the concept of death by dealing with the fact of death. The washing and laying out of the body, the wake, the family carrying the coffin to the grave and lowering the precious cargo themselves all contributed to the facing and acceptance of death and the narrative of their life as individuals, family and community. In the words of the sociologist Zygmunt Baumann, "no form of human life has been found that failed to pattern the

³⁹¹ Shakespeare, 1980: 834, Julius Caesar, Act III, Scene II

treatment of deceased bodies and their posthumous presence in the memory of the descendants.”³⁹² Similarly Lynch writes, “As I stand at each grave I see it as a venue at which families and friends have gathered to deal with death by dealing with the dead.”³⁹³ But as modern society is increasingly fractured and the sense of continuity between generations is lost so is the sense of Baumann’s “posthumous presence” in successive descendants. The question may legitimately be asked whether this way of dealing with death (or, perhaps, not dealing with death) as evidenced in direct cremations, contributes to an increasing inability in modern society to deal with life which results in, among other things, mass shootings, knife crime, appalling acts of terrorism and general hostility to everything and everyone on social media. As each country decided how to handle the rising threat of the contagious Coronavirus early in 2020 several newspapers reported that in America people were stockpiling ammunition. Protection of family and property against the threat of unnamed and unseen forces was clearly a top priority.

The cremation rate in the United Kingdom has been increasing steadily, with the national average rate rising from 34.70% in 1960 to 69.58% in 1990 and 77.82% in 2019.³⁹⁴ Crematoria offer, not cheaply, a plaque to go on a wall with the name and dates of the person who has died. The plaque is on the wall for a fixed amount of time. After that time the family is invited, on further payment, to renew the period for which the plaque may be seen. Flowers can be placed near the plaque on significant dates. So, very quickly, there is no place to go, no place to put flowers – just perhaps an area of ground at the crematorium where, records show, the ashes were scattered or buried.

We saw in Chapter Nine that many people will now hold on to ashes by fixing them in glass, tattoo or paint. Others scatter ashes in a favourite bit of woodland or some other place which was of deep significance to the deceased when alive. No official record of such activity is kept and the memory of the place of disposition is lost when the ones doing the disposing are themselves departed.

³⁹² Baumann, 1992:51

³⁹³ Lynch, 2019:133

³⁹⁴ The Cremation Society of Great Britain: Progress of cremation in the British Isles

As mentioned in Chapter Nine, several members of the gathered worshipping congregation in Canvey Island have requested that their ashes be interred in the Rose Garden of St Nicholas' Church. Their motivation seems to be three-fold: their mortal remains will forever be in the sacred ground which they have loved; their remains will be in the environs of their "church family", and they will not be leaving their own families any burden or expense with regard to the upkeep of a grave or ashes plot. The names of such people are entered in the Book of Remembrance in the Lady Chapel and an index is kept of whose ashes have been disposed of in this way.

Some funeral directors in England, following their counterparts in North America, offer an online memorial, an opportunity to 'write' a tribute and/or to 'light' a virtual candle. With the physical monument there was a sense in which the person commemorated was still a visible, individual part of the community. With a communal area of lawn or woodland the individual in death – as in life – becomes very quickly an anonymous, invisible part of the crowd and can more quickly be forgotten. And surely when the family arrange for hired people to dispose of the body of a loved one without themselves being present, this must, I think, surely be seen as an abdication of our fundamental human responsibility – the dealing with and respectful disposal of the corpse of someone who lately was a living, breathing, engaging, interacting embodiment of a human soul. When I was asked to inter the ashes of a woman whose family had decided that hers would be an unwitnessed cremation, I myself attended the actual cremation. When it came to the family gathering for the interment of the ashes, I felt that at least I had gone the distance with her.

Finding The Place

Recently an elderly lady was becoming increasingly distressed that she did not know where her mother, who had died in 1946, was buried in the local churchyard. The family had never been able to afford a headstone and any cross that had marked the spot was long since gone. When the church authorities were able to consult burial records and triangulate the location between two existing headstones, the woman was able to bring flowers to her mother's grave and utter a prayer there for the first time in many years. In

an echo of the song *Danny Boy*, she was able to come and find the place where her mother was lying and kneel and say an *Ave* there for her. Felix's parents chose to inter his ashes in the churchyard in another part of the country alongside those of his much loved Grandfather. Although the parents would say they are not religious, they have a clear sense that Grandpa can now 'look after' his Grandson.

Who Were They?

People in their sixties, as I am, can be very conscious that we are the last link between our grandparents and our grandchildren. With our death will end the eyewitness account and first-hand memory of those living, breathing ancestors who lived, worked and loved in a time and perhaps a culture very different from that of the children being born. "Some long for tombs and an enduring memorial but others realize that we live on in the memory of others but for a generation."³⁹⁵

With modern systems of capturing and sharing facts and figures we can now easily access dates of birth, marriage and death. We can recover addresses and phone numbers, National Insurance Numbers and criminal records. We can see and restore photographs. We can have some knowledge of education and employment. But, unless someone writes down an account of the likes, dislikes, foibles, character and personality, then the one dying will, with the death of the next two generations, be unknown in terms of who they really were.

A popular poem occasionally read at funerals in Essex and elsewhere speaks of *The Dash* on the service sheet between the date of birth and the date of death. The poem speaks of the dash being more important than the length of time between the two dates: what one does with one's life is more significant than the length of the life. The poem ends, "So when your eulogy is being read with your life's actions to rehash
Would you be proud of the things they say, about how you spent your dash?"³⁹⁶

³⁹⁵ Thomas Brown as quoted by Douglas Davies 2015:62

³⁹⁶ Anderson, 2017

Most people can name all four of their grandparents but almost no one, unless they have made a point of researching their family tree, can name all eight of their great grandparents. The knowledge of the dates of birth, marriage and death along with some information of work done and size of family does not constitute knowledge of a life lived in any real sense. But some people are fortunate in that their research affords a glimpse of an ancestor whose life was as vivid and important to the bearer as our own is today. The assembled scraps of dates and names can occasionally achieve something more coherent. As Gillian Tindall says in her research of the occupants of one house over a period of 200 years, “Pieces of lost lives are genuinely recovered. Extinct causes clamour for our attention. Forgotten social groups coalesce again. Here and there a few individual figures detach themselves from the dark and silence to which time has consigned them. They walk slowly towards us. Eventually we may even see their faces.”³⁹⁷

Jeanette Pickersgill was cremated at Woking Crematorium on 26th March 1885.³⁹⁸ Hers was the first legal cremation in the United Kingdom in the modern era. Excavations at places like Stonehenge reveal that cremation was a common practice in England several millennia ago. As we have seen, in the last 60 years the cremation rate as a percentage of funerals in the United Kingdom has risen to over 77%. Perhaps it is because dates alone do not furnish a real sense of the identity of the one now departed that, more than a hundred and thirty years after the first legal cremation in England in the modern era, there is still a substantial number of families who opt for burial and an ‘enduring memorial’ in the form of a traditional grave no matter how much it might cost. The churchyard in Canvey Island was closed by Order of Council in 1998 having become full. A local funeral director opened a private cemetery providing everything from small but impressive ashes plots to the full panoply of a traditional granite headstone grave costing in excess of £5,000.00 in addition to the average cost of a funeral in 2021 of £4,800.00. That cemetery is filling up quickly. The question may be asked whether this is a reflection of such families’ sense of status and security or rather, as Gordon Childe suggests, their

³⁹⁷ Tindall, 2007: 6

³⁹⁸ Plaque at Woking Crematorium

sense of status insecurity in a rapidly changing and uncertain world.³⁹⁹

Most of those who now live in Canvey Island have their family ancestral roots in London. Until the 1830s most Londoners would be buried in their local churchyard. Thus a sense of continuity was provided in a settled community as people were interred with or near their ancestors. But in the 50 years to 1850 the population of London went from one million to 2.3 million. As London churchyards became overcrowded and a danger to public health, an Act of Parliament in 1832 allowed joint-stock companies to set up large cemeteries outside the City of London boundaries. Seven cemeteries (often called *The Magnificent Seven*) were laid out in a ring around London: Kensal Green, West Norwood, Highgate, Nunhead, Brompton, Abney Park and Tower Hamlets. Those who set out to provide the new cemeteries, inspired by the example of Père Lachaise in Paris, designed them to be truly magnificent in their sheer size, layout and the ornateness of grand mausoleums and mortuary chapels. The first such cemetery, Kensal Green, was opened in 1833, and the last, Tower Hamlets, in 1841. As Rachel Mann suggests, the mood of the new municipal cemeteries was one of sleep divorced from any sense of impending “judgement of church or God”. Also as the industrial revolution made man’s individual efforts less visible, so the spaciousness and grandeur of the new cemeteries “asserted the dignity of the individual and his ‘right’ to ‘rest’”.⁴⁰⁰ At first these cemeteries were only within the reach of the wealthy as grieving families had to pay the usual fee to the local Church of England vicar who was now in danger of losing a major source of income, in addition to the fees of the new cemetery. Eventually this iniquitous practice was discontinued and the great and the good were buried more or less alongside the poorest of the poor from the slums of London. As noted, Tower Hamlets Cemetery was opened in September 1841. By 1889, a few short years before the mass exodus from London to Canvey Island and other parts of Essex, some 247,000 bodies had been interred in Tower Hamlets Cemetery. As early as 1851 some 80% of interments were in public graves (also called common or paupers’ graves)⁴⁰¹ in which several persons, quite unrelated to each

³⁹⁹ Childe 1945:13-19

⁴⁰⁰ Mann, 2017:23

⁴⁰¹ Figures from guidebooks on the cemeteries

other, could be buried within the space of a few weeks. Those who could afford to purchase a grave were careful to have etched on the headstone, “The Private Grave of...”. Headstones declared that the one who had died would never be forgotten and would always be remembered.

“Gone from us but not forgotten.
Never shall thy memory fade
Sweetest thoughts shall ever
Surround the spot where thou art laid.” ⁴⁰²

But by the middle of the 20th century, despite continuing overcrowding of these once-lovely open spaces, one by one the joint-stock companies went bankrupt, the gates were locked, the carefully manicured lawns, shrubs and trees turned to impenetrable woodland, the vandals moved in and the words of remembrance etched on tombstones remained and seemed to mock the reality of the transitory nature of human life. Expensive, ‘lasting’ memorials lasted just as long as finances and the vagaries of politics, vandalism and the British weather allowed. And those in the public graves were forgotten even more quickly as at best they would have had just a simple temporary small cross or plaque to mark the place where they lay. As stated above, many of the people who now live in Canvey Island are descended from these Londoners who lived largely undocumented lives. Within the short space of a few generations the people of Canvey Island have no idea who many of their ancestors were or where they lie buried beneath the bramble and the tangled roots of mighty trees. For the past few years local London people have formed themselves into *Friends* of each of the cemeteries to manage the grounds as nature reserves, to conduct tours, publish statistics of burial, chart the layout of interments and to slow down if not arrest the crumbling of the monuments.

Generally speaking, headstones are used to highlight the dates and the virtues of the ones who have died. Sometimes in Essex as elsewhere, they record more than that. In one local borough council cemetery near to Canvey Island a family has chosen to use the headstone to vilify cousins who they perceived had been neglectful of their own parents:

⁴⁰² Headstone of Mary Coleman, RIP December 1913. Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park

“In loving memory of a much loved Uncle and Aunt (names).
Sadly abandoned by their two sons (names)
who left them to die sad and lonely except for the care
and love of their nephew and his wife (names)...”⁴⁰³

Monuments can immortalize anger and pain as well as the promise of enduring memory. The minister who conducted the funerals of this Aunt and Uncle would have done well to dwell on the healing efficacy of forgiveness.

But, as we have seen, even the grandest and the most personal memorials after a while lose their power to remind us of the people in memory of whom they have been erected. Having watched the Remembrance Sunday service on television each year until she was 14, Mann was shocked on a school visit to London to see the Cenotaph surrounded by noisy traffic. “I had not imagined that the silence of that empty tomb would be allowed to be overwhelmed by the banal, the scream and thump of the everyday”.⁴⁰⁴ Similarly we may ask how many of those who have their lunch on the benches outside St John’s Church, Stratford, East London or in the centre of Rayleigh in Essex, are aware of the names inscribed on the large memorials to those who in another age and a different conflict were burned at the stake because they could not accept that bread and wine became the actual body and blood of Christ.

The heritage of the East London immigrants to Canvey Island may be Christian but the details of the historical arguments which forged the Churches as they have evolved are distinctly sketchy in the mind of these immigrants. The Roman Catholic Church in Canvey Island is dedicated to our Lady of Canvey and the English Martyrs. These martyrs are those killed by protestants, the descendants of whom worship in a new Anglican Church built in 1960 almost next door. The Roman Catholics of Canvey Island would struggle to name any of the martyrs commemorated by their Church. Even the most everlasting memorials are, by the very nature of memorials, ephemeral.

⁴⁰³ In Woodside Cemetery, Thundersley, Essex

⁴⁰⁴ Mann, 2017:18

Meaning Forged in Loss

Robert Neimeyer⁴⁰⁵ affirms that central to the process of bereavement is making some coherent meaning and, indeed, reconstructing some meaning out of the tragedy of loss. Some weeks after Felix's funeral five boys aged fifteen and sixteen decided to walk 100 kilometres along the coast to raise money for the same charity that was supported at his funeral. As the mother of one of them said, "They were upset and wanted to do something". Felix's own mother said of her son's death when planning his funeral, "I can't let this mean nothing".

In the words that Linda wrote for the minister to read at her mother's funeral, "We have the illusion that our lives will go on forever on earth. But to heaven we must go. Our brain is a great gift which shows us how to love, and when that someone is taken away the emptiness can be unbearable. But the feeling of pain is human and after a time the pain will ease with prayers. So, in our own way we will all remember her and she will live on in our hearts forever."⁴⁰⁶

It is interesting to note that Linda, who belongs to no church, believes that pain is eased with prayer and then is ambivalent about whether her mother lives on as a separate entity or simply in her memory. Linda would be able to accept the words of Cicero, "The life of the dead is placed in the memory of the living."⁴⁰⁷

In August 2011, Harry's grandparents⁴⁰⁸ went to church to hear him remembered in the prayers for the departed. They have been part of the life of the church ever since. Having been baptized as infants, Harry's two grandmothers took the next step and joined a confirmation class and were confirmed by the bishop in February 2015. Harry's two grandfathers followed suit in 2016. In this way all four grandparents publicly declared their allegiance to the Christian faith. They wished to stand firmly in the tradition of faith

⁴⁰⁵ Neimeyer, 2001

⁴⁰⁶ D. R's funeral

⁴⁰⁷ Cicero, 1913

⁴⁰⁸ cf Chapter Nine

which had welcomed them in their grief and offered them a narrative of birth, death and new life which made sense and constructed a meaning out of their loss.

Gifts

In our society the giving of gifts is an essential feature of Baptisms and Weddings. But traditionally presents are not given at funerals. Davies suggests that this is because at the funeral “relationships with the dead are being broken and not fostered, withdrawn from and not entered into.”⁴⁰⁹ Perhaps 21st century people, living in a more disposable society, are more keenly aware of the transitory nature of memory than were our forebears. This may be why a great number of the bereaved seek not to focus on their lost loved ones being remembered for ever but rather that their death should make a difference in the present and immediate future. Bereaved families ask that there is at the funeral a retiring or online collection in memory of the one who has died and that the money should go to some cause associated with the illness which caused or contributed to the death. Their usual reasoning is that the money will help someone else suffering from the same condition to survive longer or better in the years to come. Such a collection is often in lieu of flowers. This leaves flowers on the coffin to be provided solely by the immediate family. This arrangement has two benefits: as most funerals are now held at crematoria where expensive arrangements of flowers can be displayed only for a maximum of three days, it prevents a considerable waste of money; and secondly the family is gratified that several hundred pounds can be contributed to a cause to help others whom they will never meet. This acts as a small light shining in the darkness of the days following a death. It says to the one gone that something good will come out of their death. The bereaved can take no control of the fact of death but they can control one effect for good.

In 2020 the law in England and Wales was changed to presume consent for otherwise healthy organs to be used in the event of a death. As is the nature of laws this was simply catching up with what a number of people were already wishing to do. Indeed back in 2007, Maddie and her parents gave permission for her organs to be used. When Maddie died of bronchiectasis at the age of 14, her liver, pancreas, kidneys and heart saved and

⁴⁰⁹ Davies, 2002:55

enhanced the lives of four people aged between 3 and 38 years old. To this day the knowledge of these gifts has gone some way to assuaging the inconsolable grief felt by Maddie's family.

Some families, like those of Felix and Harry, embark on several years of raising funds for, and awareness of, particular illnesses, treatments and equipment associated with the loss of their loved one. They do not spend time blaming fate or an unbenevolent God for the illness that took their loved one. They accept that illness and death are part of the human condition. Fundraising is a positive act in the battle against illness for others and in the search for meaning for the life of the one who has gone. In the years following Felix's death his mother became something of an ambassador for a charity that trains counsellors to work in schools to help those who have been bullied and to seek to change the attitude of those who bully. In the eight months following Felix's suicide, some five thousand pounds was raised in memory of Felix – enough to train 10 counsellors. In the three years since then a further twenty thousand pounds has been raised in memory of Felix. A few months after Felix died, his mother was interviewed on Radio Four's PM programme, on ITV and Channel Four. As a friend posted on her Facebook page after the interview, "You are doing an extraordinary job at raising awareness of this terrible issue and I just wish you didn't have to be doing it. Your bravery in the face of your tragedy is incredible".

In the seven years since Harry's death his family have raised over £18,000 for the Trust which builds accommodation near the big London hospitals so that relatives of long term sick children can be near at hand. Apart from large corporate sponsors, Harry's family have raised more money than all others for this cause. It seems clear that this fundraising and belonging to a church congregation has given Harry's family a renewed identity and a purpose in the day-to-day living of their life. In the life of the church community and in the money raised Harry has an enduring memorial, perhaps far more enduring than one fashioned in granite in an old cemetery, which makes a difference to the lives of other families. Throwing themselves into fundraising for a worthy cause is no less a ritual of memory than the lighting of a candle, paying for a mass to be said, or organising flowers in church on the anniversary of death.

Indee Rose's family created a trust in her name to help the families of other children diagnosed with a brain tumour while Danny's family and friends have raised thousands of pounds to help families and to fund research into Posterior Fossa Syndrome which limits the length and quality of life following the removal of a brain tumour. Indee was 3 years old and Danny was 11 when they died. In forming the Trust and the Fund, these families have formed "fleeting support networks during the shared portions of their journey".⁴¹⁰ In these support networks bonds are formed which enable the bereaved to process a shared, though individual, grief. In such collaboration the bereaved person is lifted out of a potential well of loneliness into a society with shared pain that is openly named, understood and valued as legitimate. It is this for which the church, inter alia, was initially formed. It is this that people now often feel moved to find elsewhere partly due to continued enlightenment of individual and community, and partly due to the church's failure to satisfy that craving.

Always a Part of the Family

In June 2018 Harry's mother arranged a baptism for her second child born in 2017. Harry's baptism in 2003 had not caused his family to become regular worshipping members of the congregation. But the harrowing experience of his death and the welcoming love of the church following his death and the gentle, poignant, sad, yet joyful celebration of his life has caused them to evaluate the place of the church in the community in general and in their life in particular. Harry's mother asked that in the course of the baptism service, Harry's name should be mentioned in the prayers. In a departure from the tradition of former centuries when the name of a deceased child was given to the next child to be born, Harry's mother and her husband made the decision that the new child should have different names and that Harry's name should not be one of them. They affirmed that this new life of her second son was separate from the other life which continues elsewhere. The family home has a number of photos and other tangible tokens of Harry's life. The second child grows up aware that he has/had an older brother. Wordsworth in his poem of 1798, *We Are Seven*, captured this sense of the dead child continuing to be a member of the family in the verse:

⁴¹⁰ Mannix, 2017: 169

Then did the little maid reply,
'Seven boys and girls are we:
Two of us in the church-yard lie
Beneath the churchyard tree.'⁴¹¹

Harry's mother is clear that she has two children, one of whom has died. Like Felix's Mother, Harry's family cannot let his death mean nothing. He lives on in the lives of those who received his organs. He lives on in the accommodation for relatives near a major London hospital that is now being built because of their efforts and the efforts of others who are grieving. His death has not been in vain. Tangible outcomes in monies raised impose an order out of the chaos, hope out of despair, optimism out of pointlessness. As Douglas Davies writes, "to have ritualized human optimism, expressing it in verbal form and dramatizing it in death ritual, is a major achievement of humanity."⁴¹²

In English we change the description of ourselves when we lose parents, wives or husbands. We become orphans, widow and widower.⁴¹³ English has no word to describe one who has lost a child. Indeed, it was not until April 2020 in England and Wales that bereaved parents were entitled to statutory paid leave following the death of their child. Traditionally the death of a child, as opposed to that of an elderly member of the community, because it was commonplace, required little in the way of formal ceremony. For Harry's mother there is no change of title. However, everything has changed and the church has been there to facilitate the change in status and to provide a narrative of continuity: some assurance that life continues; the realisation that nothing is wasted and that Harry's short life was not an accident but a blessing: an enrichment of the life of his entire family.

There was a time when those who had lost a child were advised to throw away all reminders, get on with life and not speak of the child again. Today some would say that the practice of a full and ornate funeral for an embryo, a baby or a child is simply

⁴¹¹ Wordsworth, 1974:66

⁴¹² Davies, 2002:22

⁴¹³ Davies, 2002:55

wallowing in grief. Harry's mother would recognise the appropriateness of the response made by Constance in Shakespeare's *King John* when King Philip accuses her of being "as fond of grief as of your child". These words of rebuke by Constance to Philip were perhaps written after the death of the playwright's own son, Hamnet, at the age of eleven:

Grief fills the room up of my absent child,
Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me,
Puts on his pretty looks, repeats his words,
Remembers me of all his gracious parts,
Stuffs out his vacant garments with his form;
Then, have I reason to be fond of grief?
Fare you well: had you such a loss as I,
I would give better comfort than you do.⁴¹⁴

And the church offers comfort in proclaiming that Harry lives on in the presence of God. Harry's family adapted a poem for the funeral which imagined God wanting one more player for his celestial football team. The poem says in part:

So Harry plays now so happily
To the angels in the crowd
And every time he hits the net
They roar his name out loud.
Have fun our little Harribo
You're safe and in God's care.
Till it's time for us to get our boots
And join with you up there.⁴¹⁵

This poem was adapted before any of the family joined the worshipping, communal life of the church. But at some deep, intrinsic, unnamed level they already knew and accepted the traditional Christian teaching that death is merely the gateway to another and more glorious life where there is no more sorrow or pain. Although Harry's grandparents joined the worshipping life of the church, his mother did not. And yet in the cancer ward in November 2019, eight years after Harry died, as his mother digested the words of the doctor that her Dad (Harry's grandfather) had probably no more than 72 hours to live, she was able to say quietly but with the firmest of convictions, "Harry's waiting for him".

⁴¹⁴ Shakespeare, 1980: 368-9, *The Life and Death of King John*. Act III; Scene IV

⁴¹⁵ Homespun lines - *A Poem for H*

Some may say that bereavement poems written in the grip of grief are nothing more than mawkish sentimentality. It is interesting how in common usage the word ‘sentimental’ is almost interchangeable with ‘overly sentimental’. But if such poems touch a sentiment that is hard to express in any other way, then the poem goes some way to healing by way of saying what the one in grief has no words to express. Lynch ⁴¹⁶ suggests that poetry is raised language. Where one has a poor relationship with prayer, poetry helps the mourner to express what is inexpressible. Poetry at its best is subtraction: we whittle away to achieve an essential sentiment. And perhaps the poem says what the mourners would not dare to say if they had to find their own words. Sometimes the minister needs to give the bereaved permission to use an existing poem, rather than write original words, if the sentiments resonate with their situation. I am conscious that even among allegedly non-religious people there is a willingness to attribute the death of a loved one to the will and plan of God. Popular poems used at funerals exist in several slightly different forms. The original authorship is now unknown:

“We little knew that morning
That God would call your name
In life we loved you dearly
In death we do the same”

There is no blame of God here – no anger expressing unfairness – just a calm acceptance of an invisible truth.

God looked around his garden
And found an empty space
He then looked down upon the earth
And saw your tired face.
He put his arms around you
And lifted you to rest
God’s Garden must be beautiful
He always takes the best...

These words speak of a compassionate God who intervened to relieve suffering and they end with the affirmation that the one gone has not gone to some unknown place but simply returned to the place from which they came:

⁴¹⁶ Long and Lynch, 2013:14

It broke our hearts to lose you
But you did not go alone
For part of us went with you
The day God called you home”

Such affirmation of an almighty God who is aware of, and cares for, individual people can be traced through many ages and many cultures. Moreover, the place where God is to be found is called “home”. Indeed we find such certainty in the Psalms of the Old Testament:

You have kept count of my tossings;
Put my tears in your bottle.
Are they not in your record? ⁴¹⁷

Such psalms would have been written to be sung presumably in worship. Like modern favourite songs they express well what in ordinary prose we struggle to express. And the singer is aware that sentiments captured have been felt by the lyricist and others. The singing of the song helps the mourner to feel less alone in grief.

The Reality of Death

To what extent, then, are people now helped to cope with the reality of death? Until a few years ago in many parts of British society the body of the deceased would rest in the front room of the house until it was time for the funeral. This front room was called the parlour. Now, many would shudder at that prospect. Many families, as we saw with Lin’s family ⁴¹⁸, opt not to see the body at all after death. Coffins, generally, are now closed throughout the funeral. So most people are not confronted with the reality of death but simply an empty chair, an empty house and memories. In the words of a popular poem,

We thought of you with love today
But this is nothing new;
We thought about you yesterday,
And days before that too.
We think of you in silence,
We often speak your name.
Now all we have are memories
And your picture in a frame.

⁴¹⁷ Psalm 56:8 (NRSV)

⁴¹⁸ See Chapter Eight

Your memory is our keepsake
With which we'll never part.
God has you in his keeping,
We have you in our heart. ⁴¹⁹

Long points out that the parlour is now the name given to the premises of the funeral director while the front room of the family home has been renamed “The Living Room”. This change he suggests came about as people became embarrassed by the presence of the dead.⁴²⁰ Generally speaking, contemporary people in Essex and elsewhere have sub-contracted the work of preparing the body for burial to paid professionals. Frequently I am called to pray with someone who is dying or to pray over the body of one recently departed. These mourners then feel more ready to proceed with the practical arrangements for the funeral. The body has died. What lives on is the eternal soul.⁴²¹ In a sense, the church and society give permission to do what is contrary to human nature – to destroy a body. In surrendering the body to the funeral director or the coroner the family lose control of the process between the death and the funeral. They must ask to see the body just as, earlier in hospital, they had to stick to visiting times. No wonder that the bereaved seek some measure of control over what happens at the funeral as they wrest the ceremony from the ones who used to be called undertakers now promoted to funeral directors with their concomitant authority over proceedings.

Modern Icons

As the church learns to recognise and bless the language of unchurched people so the church must also recognise the iconography of the unchurched. Roger Scruton ⁴²² took issue with Martin Kemp ⁴²³ who would seek to put modern images like the Coca-Cola bottle, the McDonald's sign and the double helix structure of DNA on a par in terms of significance in the life of ordinary people with the great icons and paintings of Pantocrator of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Scruton suggested that something can only be an icon

⁴¹⁹ de Leon, 2007

⁴²⁰ Long and Lynch, 2013:87

⁴²¹ Walter, 1996

⁴²² Scruton, 2011

⁴²³ Kemp, 2011

if it can be desecrated. And only something that has been consecrated can be desecrated. The icon must have something of the real presence – the *shekinah* – about it. For the catholic and the protestant worshipper Christ is made present through and in the bread and the wine. Christ is accessed through meditation on the written icons of saints. For many in Canvey Island a sense of ongoing life and spirituality is gained through the careful tending of a grave plot, a memorial bench or a glass ornament containing the ashes of a loved one. The love and tears of the bereaved have consecrated previously secular tokens of life. Scruton suggested that Icons invite desecration, since they demand a veneration that we may be unwilling or unable to give. This is borne out in Canvey Island by the despair and intense anger felt by the bereaved when a memorial bench is vandalised, when items are stolen from a grave or an ashes-bearing ornament is lost. Similarly there was outrage across the nation when, during the *Black Lives Matter* protest in London in June 2020, a man was photographed urinating next to the memorial to PC Keith Palmer, who had died in the Westminster Bridge terrorist attack three years earlier. Before that moment, most people in the country did not know the memorial existed but on seeing the photograph of the memorial next to a protestor relieving himself, the memorial became sacred to a nation which held the belief that it is simply wrong to attack and kill a policemen who is sworn to serve and protect the public. Similarly, in the days following the storming of the Capitol in Washington DC by protestors in support of Mr Trump on 6th January 2021, American news anchors and commentators described the Capitol as a “Temple of Democracy”, a “sacred place” and “hallowed halls”, (the word “hallowed” rarely being heard outside the Lord’s Prayer in the 21st century). They described the ceremony that was interrupted as being a “sacred ritual” during which the envelopes from the fifty states were opened so that the will of the voters might be known.

Many in Canvey Island, through upbringing and culture, may be deprived of traditionally sacred things, but they are not deprived of their need of them. For Joss’s family and friends the lighting of lanterns at a certain time and date has become iconic. The memorial bench, the glass ornament, the tattoo, the kerbstone, the headstone, the grave space have all become icons on the border between this world and the next: between the life now ended and the hope of immortality. The theology is implicit. The life now ended

continues to have a real presence in the secular items now consecrated and invested with sacred mystery. Percy puts it well when he writes, “implicit theology is, therefore, that which is deduced from operant religious practice (which would include a variety of expressions of faith and belief) rather than formal religious propositions”.⁴²⁴

This is not only true when people have a personal relationship with and memory of the one who has gone. Recently in Canvey Island the land that was formerly a Roman Catholic Convent was sold for development. It was discovered that six Anglican Nuns had been buried in the grounds in the early 20th century when the place was an Anglican Convent. Permissions were sought and arrangements were made for the remains of the nuns to be transferred to the privately owned cemetery in another part of Canvey Island. Several people who have no church affiliation and had had no idea that nuns were buried in a remote corner of the now sold land, took to Facebook to lament the fact that a final resting place had been disturbed. They used words like “distasteful”, “disrespectful”, and “disgusting”. They found it “sad that the mortal remains of real people with real lives are seen by some as a problem which needs resolving”.⁴²⁵ Some were clear that graves should not be built over and expressed the hope that the nuns would now “haunt the place”. Here is another instance of the un-churched having firm views on the sacred nature of resting place. They recognise the vows of the long dead nuns and feel a responsibility to protect their memory and their mortal remains. They expect the church to be true to its own values of sacred space, sacred time and eternity.

Faculty Permission

This expectation was bizarrely expressed in November 2019 when the deputy Chancellor of the Diocese of St Albans granted a faculty to a couple who identified as atheists. The faculty allowed them to have the ashes of their baby exhumed from consecrated ground and reburied in un-consecrated ground in the same cemetery. Fifteen years previously the parents were not made aware that they had the option of choosing a consecrated or an un-consecrated area of the cemetery for the interment of their baby’s ashes. The mother

⁴²⁴ Percy, 2010:6

⁴²⁵ Facebook, 2019

explained that when her time came she wanted to be buried or have her ashes placed with his ashes. She was asked why it mattered where she was buried as she had no religious beliefs about eternal life or the religious consecration of a place. She said it would be “hypocritical going into the ground where you don’t have that religion”. She was further asked why, if she had no religious belief, she particularly wanted to be interred next to her son’s ashes. She replied that her son was “on his own ... as his Mum I should be buried with him ... I don’t want him being on his own”.⁴²⁶ So although the Mother professed to have no religious belief she still had a visceral respect for the grave space and a conviction that somehow her son existed even though she would accept no religious doctrine of eternal life. In recognising and honouring her thinking (however bizarre it may seem to many) the church was right, in my view, to grant the faculty.

The wording on headstones has also caused consternation and conflict between grieving families and the church. Nicknames, by which the deceased were known, are still banned, and only recently have abbreviations like “Dad”, “Grandad” and “Nan” been allowed. Nevertheless the decision of one vicar in Norwich, following a policy adopted by the Parochial Church Council (PCC) not to allow such abbreviations, was challenged by a bereaved family and overturned by the Consistory Court of the diocese. The family, who were not members of a worshipping congregation, said that they would have had their loved one buried elsewhere if they had known of the PCC policy. In bringing their petition for a faculty they produced fifteen photographs of other headstones where Dad and Grandad had been used on other headstones before the PCC adopted its policy. In granting the faculty the Diocesan Chancellor stated that diocesan regulation required simply that wording be “simple, dignified and reverent”. She ruled that words like “Dad” and “Grandad”, being used by most families in the country, were no less simple, dignified and reverent than “Father” or “Grandfather”. The faculty was granted and clarification issued to the PCC that such consternation should not reoccur.⁴²⁷

The Diocesan Chancellor of Peterborough reversed his earlier ruling banning the words “Dad” and “Pop” by which the deceased had been known, after revisiting the churchyard

⁴²⁶ Herbert, 2019

⁴²⁷ Herbert, 2020

with relatives of the deceased.⁴²⁸ The Chancellor's revised decision was influenced in part by the family demonstrating that some 34 other memorials in the same churchyard were already falling foul of Diocesan Churchyard Regulations.

Conversely the Chancellor of the Diocese of Lichfield rejected a proposed inscription on a headstone in a churchyard on two grounds. Firstly, the offspring of the deceased should be referred to as "our sons" not "our boys". The Chancellor felt that the latter was too personal a phrase and would not stand the test of time. Secondly the chancellor felt that the proposed quotation from a poem by Lord Byron, five lines starting with "So, we'll go no more a roving..", was too secular and did not speak of the Christian resurrection hope. The poem was rejected "because of its failure to convey a message consistent with the purpose of the churchyard".⁴²⁹ The widower was invited to find a Biblical verse or a verse from classical Christian poetry. Pastorally, in my view, this decision was a disaster and simply served to alienate the bereaved from the church. Disallowing a widower lines of a poem and terms of affection for family that meant so much to him and his wife can do nothing to express the love of God for all people.

Where Have You Laid Him?

A number of cemeteries in Essex and elsewhere have advertised woodland burial as a modern way of disposition without the clutter of headstones that need to be maintained. This development is advertised as an ecologically friendly method suitable for the modern age as the cemetery will return to being a woodland home to flora and fauna at the end of seventy years or whenever all the grave spaces are taken. But what the owners of these sites had not taken in to account was people's ongoing attachment to the precise place of burial of a loved one. The owners are constantly battling against the desire of the bereaved to place ribbons, candles, cards, teddy bears or such things to mark out the actual grave. One family of my acquaintance was demented with a renewed sense of loss when they could not identify the exact location of the grave of their daughter who had died by her own hand at the age of nineteen. Cemetery managers cast aside the importance of place,

⁴²⁸ Herbert, 2021

⁴²⁹ Church Times, 2020

ongoing bonds of bereavement and the iconography of graves at their peril. Some have re-thought their strategy and are now allowing a small plaque to mark the place at least in the short to medium term.

So it becomes clear that two things are going on at the same time. Firstly, modern people still value the minister's vocabulary of heaven and hope in the house of the bereaved, in the church, chapel or at the graveside. It provides for many a comforting backing track to their own thoughts. For many it is like special china – ornamental language that is only used on special occasions. The minister's words are in a real sense counter cultural, trapped as contemporary people are in what Malcolm Guite, partly quoting Philip Larkin, calls a "conspiracy of evasion, this complicity in denial, this costly aversion from the eyes of death".⁴³⁰ Secondly, people still need to feel a connection with some physical incarnation of the life now gone, whether it be in an actual grave, a photograph, a tattoo, a glass ornament, funds raised, other lives saved or tributes captured in poetic form using language that is accessible to the bereaved.

Every death occurs within a community. Some people choose to live and die alone. Such people should not be seen as weird but simply as very private people. As Glenys Caswell of the University of Nottingham, following a two-year study of lone deaths, has suggested, "The funeral needs to acknowledge the person as a member of the community, even if little is known about them when they were alive."⁴³¹

It might be helpful to look now at the nature of community in 21st century Canvey Island and how those who are in it, but fairly unknown, may access a sense of belonging to the whole and how this sense of belonging may be conferred and evidenced when it comes to funeral rites – with or without the assistance of the church.

⁴³⁰ Guite, 2017:xvi

⁴³¹ Caswell, 2020

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Community and Society

Perhaps because of the devastating east coast floods of 1953 and the raising of the sea wall around Canvey Island, those who live in Canvey feel that they are, and are regarded by many as, a more discrete community than most contemporary communities in Britain today. This chapter looks at the nature of this community, the means by which people find expressions of community, the place of the church in community and the way in which the church can act as a bonding agent in the ongoing narrative of individual lives that make up community particularly in the face of grief and healing.

There can be a romantic view of the ‘old days’, when we all lived in villages and everyone knew everyone else, that all was harmonious in such communities.⁴³² But of course anyone who has lived in a small community knows that the lines of demarcation between those who matter and those who matter less are often rigid, unwritten, unspoken but real. True, there may have been no digital database recording transgressions and warnings, but the life of individuals was stored just as securely in the expectations and disappointments of members in a communal memory. Now with our vast metropolis and sprawling post-war conurbations, any pretence of cohesion is abandoned. Many do not feel they belong to anything bigger than family, work environment and perhaps a social club; and of those, a great number are not sure they belong in any meaningful way even to these units.

Margaret Thatcher was much maligned for suggesting that there is no such thing as society, but I think she touched upon a valid truth – namely that society is made up of individuals; and individuals need to feel that they belong in order for society to work. There is no society over and above the sum of individuals. For society to function each individual must be ready to sacrifice some part of his or her individuality. In our modern housing complexities where one does not know one’s neighbour, the marking of sickness and death becomes a far more private and individual matter. Families may hesitate to ask their neighbours to park their car somewhere else on the day of the funeral to

⁴³² Miller, 2017

accommodate the hearse. This perhaps accounts in part for the outpouring of grief when a celebrity dies. As we saw in Chapter Three, when it comes to the national marking of a funeral, individuals can now have a sense of being part of a community that valued the work and the life and the art of the one who has died. Here at last is a shared experience.

And this shared experience, I maintain, may be termed a religious experience. I am convinced that it is in the engagement with religious observances, whether Remembrance Sunday, Harvest Festival, a wedding, a funeral, a baptism or a round of applause for the National Health Service during the Covid-19 lockdown of 2020, that the community of Canvey Island holds up an ideal of itself and affirms its place in the wider panoply of life, past, present and future. In Canvey Island when the Health and Safety experts ruled that the large community centre was too small safely to accommodate the six hundred people who wanted to attend the Act of Remembrance on Remembrance Sunday, the service was moved outside in the cold, open air of November. Each year since then the numbers sharing in this ritual have risen to over one thousand, five hundred people. As cited earlier, Roy Rappaport points out that defining the concept of religion is by its very nature vague. He adds, and I agree, “but vagueness is not vacuity, and we know well enough what people mean by the term to get on with things”.⁴³³ As Callum Brown concedes, “before getting to religious decline, the conception of religiosity must be made wider and deeper”.⁴³⁴ When people together respond to an event, whether it be a goal scored, a match lost or won, a birth of a future monarch, a death in the family, the death of a celebrity, the collective experience is greater than the sum of the feelings of the individual mourners/celebrants. The individuals are transported outside of themselves and into the realm of acute sorrow or joy. The communal aspect gives the participants a safe place to mourn or rejoice and let themselves go knowing that everyone else will understand and not judge them. Such stories are what Roger Peterson calls “behavioural truths”.⁴³⁵ He maintains that 21st century society has jettisoned the more traditional metaphysical foundations of our culture – foundational narratives of good overcoming evil and suffering

⁴³³ Rappaport, 2013:23

⁴³⁴ Brown 2009:8

⁴³⁵ R. Peterson, 2018

being transformed by redemptive love. Such themes are being restored in stories like the *Harry Potter* series, television programmes like *Dr Who* and popular films like *Finding Nemo* and the *Star Wars* trilogy. With such restoration we avoid fates like that of the Soviet Union and Chairman Mao's China. 21st century Essex communities maintain that there is in fact a distinction to be made between good and evil, and 21st century people are finding ways of recovering what was lost in the apparent, temporary mislaying of such concepts.

The church traditionally has been and currently is still often such a safe place in which sorrow and joy may be expressed. The church provides continuity. The building is the same building in which grandparents got married, generations were baptized and funerals were held. Or, if the funeral is held in the crematorium, then ministers bring with them a heritage of continuity and belonging. The minister who has served in one parish for a number of years is uniquely placed to provide in body language, empathy and words the history of individuals, families and whole communities. So when Scott died suddenly two days after Christmas at the age of forty-five, his wife would not countenance the thought of anyone conducting the funeral other than the minister who had conducted Scott's grandfather's funeral twenty years earlier; the one who had baptised Scott with their first son, the one who had proclaimed her and Scott to be man and wife a decade before and who had baptised their seven children. She and Scott had come to church or crematorium chapel only for these moments but nevertheless counted themselves as members of the church and the rector as their minister. Lynch affirms that simply by showing up, in the joyful as well as the tragic moments, the minister demonstrates the willingness of God to put a foot in the deep end of the pool.⁴³⁶ And we may add with Karl Rahner that in that journey we, the bereaved and the lost, find God "exactly where we are, and only there is he to be found".⁴³⁷

Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven

The church in a community is particularly challenged to live out and proclaim the love of

⁴³⁶ Long and Lynch, 2013:21

⁴³⁷ Rahner, 1978:226

God in the face of the death of a child. Jason was eleven years old when he died suddenly in his hallway one Friday afternoon having asked whether he could go out to play. Jason's death was sudden but his mother had lived with the possibility ever since he spent five days in the special care baby unit soon after he was born. The doctors warned that he would never walk. In fact he loved football and dancing. He excelled at drawing. He refused to let his condition get him down. The closest he came to admitting there was a situation was to say, "I've got problems". For eleven years he played the hand that life dealt him. At his funeral we sang "All Things Bright and Beautiful". At the Committal we listened to Westlife's "Flying Without Wings". Seven years after Jason's funeral his mother got married. She came to the church open evening and gently insisted that her wedding be conducted by the same minister who conducted Jason's funeral. Here the church was able to offer a narrative of continuity and the acted parabolic truth that weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning.⁴³⁸

The loss of Jason profoundly changed his mother. The bride getting married was significantly different from the mother who lost a child. As Dennis Klass puts it, "like amputation, parental bereavement is a permanent condition".⁴³⁹ The fact of the loss of an only child cannot be 'got over'. Indeed Jason's mother does not want to 'get over' her loss. What she has done is come to terms with this loss as an inalienable part of her ongoing life. As Mannix says, she has "not abdicated personhood".⁴⁴⁰ She is in a new phase of life. She is bringing herself – the self who continues to mourn her loss – to a new relationship. Her fiancé knew that he was engaged to a bereaved mother. The bride stood at the altar, not despite her loss but in a real sense, because of her loss. The loss of her son was now and for ever a vital element in any description of her. Similarly, three years after Felix killed himself and two years after his parents' marriage had ended, when his mother was asked whether there was yet any new romantic figure in her life, she replied that she could not countenance entering into a relationship with someone who had not known Felix. His life and death were so significant a part of her very being that her life

⁴³⁸ Psalm 30:5

⁴³⁹ Klass and Steffen 2018:344

⁴⁴⁰ Mannix 2017: 83

and her personality simply would not make sense to anyone who had not known him.

It seems to me that where the church can erase the divide between the obviously religious and the apparently secular, then the work of the priest and the gathered congregation can find rich soil in which to grow. Harvey Cox suggests that secularization is not the enemy of the Christian Gospel but is in fact part of God's plan for his world.⁴⁴¹ Jason's family were not part of the worshipping congregation of the church. But grief is grief. It is not secular or religious. It is a human response to loss. It has been suggested that grief is simply love which has nowhere to go. The church does well to tap into grief wherever it is found, acknowledge and bless the pain and, thus, bridge the gap between the language of the church and the language of the one who mourns.

Another paradigm of continuity between secular community and the church may be found in the case of Danny. Danny went to the doctor in April 2015 with a painful knee. After many tests and speculative diagnoses, cancer was diagnosed in September. Danny died in November that year. He was twenty-four. Danny's family asked the funeral director to invite the local vicar to conduct the funeral at the crematorium. One hundred and fifty people attended. As Ewan Kelly, a Church of Scotland Minister with many years' experience as a hospital Chaplain, writes, "Western society still associates a chaplain or clergyperson's role with ritual. This is part of our perceived priestly function – not only can church representatives say the right words but they are also entrusted with being able to do the right thing the right way".⁴⁴² Danny's family turned not just to one man, the vicar, but to him as representative of the community in which they lived and in which Danny died so that he could reflect back to the wider community something of Danny's life, his family's grief and the place of loss in the continuum of life.

Danny's father and his long-term partner had planned to be married by a registrar at a licensed venue in another part of the country the following year. Such was their experience of the care the church took of them when Danny died that they decided to get

⁴⁴¹ Cox, 1965

⁴⁴² Kelly, 2008:120

married legally with just two witnesses in a Registry office and have the vicar who conducted the funeral conduct a service of blessing with renewal of vows at the licensed venue. The sixty-five people who attended the celebration of marriage had all been at the funeral. Nine months after the funeral, I was able to convey the continuity of life and the resilience of the human spirit which is able to find joy even in times of continued grief.

Although neither Jason nor Danny's families, nor the families alluded to above would say even now that they belong to the church, they have known and trusted that the church is there for them. They have confidently been able to access what the church offers – a message of hope in a time of despair; a light in the darkness; the realization that every life matters in the eternal mind of God. The church has been a place and a company of people that acknowledged their grief and welcomed them on the journey to a new kind of reality that encompasses their grief and their ongoing capacity for joy.

These families recognize the words of Kahlil Gibran, "Your joy is your sorrow unmasked. And the selfsame well from which your laughter rises was oftentimes filled with your tears. And how else can it be? The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain".⁴⁴³ And the church has been there, a sacred space for the sorrow and then for the joy. Jason and Danny's families may not actively 'practice' the daily or weekly rituals of the Christian faith but they are keen to plug in to a place and a people that take them seriously in their haltingly spoken and imperfectly understood times of grief and happiness.

Some people in the Canvey Island community invest in clergy an ability to connect with those who have died - an ability that they themselves do not have. One woman wrote to me asking a favour. Some years previously she had promised her mother on her deathbed that she would look after her estranged father. But the father's personality and behaviour over the years had made this increasingly impossible. She ended her letter with the words: "I just need my Mum to understand that I couldn't deal with his deceit and mind games any more. I am sorry. I am in a void. Please tell her I am sorry – I feel terrible. But he

⁴⁴³ Gibran, 1978:36

has broken me. Thank you”. And again, an email with a tribute to be read at a funeral added the words, “... could you send this to Heaven. I know my Dad will be there as he was the most caring, loving, unselfish man I have ever known...”⁴⁴⁴

In the film *Hacksaw Ridge*⁴⁴⁵ in which a conscientious objector seeks to serve in the war while being faithful to his pacifist convictions, the captain needs to lead his men back up to the top of a ridge where the men know that hundreds of Japanese soldiers are waiting. The captain says to the conscientious objector, “They won’t go up there without you. They don’t have your faith but they see that you do – and they want a piece of it”. We must not assume that the other men had no faith in God or that they had never uttered a prayer at all. What they wanted was someone on their side who was manifestly living a life of faith and trust in an omnipotent God. They felt they needed all the help they could get as they went back up to face a lethal army. They needed the conscientious objector, who had suffered so much for his faith, firmly and obviously on their side. The families of Jason and Danny needed those who visibly practice a faith to be on their side when faced with an awful loss and a grief that refused to be consoled. That, surely, is how the flow of faith finds an outlet in a context of acceptance and ongoing experience. That is the role of the Christian minister in Canvey Island.

Ritual, Symbol and Liturgy

We have seen that the families of Jason and Danny along with countless others deal daily with the (often sudden) fact of grief having not been equipped with the tools and the language of church doctrine, custom or liturgy. My experience suggests that at least a quarter of all deaths in Canvey Island are sudden even though there may have been an underlying condition like heart disease or other infirmity. When the unthinkable happens, families are at a loss to verbalise what they feel in the face of a sudden cessation of daily life. A large proportion of those being born today are being born into a community that does not take as read the customs, rituals, rules and seasons of the Church. Shrove Tuesday is celebrated as Pancake Day but Ash Wednesday is generally unmarked;

⁴⁴⁴ G.T’s funeral

⁴⁴⁵ *Hacksaw Ridge*, dir. by Mel Gibson, (Lionsgate, 2016)

Valentine's Day is celebrated but not St Peter's Day; Easter Sunday is known but not Palm Sunday or Holy Week; most greeting cards say Mother's Day rather than Mothering Sunday. But it is interesting to note that an expensive wedding venue near Canvey Island conducts civil marriage ceremonies in a building separate from the main reception hall. This smaller building, catering to couples who do not wish to be married in church, is called "The Chapel". In this and other ways we see how the vestigial remnants of Church practice are incorporated into the life of modern society.

In our day in England the vast majority of those who at a push would call themselves Christian or at least living by the rule of doing to others as you would have them do to you, access the liturgies of the occasional offices only on TV when they watch a Royal Wedding or the funeral of a national figure, sporting legend, actor, performer or of someone who has borne an illness in the glare of publicity (like Jade Goody) or the child victim of kidnap, abuse and murder. It was said of Whitney Houston's four-hour funeral which was televised in full from the New Hope Baptist Church, Newark, New Jersey in February 2012 that the world came to Church. Similarly the funeral of George Floyd, whose death at the hands of a policeman ignited the *Black Lives Matter* movement in 2020, was shown in full on the rolling news of BBC television. Many will access the Liturgy of the Eucharist only at Christmas live in the Parish Church or Cathedral or as relayed on television. This may be seen as what Stig Hjarvard calls the mediatization of religion.⁴⁴⁶ On the one hand, ordinary people now have unprecedented access to a huge range of religious acts of worship and ceremonies but, on the other, the version of religion available is that which the producers and financial backers think appropriate, profitable or catering to the mood of the time.

The Parish of Canvey Island now has the means and the technologically savvy people to manage the streaming of weekly Sunday services and other major services on the internet. While it is still true that not everyone has access to the internet, these services have been watched and appreciated by a wide cross section of people who are housebound, or who live abroad or who for one reason or another cannot get to the church that day. This

⁴⁴⁶ Hjarvard, 2008

facility in churches and cathedrals was particularly appreciated, not only in Canvey Island but across the world, during the lockdown mandated by governments in the wake of Covid-19 in 2020/21.

This is all a far cry from medieval times when Bishop, Archdeacon and Parish Priest ensured that the 'faithful' attended church weekly for Matins and Evensong and made their Communion at the very least at Christmas and Easter and only after having made their confession. Eamon Duffy in his seminal work, *The Stripping of the Altars*, maintains that, yes, the lay Christians dutifully attended these acts of worship but that is not all they did: "They expected and gave far more in the way of involvement with the action and symbolism of the liturgy than these minimum requirements suggest".⁴⁴⁷

Duffy follows Mervyn James⁴⁴⁸ in suggesting that, as the church was the most usual gathering place, the liturgy of the church reflected the community in which it stood. Indeed the Church may be seen as imposing an order on to a chaotic society. It mattered who got to be in the processions and in what order they appeared. To this day Lay Licensed Ministers are followed in procession by Deacons, Priests, Canons, Archdeacons and, finally, Bishops and Archbishops.

James saw the Corpus Christi procession as "the point of reference in relation to which the structure of precedence and authority in the town is made visually present".⁴⁴⁹ He sees the procession as an attempt to tame and contain disorder or to impose the hegemony of particular groups. "Bloody riots" broke out during the Corpus Christi procession at Chester in 1399. An ordinance was issued in Newcastle in 1536 regulating the procession "in avoideing of dissencion and discord that hath been among the Crafts of the Towne as of man slaughter and murder and other mischiefs ... and to induce love, charity, peace and right".⁴⁵⁰

⁴⁴⁷ Duffy, 1992:11

⁴⁴⁸ James, 1986

⁴⁴⁹ James, 1986, as quoted by Duffy 1992:11

⁴⁵⁰ James, 1986, as quoted by Duffy 1992:12

In contemporary funeral planning, great weight is given to who shall sit where and in what order people will enter the chapel. Even before the cortege reaches the chapel or church it matters who travels in which funeral limousine and the order in which the vehicles follow the hearse. On arrival at the chapel or church, the funeral director is heard instructing those gathered, “Ladies and gentleman we shall in a moment enter the chapel – family followed by friends”. In the case of split families and second marriages much discussion may be had with regard to the place of the first spouse or the children from the original family. Generally speaking, people behave themselves for the duration of the funeral and sit where the main mourners put them. But not infrequently arguments will break out in the flower-viewing area or more probably after drink has been consumed at the reception. In one case recently at Basildon Crematorium when the family in the limousine following the hearse arrived and saw members of the original family standing waiting by the door, they gave instruction to the funeral director to drive straight back out and they held the funeral later in the day at a time unknown to the other family.

All this I suggest is no more than the medieval desire to establish the place of the deceased in family and society and the place of each person attending the funeral in the life of the deceased. Kinship and status in community matter now as much as they ever did in bygone times.

Occasionally the mourners in planning the funeral will ask the minister not to mention a member of the family who is estranged from the deceased. The minister might explain that not to mention someone, who everyone at the funeral knows exists, is simply to draw more attention to that person not less. But at root of the request is the desire to make dead the one who is estranged as though they never existed. The dead can have no further influence on the living. The trump phrase which most ministers cannot ignore is, “He would not want him mentioned”. One might be disenfranchised of property and other inheritance when left out of a will. When left out of the narrative of a life, one is

disenfranchised even of grief.⁴⁵¹ When the family is adamant that someone is to be omitted from the narrative, the minister is well placed to offer the disenfranchised person, whose loss has not been recognised, a separate act of remembrance and letting go. Such separate liturgies have been an occasion of healing for many and goes some way to countering the power of the family to disenfranchise those whom they see as outside their orbit.⁴⁵²

In the case of a local community figure or a national statesman, the seating plan is fraught. And how should the rival needs of family grief and public pageant be balanced? The solution arrived at by the family of the murdered Essex MP, Sir David Amess, in November 2021 was to have two funerals: a private family funeral in a large church in his constituency, followed the next day by a ‘political’ funeral in Westminster Cathedral. We might spare a thought for the one in charge of seating for the funeral of Shimon Peres in Jerusalem in 2016 with world leaders flying in from every corner of the globe and of every political persuasion. He must have thanked his God at the end of that day that the funeral had passed off peacefully and there had been none of Mervyn James’s “bloody riots”.

So just as the church liturgy and procession is a reflection of, or a paradigm for, the community in which it stands, so has the whole liturgical cycle of the church’s year influenced and indeed shaped the year and attendant activities of the community in England.

As stated above, Duffy suggests that lay folk are far more involved in the church cycle than mere observance of church attendance would require. Christmas Midnight Mass, Christingle Services, Carol Services and Carol Singing are all engaged in by people who would cheerfully tick Bullivant’s ‘no religion’ box. Mothering Sunday (more usually called Mothers’ Day now) is marked by gifts and flowers and a special effort to spoil mums and grandmothers. And this is now matched by Father’s Day on a fixed Sunday in June which has no corresponding originating festival in the Christian calendar. For the

⁴⁵¹ Doka, 2002

⁴⁵² Walter & Bailey, 2020: 82,2: 175-195

past few years the British Heart Foundation has encouraged people to give up chocolate in the month of March and to donate the money saved to their cause. No mention is made of the word “Lent”. The period of Advent sees each child being given a (usually secular) Advent Calendar. The church has caught up with this reality by providing religious Advent Calendars with chocolate, having not seen the need for chocolate as an incentive for many years. Shrove Tuesday (Pancake Day) is marked by copious quantities of pancake mixture, sugar and lemon juice. As Easter moves, so Shrove Tuesday and Mothering Sunday move. These feasts are celebrated across the country with hardly a murmur that the dates may vary by as much as a month from year to year depending on the date of the first full moon following the Sunday after the spring equinox.

Some would say that such celebrations are no longer (if they ever were) religious observances. I suggest that they are markers - celebrations and sensitivities – of our humanity which religion tried to formalize. For the past few years several parishes across the country have arranged on Ash Wednesday for the ceremony of Ashing to be offered to commuters outside train stations and to shoppers outside supermarkets. This activity is catchily entitled “Ashes to go”. This has been well received by people who do not necessarily belong to any worshipping community and is offered by ministers of an increasing number of parishes each year.

There is not a little irony in the fact that, just as the church took over the sacred dates, times and places of those who were considered pagan,⁴⁵³ so now modern society has taken over the vocabulary and liturgical trappings of the festivals of the Christian Church and made them their own. In Alan Billings’s view, religion has been ‘democratized’.⁴⁵⁴ When people feel the need to attend to a spiritual aspect of life, in the event of, say, a bereavement, they may turn to the church or they may craft a ceremony that uses bits of church liturgy and bits of other rituals that encapsulate their sense of loss.

Joss was 18 when he left home one evening in what seemed a normal frame of mind before

⁴⁵³ See Chapter Three

⁴⁵⁴ Billings, 2010:18

being found next morning, hanging by a rope from the sea wall. On the anniversary of his death scores of his friends and family gathered in the evening at the same place on the sea wall. There was hardly any conversation but a quiet intensity as they lit the Japanese lanterns they had bought especially for the purpose. Little by little the successfully lit lanterns rose gently into the dark night sky.

None of those friends or family members belonged to any church. Joss and his siblings had gone to the local church primary school, not because the family saw themselves as religious but because it had an excellent academic record. Joss spent most of his school days in trouble of one sort or another. When I showed up at the sea wall on the anniversary of his death, Joss's sister threw her arms around me and exclaimed, "You lovely, lovely man!" Why did my presence matter so much to her and those gathered there? What were they doing lighting lanterns on a dark night? It is as though, having expelled the religion of the church school out the front door, they ushered it back in through the back door. The emphasis for modern individuals is on creating positive experiences. Several traditions may be called up to create what is required for the present moment. There is now what Billings calls a "free market in spirituality".⁴⁵⁵ Religion is no longer an item to be acquired pre-packed and ready to digest. It is more a quest – a journey to be undertaken. People now want to seek and search for themselves. Different churches and, indeed, different faiths may each have something useful to contribute to the backpack of belongings necessary for the enterprise of the journey through life. Education, international travel, literacy and the worldwide web have all enabled people to experience so much at first hand for themselves and then settle on a view of life and death that makes sense to them. For many, practices shape beliefs and beliefs shape practices.⁴⁵⁶ A church that recognises this is a church that will engage with people as they actually interact, cope and think in the present age and place. This will be a church which stops seeing people who use different language as 'them out there' and begins to see everyone as simply 'us'. Harrai suggests that "syncretism might, in fact, be the single great world religion".⁴⁵⁷ I

⁴⁵⁵ Billings, 2010:19

⁴⁵⁶ Percy, 2010:11

⁴⁵⁷ Harari, 2014: 223

prefer to see people's response to questions of this life and the next as a smorgasbord: a collection of options from different strands of our society, history culture and geography. Joss's sister and friends were engaged in a religious activity, a hybrid of culture and instinctive theology: they needed to do something to express what they felt – that Joss was still alive somewhere; that he was aware somehow; that they could let him know that they had not forgotten him; that they were still a family – a community of friends – in which his absence was marked. They could bring no light to him on that dark night one year previously: he had given no sign that he was in distress; he had not reached out for help. But by returning to the very spot where, and at the time when, he had killed himself, they could create light in the appalling darkness. Their expression of religion was pragmatic and sacramental. They reached for ordinary things to express what was inexpressible. And when I showed up that night they saw the church had come. The gap had been bridged. Their activity was blessed. We were simply 'us'. As Davie phrases it, "most important in my view is the recognition of agency in this project: that is the ability of the young people in question to reflect, to respond and to create. Such attributes are easily missed using conventional methodologies that rely too much on the spoken word. An inability to express oneself verbally does not constitute a dumbing down; it is simply a different way of doing things."⁴⁵⁸

And I wonder why the sister's greeting meant so much then, and continues to mean so much to me these years later. I, the minister visiting the place and the people of grief, had closed the gap between the formal teaching about God and the place where they were in their grief. The minister who is called to be in the world but not of the world, had perhaps connected the fabric of the reality of a dreadful death with a glimpse of the glory of everlasting life. By my being present the church was seen to have recognised and sanctified a practice that meant everything to the participants. Here was the minister as the backlash between secular and religious, between church and community, between sin and grace. The lights they lit were lights shining in the darkness and the darkness could not overcome it. Some would say this is not religion but spirituality and would seek to make a distinction between the two. Wade Clark Roof, an American sociologist of

⁴⁵⁸ Davie, 2015:171

religion, suggests that everyone from the baby boomer age and onwards is a seeker of spirituality rather than someone who is happy to settle in a religion. He quotes someone he interviewed who makes the distinction between spirituality and religion:

“Spirituality I think is what enters you and lifts you up and moves you to be a better person, a more open person. I don’t think religion does that. Religion tells you what to do and when to do it, when to kneel, when to stand up, all of that stuff. Lots of rules.”⁴⁵⁹

As parish priest of Canvey Island I would hope that the spirituality the interviewee describes is found in religion and that the religion he describes is empty, ritualistic and barren, and has forgotten what it is there for. As Peterson suggests, such spirituality is concerned with conserving the structure, while spirituality is more interested in updating the structure.⁴⁶⁰ The interviewee would agree with Harari when he says that “religion is a deal, whereas spirituality is a journey.”⁴⁶¹ In my view, religion started as a quest for answers to big questions like “What is the meaning of life?” But, along the way religions have tended to fall into the cul-de-sac of providing, and then insisting on, ready-made, one-size-fits-all answers. Sadly, religions have then found spirituality dangerous as people arrive (or at least pause) at answers that do not fit the prescribed doctrine. Those on spiritual journeys in their turn have become more and more disappointed with the rehearsed platitudes that pass for answers in their quest. The spiritual journey is almost by definition a lonely journey with few *com-panions* (those with whom one can break bread) on the way. Religion, by contrast, is a means of harnessing the masses, sorting out the procession, and shepherding or herding the flock in the direction in which the shepherd believes that they should go. The spiritual journey never ends. Those who mistake a resting place for the destination can become quite evangelical on the matter, recruit like-minded souls and form just what they were railing against – another religion or at least another version of an existing religion. The algorithms of social media are designed to help people see only those opinions that suit their own. Instagram, Facebook and Snapchat are modern-day shepherds of those who find new ways and forms of expressing latent,

⁴⁵⁹ Roof, 2001:304

⁴⁶⁰ R. Peterson, 2018

⁴⁶¹ Harari,2017:214

unorganised spirituality.

Joss's friends found an energising spirituality outside the walls of the church – at the seawall: the spot chosen by Joss at which to end his life. And the church was seen to approve of, and to bless, the ritual. And this surely is part of the central selling point of the church – that there is light in the darkness. No wonder Peter the disciple warmed himself by the fire in the dark courtyard as the Light of the World was on trial for his life. We find our light where we can. Indeed, many of Joss's friends have turned to Facebook and other social media to light virtual candles and to write messages to him. The social media page dedicated to Joss is "Joss, an angel in the sky". And it is the fact that many people now find the light outside the traditional structures of the church that the church finds very difficult to bear. Billings suggests it is as though the church, having realised it could no longer be a dominant player in the cultural and social affairs of the world, decided to set itself up as a permanent and loyal opposition.⁴⁶² This is clearly easier than grappling with, and getting to understand, the issues and the mind-sets that affect and govern the behaviour of generations unschooled in church doctrine and liturgy. As Percy says, "we need open minds, open eyes and open hearts to the places where God will be found. And even when he is not discerned, he is nonetheless present".⁴⁶³

This sense of the church being a "loyal opposition" to the world was seen clearly in January 2020 when the House of Bishops, at a time when every popular series on television includes homosexual partnerships, issued a statement which said that those in civil partnerships should be celibate and that "sexual relationships outside heterosexual marriage are regarded as falling short of God's purpose for human beings".⁴⁶⁴ At a stroke this statement cast all homosexual people, all in civil partnerships and all in same-sex marriages as being outside the grace of God. This statement declared that there was, flying in the face of definitions, a cut-off point for grace. Grace which has a cut-off point is

⁴⁶² Billings, 2010:69

⁴⁶³ Percy, 2010: 63

⁴⁶⁴ A pastoral statement from The House of Bishops of The Church of England, 22nd January 2020

simply not grace. The dismayed and appalled response from those who have no connection with the church, and from many who do, was swift. A number of newspaper headlines suggested the church was now a “laughing stock” in the world. Those in charge of the social media profile of the parish of Canvey Island quickly posted a note saying that “we are an inclusive parish and all are welcome to worship here.” A further irony is that a YouGov poll commissioned by the Ozanne Foundation the following month found that 48 percent of self-identified Anglicans in England believe that same-sex marriage is “right”.⁴⁶⁵ This was an increase of 10 percent on the figure given seven years previously. The issue was further complicated the month after that when the Archbishop of Canterbury attended the installation of the new Primate of Uganda. A press release by the Ugandan Church stated that “The Church of Uganda is, in fact, concerned about the Archbishop of Canterbury’s support for homosexuality and same-sex unions. He has consecrated a gay Bishop in England, invited gay and lesbian Bishops to the upcoming Lambeth Conference and promotes the recognition of same-sex unions in the Church, schools and society ... for these reasons the Church of Uganda will not be attending the Lambeth Conference.”⁴⁶⁶ The people of Essex and elsewhere are confused and bemused by the ability of the church in different places and in different times to interpret Christian teaching in diametrically opposed ways.

The Christian minister is called to bridge the gap between the members of the congregation and those in the community who see church-belonging as irrelevant. John was a member of the church congregation of Canvey Island. His coffin was brought into church to rest overnight before his funeral. His family were encouraged to spend time in the evening in church with the coffin. John was an avid Liverpool football fan. He and his grandson would frequently attend matches. Liverpool was playing the night before the funeral. His grandson who never came to church felt able to bring his iPad, sit next to the coffin and post on Facebook, “Just watching Liverpool for the last time with Grandad”. On the eve of the funeral the church provided a place for the grandson to spend time doing what he and grandad often did together. For him the funeral next day

⁴⁶⁵ YouGov Poll 2020

⁴⁶⁶ M. Davies 2020

was easier to endure as it had to do simply with letting go of the physical remnant of granddad. The essential granddad lived on; the memories and the love endured.

One of the most popular episodes of the Television series, *Call the Midwife*, broadcast in January 2019, finished with the words: “There is light, there is. Look for it. Look for it shining over your shoulder, on the pass. It was light where you went once, it is light where you are now, it will be light where you will go again”.⁴⁶⁷ These sentences were shared on social media several hundred times following the episode. What at first sight appears to be a secular world turns out to be another incarnation of the religious which contains built-in themes honed in the crucible of Christian history and doctrine. People may prefer to call themselves ‘spiritual’ rather than ‘religious’ as the latter word conjures up organised, compulsory and didactic indoctrination. The word spiritual leaves the door open to craft one’s own version of the gateway to light. This certainty of ongoing life and love occurs quite independently of church belonging. And so, when the popular presenter of the reality TV show, *Love Island*, killed herself in February 2020 her friend who had worked with her in another TV show, *Strictly Come Dancing*, addressed her deceased colleague in a post on Facebook, “I am not sure when, but I know I’ll see you on the dance floor again. And I hope you are at peace and know that you are loved.”⁴⁶⁸

Social Media

A great deal of the foregoing makes reference to the increased place of social media in modern, everyday life. Elaine Kasket⁴⁶⁹ affirms that the use of social media in expressing grief and maintaining living bonds has created a new normal within bereavement. As we have seen in the last paragraph, the second-person mode of address is used as the bereaved speak directly to the one who has died. Such words are expected to be read by other mourners and so swiftly, in Walter’s phrase quoted earlier, a durable biography is fashioned. Those who have never known a world without internet naturally expect to communicate with friends at any hour of the day and from any part of the world. Death

⁴⁶⁷ Call The Midwife, BBC One, 20 January 2019

⁴⁶⁸ Whitmore, 2020

⁴⁶⁹ Kasket, 2018

need not interrupt this communication. It is instructive to note that HMV's original image of the dog listening to his master's voice in fact pictured the dog sitting on a coffin. Edison's 1877 invention of the phonograph enabled voices to be preserved beyond the grave. The invention of social media has made more possible than ever before communication at a distance and has done so much to reverse the privatising and isolation of grief. Hundreds of photographs of the deceased posted online keep the one gone ever present in the day-to-day lives of the surviving friends and relatives. Photographs usually include the one deceased along with the one who is posting the picture. The on-line presence of the smiling, vibrant, good-looking, cheeky teenager is a world away from the broken, strangulated body of the son and brother found at the bottom of the sea wall early one morning. Just under two thousand people have 'liked' Joss's Facebook page. The cover photo is of his Dad and his nephews sitting on the bench installed in his memory. Comfort may be had, at no cost, by those who continue to miss him knowing that they are part of a large community of friends and relatives who share a grief. And each year Joss and countless others who have died are wished a happy "heavenly birthday" on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. It may be asked to what extent Facebook is a modern and safer alternative to séances and Ouija boards. The internet is here to stay and the church has of late come to terms with this fact. In the way that the printing press made the spread of opinions possible without the need for the mediation of educated officers of the church, so cyberspace has opened up new frontiers which evangelists like Pierre Rabin and Angela Ann Zukowski have made it their business to chart.⁴⁷⁰

The local church has been able to use social media to reclaim the personality of one who has languished with dementia for several years in a nursing home. When Wendy died in July 2021 after several years of isolation and unknowing, two photos of her as a pastoral assistant and on pilgrimage to the Holy Land which were posted on the parish Facebook page enabled the congregation to share memories of happier times, express gratitude for her work and spirituality, and pray that she might now at last rest in peace and rise in glory.

⁴⁷⁰ Zukowski, 2003

Curiously, in the event of a tragedy, even strangers feel moved to comment on the *Wall* of a memorial page with sentences like, “I didn’t know you, but the story of your life and death has touched my heart”. This reached quite ridiculous levels in 2018 when the courts ruled that Alder Hay Children’s Hospital was right not to let baby Alfie be released from hospital to be taken abroad for treatment. Social Media went viral with death threats to hospital staff and, after Alfie died, suggestions about how even those who had never met the family could mourn Alfie’s death.

The American model and television personality Chrissy Teigen has 13.2 million followers on Twitter. When she suffered a miscarriage at the beginning of October 2020 she posted black and white photographs of herself sitting on a hospital bed wracked with grief along with photos of her husband John Legend (13.7 million followers) and their dead baby. In words addressed to her child, Teigen wrote, “I’m so sorry that the first few moments of your life were met with so many complications that we couldn’t give you the home you needed to survive. We will always love you.” The response among Twitter users and in the rest of the world was divided. Some thought Teigen was brave for publicly sharing the pain of miscarriage and neo-natal birth. They thought that this gave ordinary people with their private, largely unnoticed ache a chance to plug in to a more public grief. Others took the opportunity to draw attention to Teigen and Legend’s pro-abortion stance, suggesting that they might now want to reconsider. Still others wondered why anyone would want to take photographs of their deep pain and share it with strangers. They wondered whether there is nothing that cannot be deployed to attract attention on social media. This last chorus was magnified when it was realized that the grieving couple had employed the services of professional bereavement photographers to capture/restage the pain. There will hardly be a pregnant woman in Canvey Island who has not seen and followed the grief of Teigen and Legend. The traditional church, which could never pay for such engagement, was absent from the conversation.

Those skilled in modern technology have created video games which memorialize loved ones who have died. *That Dragon, Cancer*⁴⁷¹ is based on one family’s experience of

⁴⁷¹ Numinous Games, 2016

raising their son who was diagnosed with terminal cancer at the age of twelve months and died four years later. Melissa D Irwin in her chapter entitled *Mourning 2.0* suggests that social media can “serve as a wholly secular space”.⁴⁷² But I would suggest that the certainty of the ongoing life of the deceased person who is being addressed, references to heaven and angels, along with rituals like lighting virtual candles, makes the social media space an intensely religious one albeit divorced from the traditional site of the church, churchyard and cemetery. And this is a space in which everyone may have a voice. The narrative is not limited to the eulogy by the next of kin or the minister who has been told what to say by relatives of the deceased.

So after Jason’s road traffic accident put him in intensive care in the Philippines, a crowd-funding Facebook campaign to pay his hospital bills was launched. The debt did not die with Jason and the campaign continued after his death. Social media campaigns and memorialization should not be seen as separate from or in opposition to, the life of the church but rather as another expression of faith in the ongoing nature of life beyond this one. Irwin calls this ‘thanatechnology’.⁴⁷³

One side effect of this digital age and the profusion of photographs easily accessible is that the families of the deceased have less control over how the dead are remembered and memorialized. I remember, even though I was only 9 when Winston Churchill lay dying in 1965, being fascinated by how a spokesman would issue bulletins periodically. Information was edited, controlled and fed piecemeal by his family to a waiting world. Now, by contrast, the first a close family member might hear of a death is through a comment on Facebook, “RIP Bill”. Similarly at wedding rehearsals ministers are routinely asked by the bride to request that the congregation do not post pictures of the bride and groom until after the evening reception is well underway so that the evening guests see the dress first-hand rather than plastered all over iPhones.

Privacy settings allowing, the digital legacy is available equally to the immediate family, the friends, the former friends, the former partner and the estranged. The life of the one

⁴⁷² Irwin, 2018: 319

⁴⁷³ Irwin, 2018:328

deceased is now more than ever before open to sundry and contradictory enduring biographies. Douglas Davies puts it well when he writes, “Identity was not simply to be gained from active, face-to-face, participation in a community or congregation of others, but also from on-line contacts, it could adopt two or more forms in a ‘second life’ on-line presentation of fictively imagined selves”.⁴⁷⁴ Such a ‘fictively imagined’ self will have consequences in on-going relationships in life and in death. One of my sons was surprised, having ‘followed’ someone on Twitter for a while, to find on meeting them that their face-to-face personality was shy, retiring and insular, quite removed from the dynamic, outgoing, creative personality portrayed on-line. When Felix’s mother⁴⁷⁵ suggested to one of his bullies that she really did not want her and her friends at the funeral, she was surprised by how different the girl’s personality was when not shielded by the dark screen of iPhone or computer.

Some of us are concerned that posterity will not have very much to look back on to evaluate the nature of our current society. As new technologies replace older technologies, as VHS videos may no longer be played and machines to play audio tapes may no longer be purchased, the question can be asked, how enduring is the material stored on the internet? If my memory of my friend is dependent on retrieving photographs of the way we were, what will happen to our relationship when he has died and I can no longer access the online catalogue of our relationship? When Clare’s husband alerted Facebook to the fact that Clare had died, her Facebook page was frozen and entitled *Remembering*. Family and friends can continue to access the photographs and the opinions of Clare as the years pass, much as we would look again at a scrap book or photo album.

The world of the internet impacts the outward expression of grief. In March 2019 BBC News carried a report of a man called Jasen in Florida who for three years had played *World of Warcraft* with a man called Dave whom he had never actually met face to face. When Dave died, Jasen said that the process of grieving was just as difficult as it would have been for a friend in real life: “A lot of my friends have been cultivated over the

⁴⁷⁴ Davies, 2012:213

⁴⁷⁵ cf Chapter Twelve

internet, so for me it had absolutely no difference whatsoever. It could have been someone I had known from high school or had been in my weekly sports league or anything else”.⁴⁷⁶ Jasen and his online friends were always quite clear that what happened offline was more important than what happened online. One of their mottos was ‘Real life first’. But after an online friendship that lasted three years, there was, for Jasen and the other gamers, no funeral to attend, no body to view, no grave to visit. So the gamers chatted to each other. As well as sharing stories they held an online event to commemorate Dave’s death, sharing anecdotal memories of him and the jokes they had enjoyed: “He was really a fixture of our family and of our weekly gatherings”. As Jasen’s wife posted on Twitter, “I’m overhearing them playing today in his honour; laughing, talking, reminiscing about their friend. Don’t ever tell me “online friends” aren’t real friends”.

All this interaction on the internet has led to a new problem. For about 40 years the bereaved have faced the difficult question of what to do with answerphone messages of those now deceased. Many have not the courage to delete them and, indeed, get some comfort from hearing the much-loved voice again and again. For even longer we have been able to look again at family cine films and DVDs of holidays, weddings and other significant moments. Now we are faced with the legacy, not just of the now redundant toothbrush, dressing gown and handbag, but also of the digital aspect of a life now ended. Many do not do anything with the material and each year, despite the fact that they have died, friends are reminded by Facebook that “Today is so-and-so’s birthday. Help him celebrate”.

What should be done with all the photographs, opinions and sundry comments that an individual has posted online after that individual has died? We have just seen that Clare’s husband asked that her Facebook page be memorialised - made into a ‘Remembering’ page – a sort of photo album that friends can turn to at any time. The social media company Twitter announced in 2019 that it would delete all inactive accounts. The furore was swift and enormous when it was realised that such inactive accounts would include accounts of those who had died. Brendan Cox, the husband of the murdered MP Jo Cox,

⁴⁷⁶ Newsbeat, 2019

said it would be like losing letters she had written: “I think it is a very modern equivalent of keeping someone’s diary or letters... There are a lot of things on there where she talks about the work that she is doing, she posted a few bits on there in terms of family, and it’s something that I want the kids to scroll through when they’re older”.⁴⁷⁷ Twitter cancelled plans to delete such accounts.

In 2018 Chris Goode wrote a play entitled *User Not Found*.⁴⁷⁸ The one-man play has toured England in small café-type venues to great critical acclaim. Goode sees the café as a contemporary office/anonymous communal space in which people connect to the world through screens and yet are insulated from the world by headphones. The individual is cocooned in an insular world set in a communal arena. In the play Terry has just discovered that his former partner from whom he has been estranged for 7 months, has died. Before he died, the partner had nominated Terry as his “Online Legacy Executor”. Terry has to decide whether to keep, edit or delete forever the online digital presence of the one who has died. He does not want the job of digital executor but discovers that legally the role cannot be assigned to anyone else. Terry has to deal with his on-going anger that his partner left him and wonders whether in this “weird virtual afterlife” he might find a way of forgiving him, or at least acknowledging or accepting the situation. “This could be a gift”, he says. Terry asks the audience rhetorically what would we do if we had the chance, just before the moment of our death, to push a button that would erase every online trace, “every virtual fragment, every tremor of your human frailty that went out into the world expressed as a cloudburst of ones and zeros.”⁴⁷⁹

Terry, like the minister in the house of the bereaved, feels as though he is on the edge of the life of the deceased. He feels he is on the edge and in danger of drowning in all the information. He comes to the conclusion that, “Death is a story told by the living” and furthermore that “It’s not what you keep that defines who you are. It’s the things you let

⁴⁷⁷ Harris, 2017

⁴⁷⁸ Goode, 2018

⁴⁷⁹ Goode, 2018:scene 6

go”.⁴⁸⁰ Terry takes one more look at the 34 bundles of information that his former partner used as a means of processing the world; “placing himself within it. Reaching out. Making friends. Being the beautiful man he was, Before me, with me, after me.”⁴⁸¹ He selects ‘All’ and presses the delete button. The computer asks whether he is sure; he affirms that he is sure but he thanks the computer for asking. After a few seconds the screen goes blank. All digital trace of his former partner has been erased.

In October 2019 a clergy friend of mine conducted a poll on Facebook asking contacts whether they would delete all digital traces of themselves before they died if they could. The question that was posed was, “Now that each of us has recorded so many thoughts, opinions and pictures on social media, if you knew you were about to die and had the option of pressing a button to delete every single piece of your social media history, would you press the button so no one could see it again?” 76 people voted of whom 13% said ‘Yes, I would want it gone’ and 87% said ‘No, I’d leave it for others’. I suspect that the high percentage of those who voted to preserve the material is due to the fact that people are now more careful with what they post on social media as they are far more aware than formerly of how careless statements made on social media are there for ever and can resurface to haunt them in later life and career. It is as though we are self-editing our biography as we go along, showing the highlights of our life with half an eye on how we shall look to posterity.

Television and Film

In 2019 Netflix released an episode called *Be Right Back* in their series *Black Mirror*.⁴⁸² It is called *Black Mirror* as in a dark screen of a computer or television when it is switched off and all that is left is one’s own reflection. In this particular episode a recently bereaved widow is persuaded to sign up to a facility whereby she can keep a relationship going with her husband by means of an online chat. His part of the chat is harvested from the trail of his personality he has left on various social media platforms. Later she upgrades the

⁴⁸⁰ Goode, 2018:scene 8

⁴⁸¹ Goode, 2018:scene 8

⁴⁸² ‘Be Right Back’, *Black Mirror*, written by Charlie Brooker, 2019

conversation to speaking with ‘him’ on the phone. Finally, it is upgraded again to her ordering a special mannequin which takes on his physical appearance. But still all the avatar’s responses are based solely on what her husband said and posted online. The avatar is unable to have any original responses when faced with a new situation that is not prefigured online. In the end the widow places the avatar in the loft where the family tend to store photographs and other memorabilia of those who have died. She and her daughter visit the avatar in the loft once a year on the daughter’s birthday. Older folk may watch *Songs of Praise* which has been successful since 1961, but series such as *Black Mirror* are watched in Essex and elsewhere by millions of teenagers and young adults who, like everybody else, are seeking to weave a narrative of belonging and to make sense of their lives in the context of a greater whole particularly in the face of bereavement.

Similarly, in March 2020 Pixar Animation Studios, a subsidiary of Walt Disney Studios, released a film entitled *Onward*.⁴⁸³ In it an elf is granted a wish on his 16th birthday – that he and his brother can spend one more day with their father who died when they were very young. The wish comes to pass only in part: they are given just Dad’s chino-wearing dancing legs. The quest to bring back the whole of Dad is funny, poignant and heart-breaking. As the fantastic film unfolds it becomes clear that the story is not so much about Dad as about the brothers’ relationship with each other in the context of being sons of a dead father. The work is based on the director and co-writer’s own story of loss as his father died when he was just one and his brother was three years old. The very title suggests the need to keep going in the face of a search for meaning in loss and bereavement and that this meaning is found in the ongoing relationships of those who are left behind and their understanding of the place of the one now gone in their lives past and present.

Such productions, along with the previously mentioned *Harry Potter*, *Star Wars* and *Finding Nemo* creations, address in a modern way what eternal life might mean and how we who are left might function in the new reality of loss. These episodes do what the church is meant to do, particularly at a time of bereavement: holding up a mirror so that folk can see themselves in relation to whatever is going on. There is a theory that there

⁴⁸³ *Onward*, dir. by Dan Scanlon (Pixar, 2020)

used to be a mirror attached to the bottom of Rublev's icon of the Trinity. This enabled the viewer to place himself at the table with the divine. Modern systems of communication allow everyone to be in touch with physical and metaphysical things and ideas like never before. In the rituals offered to the bereaved in the face of loss, the church can hold up a black mirror in which 21st century folk can see themselves and construct a narrative of what it means to be alive and what it means to have died. The minister's task is to help the bereaved angle the mirror correctly to enable them to see their reflection honestly and deeply. The Apostle Paul put this well when he said that in this way all of us are seeing the glory of the Lord as "though reflected in a mirror (and) are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another".⁴⁸⁴

For 2,000 years the Church has proclaimed the message that "life is eternal and love is immortal and death is only an horizon, and an horizon is nothing save the limit of our sight".⁴⁸⁵ So in the transitory nature of even the digital age, the church in Canvey Island and elsewhere needs to represent a timelessness. The vocabulary and vernacular may change, the poetry may change but the need for a coherent narrative of life and death and on-going life has not. And people will fashion this narrative with materials that are to hand – with the church or without it.

So it is clear that community and society have not just to do with physical boundaries of where people live and work but encompass how people think and interact and what they access by way of hope, comfort and belief in a life that outlasts this one. The sense of reality being far greater than what is visible is found particularly when it comes to people's innate and learned understanding of levels of existence beyond the human. I turn now to the traditional and popular understanding of the place of angels in the grand scheme of things. This is a concept that increasingly finds a place in the vocabulary and understanding of people in Canvey Island in the 21st century however much in daily life they are separated from the liturgy and practice of the church.

⁴⁸⁴ 2 Corinthians 3:18 (NRSV)

⁴⁸⁵ William Penn (1644-1718) quoted by Rossiter W Raymond in *Death is Only An Horizon*

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Angels

In Chapter Eight we saw how Lin was comforted by her sense of the presence of angels as she lay dying of adrenal cancer. It may be that the human psyche is hardwired to see some intelligent agency as being behind moments of good or ill fortune. I have not come across anyone in Canvey Island who currently would blame illness on some spell cast by a person who they have upset in the past. But many would ascribe good fortune and healing to the active intervention of an angel or the spirit of a departed loved one. We saw earlier that modern poetry popular at funerals does not blame God for the death of a loved one but, rather, focuses on the one gone as now being with God and able, from that vantage point, to share in the personal care and concern that God has for those left behind. The word used for the condition of the one gone is often ‘angel’. As Pascal Boyer suggests, “each individual has a unique perspective on the surrounding objects”.⁴⁸⁶ Such a view would see an interaction between all life forms. This is what some would call reciprocity and what Rohr calls the Divine Dance.⁴⁸⁷ Boyer points out that because we have a name for a thing, “we may be tempted to think that it actually is a thing”.⁴⁸⁸ And so it is with the word ‘angel’ which has gained widespread currency in contemporary 21st century Essex society. The word is used freely by those who have no history of Christian education or any sense of belonging to the church. This I think is due to what Boyer refers to as “cultural evolution”.⁴⁸⁹ Following Boyd and Richerson, Boyer suggests that cultural material comes in different packets of information called memes transmitted from individual to individual. The memes that mutate and survive in their turn go on to influence, with the help of, inter alia, the sermon, the printing press or social media, the culture in which they are transmitted. Cultural concepts then evolve in a particular direction. This is surely the history of the concept of angels. Before quoting specific examples of modern contextual usage of the word ‘angel’, I turn first to how the Biblical

⁴⁸⁶ Boyer, 2018:246

⁴⁸⁷ Rohr, 2016

⁴⁸⁸ Boyer, 2018:246

⁴⁸⁹ Boyer, 2018:250

and Christian concept of angels has generally evolved in modern conversation, perception and understanding.

Psalm 8 suggests that human beings were created by God as a separate order of being from divine beings. Verses 4 and 5 of the psalm may be translated thus:

4 what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?

⁵ Yet you have made them a little lower than angels,
and crowned them with glory and honour.

The Hebrew word translated ‘angels’ here is ‘elohim’ literally ‘Gods’ or ‘divine beings’. In whatever way the word should be understood, the Psalmist is clear that human beings are a lower order of created entities.

At the Garden of Eden, Cherubim are placed as sentries to prevent Adam and Eve getting back in to the garden of paradise.⁴⁹⁰ Three men/messengers/angels visit Abraham and accept his hospitality and foretell that the aged Sarah will have a child.⁴⁹¹ In Rublev’s icon the three are portrayed as angels complete with wings and halos. Rublev is clear that the three are none other than the Holy Trinity of Christian belief.

The author of the Book of Exodus gives detailed instructions about how cherubim should be fashioned in gold for the lid of the Ark of The Covenant.⁴⁹² The author of the Book of Isaiah in the Sixth Chapter paints a picture of seraphim with six wings around the throne of God, singing continuously the acclamation of praise, *Holy, Holy, Holy*. The refrain is taken up perhaps a thousand years later in the Book of Revelation Chapter Four sung by creatures – a lion, a bull, an eagle and one with a human face. This thrice sung ‘Holy’ is found in the liturgies of the Eastern and the Western Churches. The angels’ cry of ‘Hosanna’ is sung lustily in carol services to this day in the words of *Ding Dong Merrily on High* and is embossed with glitter on a million Christmas cards.

The influential theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274) sees angels as intellectual because they have immediate and complete insight. Human beings, on the other hand, he

⁴⁹⁰ Genesis 3:24

⁴⁹¹ Genesis 18

⁴⁹² Exodus 25: 17-20

calls rational because their knowledge is acquired by a process of reasoning. Unlike angels, human beings are convinced by formal argument rather than intuition.⁴⁹³ Quoting Augustine⁴⁹⁴ he states “two things thou hast made, O Lord, one near to thee – namely angelic substance, the other near to nothing – namely matter.⁴⁹⁵ Angels are “intellectual natures, at the peak of creation.”⁴⁹⁶ Their function is to execute the plan of divine providence, even in earthly things: who maketh his angels spirits; his ministers a flaming fire.⁴⁹⁷ Aquinas reasons that angels must have been created before human beings as the perfect must come before the less perfect. He sees this confirmed by the Book of Job which has God declaring that these divine beings were there at the beginning of creation: when all the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy.⁴⁹⁸

There is no suggestion in the Bible or in Christian classical theology that we become angels when we die. But, increasingly people are currently using the language of angels to describe what happens when this life becomes the next. In an account of the martyrdom of Polycarp⁴⁹⁹, written perhaps at the end of the 2nd century AD, Polycarp and others who had suffered martyrdom are said to have endured the torture because “they were no longer men, but were already angels”. We saw earlier that Laertes suggested that his sister would become a “minist’ring angel”.⁵⁰⁰ In 1933 the parents of 12 twelve-year-old Joan caused these words to be inscribed on her headstone:

God wanted one more angel
To join his happy band
So he came into our home
And took our darling by the hand.⁵⁰¹

In 1968 the musical *Joseph* saw the brothers explaining the demise of Joseph to their father with the words:

⁴⁹³ Summa Theologica, 1a. Lviii. 3

⁴⁹⁴ Confessions, xii. 7

⁴⁹⁵ Disputations, de Spiritualibus Creaturis, I

⁴⁹⁶ II Contra Gentes, 42

⁴⁹⁷ III Contra Gentes quoting Psalm 103:4

⁴⁹⁸ Job 38:7

⁴⁹⁹ The Letter of the Church of Smyrna to the Church of Philomelium

⁵⁰⁰ Shakespeare, 1980: 903 Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, Act V: Scene I

⁵⁰¹ Headstone of Joan Irene Peen in Leigh-on-Sea Cemetery, Essex

“There’s one more angel in heaven,
There’s one more star in the sky
But Joseph the things that you stood for
Like truth and love never die.”⁵⁰²

In many cultures and throughout history it would appear that the concept of angels has been turned to when people are confronting difficult situations. Peter Stanford quotes Jane Williams, an Anglican theologian, who suggests that, “In what we think about angels, it is as though we allow ourselves access to needs that normally we would deny or suppress. Angels give us a way of expressing our longing for beings who are more powerful than ourselves, and who care for us.”⁵⁰³ Stanford points out that in the last century the church has shied away from any formal acknowledgment of the existence of angels.⁵⁰⁴ This is ironic as at the same time popular belief has turned towards the perceived reality of angels. People see the concept of angels as offering hope, but the church has failed to capitalise on this. The legacy of Aquinas is seen at best like crockery passed on through the generations from Great Grandma – lovely to have but quite impossible to use. The church seeks to be rational at precisely the time when many have moved on to explore and embrace the other-worldly. In the 21st century people may turn to the concept of angels in response to the human need for this life not to be all there is. We just don’t want to be alone.

The broad theological expanse of the Church of England has adopted to a greater or lesser extent the concept of angels as inherited from the Roman Catholic Church. In 1950 Pope Pius XII spoke against those who doubted angels and so destroy the gratuity of the supernatural order.⁵⁰⁵ But by 1950 this was being seen by the mainline church as an outdated approach. A decade later the Second Vatican Council paid no attention at all to the place of angels in our life.

In 1986 Pope John Paul II endorsed the Aquinas view of angel as spirit and above the

⁵⁰² Rice, 1968

⁵⁰³ Stanford, 2019:279

⁵⁰⁴ Stanford, 2019:280

⁵⁰⁵ Humani Generis, Catholic Church, 1950

“laws of incorruptibility, which are common to the material world.⁵⁰⁶ The Pope went on to say that it is our encounter with the world of purely spiritual beings that helps us to come to some understanding of our own being, as body and spirit, and of our place in some plan of salvation. But this thought was not developed in his many letters and encyclicals.

Pope Benedict’s only contribution to the concept of angels came in November 2012 towards the end of his papacy when he suggested that the angels as pictured in the Gospel birth narratives of the Christ Child spoke, rather than sang, their acclamation.⁵⁰⁷ There is something more prosaic about angels speaking rather than singing as part of a heavenly choir.

Pope Francis, whose feet tend to be more firmly planted in the current earth, affirmed in 2014 that “The doctrine of angels is not fantasist ... It’s reality... according to church tradition we all have an angel with us, who protects us and helps us understand things.”⁵⁰⁸ Again, this restatement of two thousand years of Christian teaching, though spoken, has not been written down in any official instrument of the church.

The protestant Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886 – 1968) was firmly in the tradition of Aquinas in seeing angels as a different order of beings and he writes against a tendency to see them as individuals with links to specific human beings tailored to our needs. Their real function is to serve God. Occasionally they may be summoned to fulfil a specific mission, like Gabriel appearing to Mary, but as soon as that function is completed they dissolve back into the company of angels. Barth counselled against studying angels at the expense of the proper function of theology – the study of God. Barth saw angels as far more part of heaven than they are of earth: in serving God they serve humanity.⁵⁰⁹

⁵⁰⁶ 6th August 1986 Weekly General Audience

⁵⁰⁷ Benedict XVI, 2012

⁵⁰⁸ October 2014. Feast of the Guardian Angels in small chapel of pilgrims hostel in the Vatican

⁵⁰⁹ Barth, 2010

This traditional teaching of angels as a separate and superior order of beings has slowly but surely shifted into a concept of angels as what we become when we die. We saw that Shakespeare in *Hamlet* and Tim Rice in *Joseph* touched on this possibility. Now it is found unapologetically centre stage time and time again in the responses of people in Canvey Island to the fact of death. Many who grew up with no church affiliation take angels as an accepted part of life. Such people as adults are able to recite prayers like:

“Matthew, Mark, Luke and John
Bless the bed that I lie on
Four corners to my bed
Four angels round my head
One to watch and one to pray
And two to bear my soul away.”⁵¹⁰

One of my own earliest memories is of a Cradle Roll card representing my name being on the list of the Baptised. The card had a picture of an angel emanating light at the head of a child’s bed.

In November 2016, parents took to Facebook to publish two pictures of their four-year old daughter who died after suffering terribly with cancer of the nerve cells for 13 months. One picture showed a healthy child, the other (to which many people vociferously objected) showed the child in the grip of the cancer. The child’s father wrote “now my princess has grown her angel wings and has gone up to play with her friends and loved ones”. He is clear with Raymond, quoted earlier, that his daughter’s death was only an horizon and that an horizon was merely the limit of our sight.

Similarly Mark wrote a few words to read at his Mum’s funeral. His piece ended with,

“You left us very suddenly
But now we understand
Heaven missed an angel
And you were right at hand.”⁵¹¹

Lisa and her husband Chris have raised thousands of pounds since their son Danny died,

⁵¹⁰ This version first recorded by Sabine Baring-Gould in 1891

⁵¹¹ Y.P’s funeral

aged 11, of Posterior Fossa Syndrome (the condition that occurs after a brain tumour has been removed) to fund research, raise awareness and offer practical help to families whose children live with the same condition. When Jamie, one of the children helped by the *Danny Green Fund*, died in September 2019, Lisa posted on Facebook:

“We are truly devastated to read the very sad news that the incredibly brave Jamie gained his angel wings this morning...”.

And Kevin marked the first anniversary of his wife’s death with a post on Facebook, “1 year ago today our lives fell apart when my brave, beautiful wife lost her battle and was given her wings to sit alongside the angels.” ⁵¹²

The friends and family of Joss ⁵¹³ set up a Facebook page for tributes and photographs of his life. The page is subtitled, *An angel in the sky*.

The Netflix television channel mentioned earlier released an episode in their *Black Mirror* series in which an anxious mother had her three-year-old daughter fitted with a permanent implant which allowed the mother with the aid of an iPad to track the child’s movements, soften the reality of danger when her daughter’s heart rate increased and, indeed, see everything her daughter was seeing through her daughter’s optic nerve. This worked well when the child was little but proved disastrous as the child became a teenager wanting independence from the all-protecting, all-seeing implant. The makers of the Netflix episode named the implant *Arkangel*.

Between 2016 and 2020 Netflix broadcast three series of a programme called *Lucifer*. In this work the former angel who had spent ages ruling hell on behalf of God his father, decided to take a break and spend time on earth. He set out to punish wrongdoers but found that interaction with living, imperfect human beings caused him to have an empathy with the human condition and his views became less clear cut than they had been. Netflix never releases audience viewing figures but the fact that a fourth and a fifth series are

⁵¹² In memory of D.E

⁵¹³ cf Chapter Thirteen

planned suggests that modern television audiences are sufficiently gripped by the redemption of fallen angels, the concept of good and evil and all the grey areas in between, to make it worth the company's while.

In 2017 the singer Ed Sheeran released a song entitled *Supermarket Flowers* in which he imagines clearing the bits and pieces from his mother's flat after she has died. The song which reached the top 10 in the UK and has been requested innumerable times for funerals, contains the line,

“You were an angel in the shape of my mum
When I fell down you'd be there holding me up
Spread your wings as you go
And when God takes you back
We'll say, Hallelujah! You're home.”⁵¹⁴

A brief internet search for Guardian Angel Tattoos reveals scores of websites advertising such things as “100 Guardian Angel Tattoos For Men”, “155 Charming Angel Tattoos”, “25 Cool Guardian Angel Tattoos”, “99 Breath-taking Angel Tattoos”, “70 Beautiful Guardian Angel Tattoos” and “The 95 Best Guardian Angel Tattoos For Men”. The accompanying blurb says things like, “Whatever branch of belief you hail from, a guardian angel tattoo symbolizes God's presence in your life. Scripture and Christian Tradition teach us that God often sends his angels to help, guide and protect us”. Another, slightly more mysteriously, says, “There's just something so comforting about seeing a picture of an angel – no matter if it's the light or dark that draws you towards them”. So Brian, aged 72 and living with Parkinson's Disease, when he reflected back on his suicide attempt several years before, came to the conclusion that he had a Guardian Angel. To mark this realisation, he had a seven-inch tattoo of a Guardian Angel etched on his right forearm.

Duffy⁵¹⁵ reminds us that devotion to the angels was a prominent feature of late medieval piety. Michael, the guardian spirit of the boundaries between this world and the next, is

⁵¹⁴ Sheeran, 2017

⁵¹⁵ Duffy, 1992:270

often found painted on the doorway of the rood screen – the boundary between the profane and the sacred. Does modern man, having lost a loved one, feel that the one who has died has narrowed the gap between the worlds and is able now to speak for the ones left behind? Is death once again not to be feared if the one lost has simply gone before and is waiting, as Scott Holland, quoted earlier, said, somewhere very near, just around the corner?

Miscarriage, neo-natal death and ongoing life of angels

21st century Essex families are encouraged to regard a baby who has died as living on, gloriously, in another, angelic, dimension. Liturgies have been created to help families honour the tiny life however brief might have been its duration. But there was a time when women who miscarried or suffered a neo-natal death were advised not to dwell on the fact but get on with their life and try for another child. There was no perceived need for counselling over and above what the family and close friends could provide. There was no funeral but, rather, the foetus was simply interred in the coffin of an adult whose burial was taking place the next day. No record was kept of where the foetus or embryo was buried. Such mothers, now elderly and facing the prospect of their own death, get in touch with their local parish church hoping that someone would be able to tell them where the body of their child was buried. Often their hope is that their own ashes might be laid in the same spot. The best the parish can do is indicate the area of the churchyard that was in use around the date of the miscarriage or neo-natal death and permit the ashes of the parent to be interred there. So when Doris Cripps died in 2002 in Canvey Island at the age of ninety-four, her ashes were interred in the area of the churchyard where her baby son Gerald would have been laid to rest in 1936 at the age of three weeks.

Very occasionally the vicar in former times felt moved to record the fact of a baby being buried with an adult in the burial register. So in Canvey Island we know that on the 6th December 1930 Percy Ryall, who had lived for just one day, was buried with John Prow aged eighty-nine. We also know that Angela Middleton, who had lived for two hours, was buried on 25 August 1958 with Catherine James aged eighty-nine. No headstone records the names of Percy or John; the headstone over the grave of Angela and Catherine memorialises Catherine and her husband, Lionel. The name of baby Angela does not

appear. Neither Percy nor Angela had any connection with the adults with whom they were buried. But it seems that care was taken to ensure that a baby girl was buried with an adult woman and a baby boy was buried with an adult man. This impression is confirmed by Rita who, sixty years after her male baby was “whisked away” without her being “given the chance to see or hold the child to say goodbye”, can remember only that she was told that the undertaker “had buried him with a man up at St Katherine’s”. The burial register for the period makes no mention of Rita’s child. So, clearly, burial records detailing exactly where a baby was buried are the exception rather than the rule. St Katherine’s Churchyard has well over five hundred babies whose precise resting place cannot now be known. The register for the most part, if it mentions the baby at all, simply states that the interment took place in “CC” - the Children’s Corner of the churchyard.

When babies lived for a few months or more, some families managed to keep track of where the baby was buried in the CC Section, by marking the place either with a simple cross or a more enduring headstone. This has given comfort to the parents of these children when it has come to planning their own funeral and deciding on the place of disposition for their ashes. So when Florence Steven and Ernest Steven died in 1971 and 1984 respectively their ashes were interred in the grave of their son Peter who had died at the age of two in 1946. Similarly when Henry and Dorothy Morris died in 2001 and 2006 respectively their ashes were interred in the grave of their seven-month-old son, Robin, who had died in 1954. For all the years since the child’s death, the place of burial had been sacred to these parents and, in the final years of their life, they would say that they even looked forward to being reunited, physically and spiritually, with their child.

Options for ceremonies and rituals with regard to the conduct of grief in the face of miscarriage and neo-natal death have changed over the years. When the hospital is charged with the responsibility of disposing of a foetus, the foetus can be taken to the crematorium in the early morning. Such slots in time are reserved for “NVF” (non-viable foetus) which usually refers to a foetus which reached less than sixteen weeks of gestation. If families request to be present they are granted a funeral time for a foetus later in the day. Some families keep these services as very private affairs attended by just the parents

and perhaps grandparents. Some others invite all their friends to share in the funeral for the death of hope and the dashing of plans which may have been well advanced if the miscarriage took place late in the pregnancy or if the baby was born and lived for a few hours. Such families will often count the child who died in this way among the number of their children. The pictures from the twelve week or the twenty week scan are given a prominent place in the house. These parents are clear that their child lives on in another dimension which they still call heaven. The word that most closely describes the life now enjoyed by their child is 'angel'. The word and the concept represented by the word is perfect because of course in the whole history of angels, in all its shift of language and perception, angels are never sick. The child who died is now eternally well.

On Saturday lunchtime all seemed well with Zoe's baby. The pregnancy had reached thirty-six weeks and Zoe and family were looking forward to the birth of her third child. That evening Zoe knew that something had changed. A scan in the hospital confirmed that the baby had died. Zoe's first thought was to get home and tell her other two children that the longed-for baby would not be coming home. Two days later contractions were induced and Tyler was born – "born asleep" in the phrase we now use to soften the reality of death.

Zoe, who had not had her other children baptised, asked that this poem be read at Tyler's funeral:

"I am here in heaven
God took me by the hand
Wrapped me in his love
Gently led me to his land.

I will always be your baby,
Our hearts joined by love.
Perfect as an angel,
I am watching from above.

I am part of you
Though brief the time we shared.
Take comfort, be healed,
I'm safe in loving care.

Remember me with joy,
Lift a smile to the skies.
Say a prayer for me,
Let there be no sad goodbyes

One day we'll meet again
A lifetime I will wait.
You will know the
Little angel with
Outstretched arms at
Heaven's gate."⁵¹⁶

All the words are there – Heaven, Angel and Joy – words that sum up the Christian hope for one who belongs to no church and has not accessed the sacraments of the church at birth or at marriage but wishes the church to be visibly present as she honours the eternal nature of her child's life.

An Angel Instead

In Canvey Island, a group of women who have suffered such a loss have formed themselves into a charity, a micro-community, called *From my Womb to my Heart*. They have raised money to produce literature to assist others. With the help of ministers of the church and a local funeral director they have secured a place in the cemetery for a statue of an angel and a grave plot with marble kerbstone on which are engraved the names of their babies or the date of the loss. They do not deal in dates of death but, rather, the date on which their babies gained “their angel wings”. The group strives to end the silence and perceived stigma of baby loss. Those who have lost children are known as parents of angel babies. At fundraising events the fathers have the option of wearing clothing with the logo “Daddies with angels – here for you in your loss”. In the same vein, having suffered a miscarriage, on the original due date of her baby, Kellie posted on Facebook, “We were going to have a baby. But we had an angel instead.” In this way Kellie seeks to transform the grave-bound desolation of dashed hopes into an uplifting image of an eternal, beautiful and meaningful life.

⁵¹⁶ The Poem *Baby in Heaven*, author unknown

A great number of the tributes written to be read at funerals speak of the one gone as ‘looking down’ or ‘looking over’ or ‘looking after’ those left behind. These concepts are unconscious echoes of the words of Aquinas when he writes, “Angels execute the divine plan for human salvation: they are our guardians, who free us when hindered and help to bring us home”.⁵¹⁷

The 15th October each year is now a date marked across the world for the provision of a *Wave of Light* created by lighting a candle at 7pm in memory of a baby who has died. Many churches in the last few years have adopted the custom of candles being lit in church at that time. After one such service a woman who had lost her baby some thirty-five years previously, and had been denied any act of letting go and farewell, remarked as she left the church, “We feel we have had a funeral now, at last.” The advantage of candles is that they are extremely portable and a candle may be lit wherever grieving people happen to be. Social Media has been found by many to be a good platform for sharing a picture of the lit candle in memory of an angel baby. In such a way a community of sympathy is formed, extended and strengthened. This community is composed of living earth-bound humans and celestial angels.

When a healthy baby is born to a woman following an earlier miscarriage or neo-natal death, the baby is often known as a *Rainbow Baby*. The very name is a, usually unconscious, echo of the Biblical narrative of The Flood when, following the flood, God put a rainbow in the sky as a sign of hope and new beginning.⁵¹⁸ Seeing the new baby as a rainbow baby helps the mother to cope with the mixed emotions of joy at this new birth and ongoing grief over the loss of the earlier child. The term “rainbow baby” satisfies the complicated and undulating emotions felt primarily by the mother by incorporating the fact of the earlier birth into the reality of the second baby. The new pregnancy brings hope after the dark months or years following the loss of the angel baby. The image of the rainbow was used in Italy at the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 when the hashtag #Andratuttobene (“Everything is going to be ok”) was trending, accompanied by

⁵¹⁷ Aquinas 1485: II Sentences xi.i.i

⁵¹⁸ Genesis Chapter Nine

a rainbow emoji. This image was adopted in many countries as a sign of hope throughout the pandemic.

In August 2020, on the 4th anniversary of her miscarriage of one to whom she had given a name, a young woman posted the following words on Facebook:

“I can’t believe it’s been 4 years ago I miscarried you at 24 weeks pregnant. Isabella, never has this day got any easier but I’ve kept going strong as you are always in my heart. One day I hope to have a rainbow baby and tell them that they have an angel sister looking down on them...”

As noted earlier, it is surely a great irony that, just as the church distances itself from formal declarations of the existence and the place of angels in the Divine economy, so ordinary people who belong to no organised church, find real comfort and hope in the concept of an angelic life that not just survives this one but is a glorious and eternal life of unimaginable light, compassion and beauty. This is where poetry meets unstructured theology. As Stanford puts it, “Like poetry, angels talk to spirit, not body; the within, not the without; the metaphysical, not the physical; the invisible, not the visible.”⁵¹⁹

Anxious not to be seen as dabbling in superstition, the church has, at least in formal pronouncements, distanced itself from the concept of an angelic host. Presumably such doctrines originally came out of the human sense that we are not the only created order in the universe. Angels have somehow detached themselves from human institutions and hierarchies. People in the modern age, unshackled by church doctrine, find themselves free to express the inexpressible in language inherited from the church. And it is to such language, used freely without any sense of its original context, that the church in the modern era would do well to pay attention and take seriously.

Recording the name of my angel

A family devastated by the sudden death of their Dad at the age of fifty-three telephones the church office. They say they are not religious but would like Dad’s name to be

⁵¹⁹ Stanford, 2019:304

mentioned in the prayers on Sunday and they might come along then. Until Dad died they hardly gave any thought to this life or the next. But in the face of sudden death they wish, in the words of Tim Hutchings and Joanne McKenzie, to have a go at “materializing ‘their’ religion”.⁵²⁰ The Church is located in a particular place. Hundreds of people go there and they wish to locate their grief and the loss of Dad somewhere among people who take life and death more seriously than they have done hitherto.

The whole premise on which the Holocaust Memorial, *Yad Vashem*, in Jerusalem is built is that the six million Jews who perished must have their name recorded. This is a work in progress and fresh names of the lost are constantly being submitted. The foundational text for the memorial is Isaiah Chapter Fifty-Six, verse Five: “I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.”⁵²¹ And this is what those who come, or send messages, to the church in Canvey Island seek: that Dad, Mum, Sister, Brother, Son, Daughter, Aunt, Uncle, Grandparent or Friend should have their name called, recorded and honoured in a place set aside particularly for consideration of matters to do with eternity.

Making the Memory Visible

Hutchings and McKenzie quote Elizabeth Arweck and William Keenan in their view that “the idea of religion itself is largely unintelligible outside its incarnation in material expression”.⁵²² And materials like candles, crosses, holy water and, indeed, Church buildings and congregations themselves are readily accessible by all sorts of people and not solely by those who profess an established faith. The physical body of the one who has died no longer exists except as a billion fragments of ash, scattered or buried, but, with every candle lit, the memory is reignited and burns brightly, as though with an angelic light, in the hearts of those who remember.

⁵²⁰ Hutchins and McKenzie, 2017:5

⁵²¹ New Revised Standard Version

⁵²² Hutchins and McKenzie 2017:2f

Not many would be able to explain to themselves why they should be drawn to the Church in the face of loss: but drawn they are. The language of prayer seems timeless and on-going and so not dependent on the bereaved having to think up words themselves. A simple act like lighting a candle in a Lady Chapel or some such place is one of many acts suggesting a continuity across time and across communities. Actually putting a flame to a wick is an act of joining with those who have gone before and those who will come after. It is a small act of creating light in a dark world or at least at a dark moment. The detritus of candle wax and/or little foil holders is testament to the actual, tangible reality of embodied grief and an on-going bond of bereavement.

A Book of Remembrance has pride of place in a glass case in the Lady Chapel in St Nicholas's Church, Canvey Island. A page of the book, professionally calligraphed, is turned each day and, as the church building is open daily, people are able to come in and see the entry they have requested which records the name and dates of the one who has died and a brief line encapsulating a tribute to the one gone. During the coronavirus national lockdown, photos of the entries were posted daily on the parish Facebook page so they could be seen by those who remembered the one commemorated. This proved so popular that the practice has been continued since lockdown restrictions were lifted. Many of those who request such an entry do not belong to the worshipping congregation. The Parish of Canvey Island purposely departed from the practice of some churches in that anyone may request an entry, whether the departed person belonged in life to the congregation or not. The Book of Remembrance and entry to the Lady Chapel are open to all. So-called 'non-religious' relatives find comfort in the fact that the name is etched into parchment and, on the anniversary of death, the page is open to all who wish to see it, to remember, to light a candle in honour and to go away feeling that, though the life will eventually be forgotten, somehow the name is recorded where it matters: in the memory of God. Here, in 21st century Canvey Island, with hand-crafted book and candle, mourners sense a stillness, an otherness, and know instinctively, though the words may not be familiar to them, that they are surrounded by angels and archangels and all the company of heaven.

For the people of Canvey Island, as elsewhere in the 21st century, the church is now but one minority source of teaching and understanding on everything from miscarriage through assisted suicide to the concept of ongoing life and the angelic host. The 20th century was a time of rapid and quite remarkable change in access to education, freedom of expression and assembly. I turn now to some preliminary conclusions about the current place of the church in the lives of the dying and the bereaved in Canvey Island, Essex.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Conclusion

In former times it was seen as a grave sin to speak against official church teaching or to modify it in spoken or written word. The Tower of London, now a popular tourist attraction, was the place of terrible suffering for those who contradicted such teaching. One's thoughts were best kept to oneself on pain of imprisonment, torture and death. As Davie points out, "religion (in all its diversity) is no longer invisible either to society as a whole or to the academic community. It is increasingly present in public debate, despite the fact that indices of religious activity are falling rather than rising."⁵²³ This exposes the dichotomy between academic theory arising out of data and the lived experience of a particular community over a period of time which this work seeks to demonstrate. Davie tries out the term "post-secular" to explain the disconnect while acknowledging that the term is not entirely satisfactory.⁵²⁴ My experience is that such terms suit the researcher but never adequately portray the ever-shifting thoughts and practices of actual people responding to the real trauma of terminal diagnosis and bereavement. The flaw perhaps of academic scholarship is that some researchers seem to have as their starting point the view that there is something quaint and old-fashioned about religious belief and practices which is at odds with modern living. This work, arising out of living among and ministering to the people of Canvey Island over a period of nearly a quarter of a century, shows that contemporary living has within it a rich vein of religious sensitivity. In the community under consideration I have been insider and outsider, as all of us are by turns, and settle for being the backlash between contrasting views, practices and belongings. This dissertation has sought to reflect the broad and often contradictory diversity of matters that affect and inform day-to-day life, practice and belief in Canvey Island society in particular within the context of the country at large. The work has set academic research alongside the voices of the terminally ill and bereaved.

In the process of this work I have come to realise the extreme fluidity of words and the degree to which all attempts to verbalise experiences of dying, loss and bereavement are

⁵²³ Davie, 2015:228

⁵²⁴ Davie, 2015:232

doomed to failure. Religion cannot be the sole preserve of those whose business it is to study religion or minister in its organised confines. The sacred can be found in what some view as profane and the spiritual is alive in ostensibly secular contexts. It is clear to me that sociologists, anthropologists, theologians, ministers of religion and civil celebrants are all striving to describe the indescribable. In conversations at the time of loss, words can be amended and alternatives can be found. In the printed form of analysis and reflection words take on a life (or a death) of their own and readers bring their own perceptions, understandings and prejudices to bear. The strength of the words of the dying and the bereaved quoted in this work lies precisely in the fact that they were uttered at the time of loss. The contribution to scholarship that this thesis brings is the documenting and reflecting upon the dramatic vitality of people's experiences in a particular community as evidenced in their emails, texts, social media posts, letters, conversations and tributes.

In the introduction to this work I suggested that the task of the Church in these days is to recognize and sanctify much of the language and many of the practices of those who do not belong to a worshipping congregation and to acknowledge that the church is bigger and wider than the traditional structures allow. I further posed the question as to what it is that people like Brooklyn and the more than a hundred thousand families and individuals each year seek when in grief they welcome the Church of England minister into their homes - often for the first time ever. In focussing on the community of Canvey Island whose roots are in East London, I have shown that 21st century Essex people, although usually busy with day-to-day work and worry, still find the need to focus attention from time to time on the fact that every project and every life is time limited. They still need to find meaning and order in times of loss and grief. In such moments the church is well placed to offer, in the words of Rowan Williams, "attention to what's immediately to be done, along with acceptance of long-term limit and finitude".⁵²⁵

Religious Words – Other Contexts

The rise in popularity of genealogy has led many to submit a sample of saliva so that their DNA history might be mapped. It would be interesting to plot the DNA of language used

⁵²⁵ Williams, 2018:80

by those who live in Canvey Island. Words in common parlance owe their lineage to the Christian ancestry of our nation. Just as the early church appropriated the language, dates and sacred spaces of the people to whom the Gospel was proclaimed, so now the language of the church has passed into everyday speech in several other and varied ways. Hundreds of phrases from the Book of Common Prayer are found in the Oxford Dictionary of Quotations.⁵²⁶ Phrases like ‘salt of the earth’, ‘at death’s door’ and ‘by the skin of my teeth’ are used without many knowing they are quoting the King James Version of the Bible. A glance at daily Facebook posts reveals that many who would not call themselves religious would fervently hope that someone who has, say, attacked an elderly person in their home or run over an animal and left it for dead will “rot in hell”. Slimming World, which helps people adopt a regime of exercise and sensible eating in order to lose weight, allows members to eat some unhealthy foods occasionally. Members are allowed five to fifteen “SYNS” a day! Clearly here the word ‘sin’ is understood in its proper context of missing the mark. A low-calorie cereal bar is now available called *Saint* complete with an image of a little halo. Words like “Goodbye” and “Bloody” along with phrases such as “For Pete’s Sake” are used casually without any awareness of their origins in calling upon the help of God, the Virgin Mary or St Peter. But perhaps we should pay attention to Percy’s suggestion that modern conversation is deeply coded with talk of God: “I’ll be thinking of you this week” means prayer; or “I’ll drop by with some scones” means bereavement visit.⁵²⁷

Despite the secularization of religious terms, the people of Canvey Island value the fact that the parish church is open all day and several people in the course of the day will come in from the streets to light a candle or write a request for a prayer in the book designated for the purpose. If they were asked, such persons would hesitate to call themselves religious and yet, the lighting of a candle they seem to feel is effective. On the day the parish church was open again for private prayer following the closure due to the Covid-19 pandemic, someone called Janice posted on the parish Facebook page, “Although I’m not religious, I’m so glad the church is open for people who really need to touch base with

⁵²⁶ Partington 1992:118-135

⁵²⁷ Percy, 2010:25

their normal lives. I really do hope you get what I mean: places of worship are important to people”. This suggests that such places are important, not only to those who go to them, but also to people like Janice who do not. On the same day, Amelia, whose husband had died nearly eight years earlier, thought to mark what would have been her thirty-sixth wedding anniversary by coming into the newly re-opened church to light a candle, posting a picture of the candle on Facebook with the words, “Love you always, miss you so much. Happy anniversary to us both. I am the first one to write back in the remembrance book sending my love to you”. Amelia is never seen among those who gather on Sundays for worship.

Often, when someone has been restored to health, the church will receive a message of thanks from the person, or from the relatives of the one who has made a recovery, although they would not count themselves as members of any congregation. The task of the church minister in seeking to bless and sanctify the rituals of a modern generation, is to build up pastorally-minded congregations so that those who do not see themselves as belonging are nevertheless near to someone who they regard as belonging – someone who can in turn recognise and sanctify what is going on outside the confines of the traditional and visible church building.

We saw in the opening chapters that the role of the church is exemplified in the conversation between the minister and those who grieve in the house of the bereaved. Such conversation places the participants in the realm where souls find a connection: the connection of two human beings searching for order and meaning in the chaos of pain. We saw that the attentive minister strives to see the bereaved not just in the painful present moment but as a person in relation to the deceased over time – in the past and now, alas, in the future without the physical presence of the one now gone but with a cornucopia of memories. By their very presence in the house of the bereaved ministers bear witness to the fact that there is meaning and beauty in life even when this is obscured by the reality of suffering and death.

Historically, the church has tended to, and often still does, instil a fear of death by dark

threats of a certain kind of divine judgement that will follow death; or the church has justified doing nothing to alleviate the dreadful circumstances in which some people live by spinning the vision of a future consolation and vindication. Such a view suggests that the reality of the mighty being dragged down from their seat and the exaltation of the humble and meek shall be realized in the next life. This has been convenient as for centuries the church did not feel the need to champion the cause of the downtrodden, the humble or the meek. Indeed, the church colluded with and advanced such obscenities as the slave trade in the West Indies for over two hundred years. It was the colonisers who dictated to the colonised what religious practices were civilized and rational. This legacy is now being questioned and dismantled across the post-colonial world and is evidenced even in the no longer hidden practices of contemporary bereaved in Canvey Island. In my genes I carry the history of both the enslaved and their owners. Our society is built on the foundations of our history. Some would seek to obliterate that history by agitating to pull down statues and rename parks and roads and universities. But I think it better to let them stand as a reminder of where we were, what we thought and what we accepted as part of the divine plan. The standing huts of Auschwitz do not glorify what took place there. Rather they stand as a reminder of the logical conclusion of a particular mindset held by a particular group of people in a particular time. Such things can then act as a marker by which we can measure how far we have come, if we have travelled at all. They act as a reminder that such things can happen again if we do not remain vigilant. The sight of the Confederate flag in the Washington Capitol on 6th January 2021 suggests to some that we have not travelled very far at all. And with the reality of our history we can come humbly to the present task of revealing the presence of God in the pain and the suffering and the lost-ness of bereavement. This presence of God the church calls the Kingdom of God. But most of the people within the parish boundaries of Canvey Island would not use that phrase. They speak of peace, contentment or, in the case of retributive justice, Karma, with no concern that in so doing they have swapped vocabulary for that of another religion. Jesus was at pains to teach that the Kingdom of God was not to be seen as some future utopia but a reality that could be glimpsed and grasped in the here and the now. The task of the Christian minister in the 21st century, in Canvey Island and elsewhere, is to make this kingdom, whatever it is called, however it is perceived, manifest in the broken

particularity of daily life.

And it is the particularity that is crucial. Human nature is not good at comprehending global loss. But in the particular situation where the wife is now the widow, the child is now the orphan and the parent grieves without a change of title, the apparent order and givenness of the past is now the chaotic present with a deeply obscure future. The *tohu wa bohu* of Genesis – the emptiness without shape – and the unfathomable deep are now realities in the life of the bereaved. It transpires that any illusion of competence was just that – an illusion. The minister bringing the Word as expressed through the ages can help the bereaved fashion a structure in the chaos, set a new goal and help the survivor navigate tentatively towards it.

I have shown that the vernacular of the bereaved in Canvey Island, simultaneously different from and similar to the traditional vocabulary of the inherited church, nevertheless strives to encapsulate human longing for meaning in the face of loss. It strives to formulate a narrative of meaning in the face of often apparently random moments of chaos. The ministers of the church need to make more effort in recognising and sanctifying the words and actions of the bereaved who have not been schooled in the language of organised religion. Modern methods of communication make possible a variety of individual expression which is far removed from the old Prayer Book's invitation simply to repeat the words of the minister with the injunction that the congregation should be "saying after me". This was fine when a large part of the congregation could not read, but it simply will not do now that education of some sort is almost universally accessed. Nor will it do, as we have seen, now that just about everyone has access to a television, a computer and a cinema where concepts of good and evil, life, death and eternal life are explored in glorious vivid, captivating detail couched in accessible story lines of ordinary and super heroes.

Forty years ago, when I was ordained, most people who were planning baptisms, weddings and funerals travelled to the vicar's study or the parish office to have the conversation. In the last four decades so much of the ministry of the church has taken place outside the

confines of the church walls and the vicarage. We have seen in this work that the Kingdom of God needs to be realised and recognised in the home of the young parents whose child has died and in the nursing home around the bed of the elderly, philanthropic entrepreneur who no longer knows your name. It is to be found in the bedroom of one who writes a letter to be read to her family at her funeral. It is to be found in the tears of the mother whose son has killed himself because he cannot bear the bullying of this life anymore. The church takes seriously this mother's lament as she says "I can't let this mean nothing". The Kingdom of God is to be found in the Facebook posts, the Japanese lanterns lit in the darkness of an anniversary of death and in the marriage of the young mother who stands at the altar with no special name like widow or orphan but whose heart is forever swelled with the grief of the death of her child. The Kingdom of God is to be found in the meeting of cultures, the conversation of minister and bereaved, the carrying of the coffin with infinite care, the disposal of ashes in the earth or in glass and it is found in the heart of the one who lights a candle in church knowing that that will make a difference – somehow.

I have focussed largely on the community of Canvey Island but with the awareness that trends and viewpoints among those who live there are reflected and echoed across the country and, indeed, across much of the world. By calling as witnesses new and old poetry and prose, and by allowing the bereaved and, indeed, the dead themselves to speak, I have shown that humankind's need to cope with loss is not new but that the language and expression of that need may now be clothed afresh. This should come as no surprise as we have seen that a great deal of light has been shed on the hitherto mysterious workings of many aspects of our national, community, religious and legal life in the course of the last century.

Marion Bowman along with others before me have recognised the sheer complexity of religious life in contemporary Britain. She is hesitant about using the term "alternative" when speaking of current expressions of religious belief as this would imply that other forms are mainstream. She uses the phrase "integrative spirituality" suggestive of a creative blending of older and newer expressions of belief. The tendency to give the impression that in former days everyone faithfully and solely followed mainstream

expressions of religion really cannot be sustained.⁵²⁸ In the words of Davie, “Current formulations may be innovative, but the combinations of formal and less formal, of official and less official have always been present in vernacular religion, which from time immemorial has run alongside what may be termed conventional forms of religiousness.”⁵²⁹ What is new is the freedom with which innovative forms can be expressed without fear of reprisal from the official organs of religion.

This study shows that the church and the community minister to each other if they are allowed to be close and able to listen to each other for a serious amount of time. It is fair to say that I, of mixed-race Caribbean origin, have had not a little influence in raising the status of the Christian funeral in the largely Caucasian community of Canvey Island with regard to attentive listening, the planning of the funeral, the reclaiming of the personality of the deceased and the sheer salutary efficacy of the theatre of the funeral rites. We have seen that the modern need for effective funeral rites is not so far removed from apparently very different customs and cultures across the world and throughout time.

I have shown that people who do not obviously belong to a worshipping community, and who would tick the “no religion” box on which we touched in Chapter Four, have an innate understanding of the continuity of life following death even if they reject, for the most part, the facile grammar of heaven and hell. It is as though the church, having been established to offer signposts to eternal truths, has been saddled with vast buildings and a heavy bureaucracy which bear no obvious relevance to modern life. The sacred space traditionally provided by the church may now be found elsewhere as well. The sacred moment is revealed wherever and whenever two or three are gathered together in grief or in joy. Now that society no longer exerts an expectation of Sunday gathering in a building called a church, now that the incredible and often abusive power of the medieval church has waned and now that a large part of the population is able to travel, to read, to discuss and to arrive at their own conclusions, the church will thrive where these current realities are accepted and the traditional vocabulary of faith is translated from fear to love, from

⁵²⁸ Bowman, 2016

⁵²⁹ Davie, 2015:226

judgement to understanding, from excommunication to inclusion. Of course there are inherited doctrinal jewels that the church will want to continue to share, chief among which would be the sacrament of bread and wine; and there are occasional harmful cultural practices and views that need to be challenged, particularly with regard to seances and Ouija Boards. But an on-going conversation between those who are seen to be part of the church and those who some would see as 'outside' it – a conversation that takes seriously the contribution of scientific progress and the realities of psychology, anthropology, sociology and medicine - is certainly fruitful in helping all of us to discover not just what we mean by the divine, but what we mean by being human. The conversation needs to take seriously the fact of the truly awful destructiveness of sundry regimes in the course of the last century. A church that disregards the mindset of a Stalin, a Hitler, a Mao, a Pol Pot, an Amin or a Putin; a church that fails to recognise that a large part of the population saw on television a plane fly into the Twin Towers of New York; a church that will not humbly acknowledge the abuse of the vulnerable on an industrial scale; a church in which the sermon and the intercessions make no reference to current world catastrophes, will not find many participants wishing to engage with the doctrine of the redeeming death of the Christ. It is in honest conversation that the church offers the bereaved a community to which they may belong and the recognition that they do belong by virtue of their humanity even if they do not actualise that belonging themselves in the sense of coming through the church door on a Sunday morning. Religion may be seen as a way of being – scaffolding supporting us through the changes and chances of life - rather than a set of things to do. In this way the bereaved might be counted, if not actually in the Register of Services, at least among those who access the efficacy of communal grief via television or social media.

We have seen that those who work in more menial jobs and who have had limited access to education have felt excluded (and indeed have been actively excluded) from the church with its social requirements with regard to dress and its wordy liturgy. Anglican ministers like John Wesley set out to address this by riding out to wherever people were gathered, and preaching and teaching there. In the last forty years the changes in society have required that ministers and evangelists go out to where people happen to be. But, alas,

many have been overburdened with keeping their buildings warm and the lights on.

This thesis shows that the church has often failed to pay attention to what individuals and communities think and believe in the face of their own experience of life and death. We have seen that the massive programme of church building in the 20th century, financed in no small measure by wealthy widows and heiress spinsters, has left small congregations more focussed on maintaining, while practically squatting in, expensive and decaying buildings rather than proclaiming a gospel of hope of eternal life.

This hope which, as we have suggested, is the central selling point of the church, has become shrouded in the weighty bureaucracy of the modern church with its overweight plant, outdated hierarchy and importation of civil guidelines with regard to work/life balance and job satisfaction. The unchurched people of Canvey Island know instinctively that there is more to life than what can be seen and measured. Their undimmed hope for the one who has died takes on a virtual certainty reflected in their written tributes and spoken conversations. This hope is the bedrock of the church but so often the ministers of the church and those who feel themselves outside it, pass each other unseeing as though living in different dimensions.

We have seen that working-class immigrants to Essex from East London had no great tradition of church belonging and as the power of the church, in concert as it had been with the State, waned in terms of telling people how to live, so the number of baptisms, confirmations and weddings in church plummeted. In August 2021 the Office for National Statistics published figures showing that in 2018 alone the number of weddings in church fell by 11.4 per cent.⁵³⁰ The published statistics of declining engagement of the general population with the church at times of birth, marriage and funerals are stark and undeniable. Despite this, we have seen that the local and national church still has a valued place in the heart of the bereaved and the traumatised. The young mother who did not get married in church or have her children baptised still wanted the vicar to officiate at the funeral of her unborn child and people tuned in in their millions to, for example, the

⁵³⁰ Ashworth, 2021

religious funerals of Diana, Princess of Wales in 1997, and for those who died by fire in Grenfell Tower some twenty years later. Nor is it at all clear that the reduction of the *number* of weddings in church equates with the reduction of *religious* weddings as many couples invite a minister to bless them at the civil wedding after the registrar has left the building.

As the Welfare State took over and developed much of what the church had pioneered in terms of education and feeding the poor, many vicars went through something of a crisis of identity. But little by little we see that the proclamation of the Kingdom of God with its attendant hope of eternal life, however such concepts are expressed, is as necessary now as it has ever been. No longer is the vicar necessarily the most educated person in the parish; no longer, generally speaking, do they live in a house markedly different from that of the parishioners. But still, in a rapidly shifting, more open and honest society, the minister is still called to serve, in the words of the bishop to the new incumbent of Canvey Island in 1935, “with courage and unswerving loyalty”.⁵³¹ The desire of people to fashion order in times of chaos and to find meaning in loss and grief has not abated in the 21st century. The tools they use in this pursuit, like ashes into glass, tattoos, or social media memorialisation of a life, may have been unintelligible to previous generations of mighty prelates and freehold vicars, but such ongoing bonds of bereavement speak to the current generation and must be recognised and sanctified by the church lest the gap between the church and the people widens even more irreparably.

Perhaps the forging of a link between those who actively and obviously belong to the gathered congregation of the church and those who do not see themselves as belonging, has been easier in a place like Canvey Island surrounded as it is by a sea wall and being a community that has undergone the uniting trauma of the east coast floods of 1953. As a greater degree of disposable income, paid holidays, bank holidays, the advent of the touring caravan and package holidays to the sunshine, have made physical exploration easier, so the church in Canvey Island has had to be far more flexible with regard to the times and the types of services offered. Sunday trading, Sunday football leagues, the

⁵³¹ The Bishop of Chelmsford to the Revd Pink, 7th December 1935. See Chapter Five

opening of sundry entertainment venues and the needs of split and complicated multi-parent families have meant that the church has had to amend greatly the way it does business. The Sunday morning Eucharist has become just one possibility to satisfy the desire to come together, to worship, to doubt, to question and to encourage. The mere fact that in the last twelve years seven men and women have emerged from the Anglican congregation in Canvey Island to be ordained Deacon and Priests, suggests that the church in the community is scratching where people itch and engaging in an accessible way with eternal questions of life, death, chaos and order, randomness and meaning.

Nor is the obvious contact of people with church services the only impression that they will gain of the church. People are well aware that the church has arrived late at the realisation that marriages die and that second chances should be allowed for happiness with a more suitable partner. People are aware that the availability of a second marriage in church is still a matter of marriage-by-postcode as some ministers remain implacably opposed to the prospect. The church is still campaigning against the legalising of assisted suicide – a stance that cannot be maintained if one were to spend half an hour in the house of one who is suffering terminally in a way that no morphine can assuage. The church is still opposed to calling same-sex partnership a marriage and the church is still ambivalent, indeed some would say two-faced, about ordaining homosexual people. These things make the hill of engagement between a minister and a community very steep indeed.

And yet the church at its best in the face of bereavement is able to say that one day the grief will be lifted. When people find themselves in the front row of the crematorium chapel, the Christian minister is able to enunciate for them the hope of eternal life – and this is real hope as opposed to mere optimism. We have seen that the emphasis has shifted from authority to experience and the church is able to help folk work out not only what they experience but how they experience it. The Christian minister, as distinct from the Civil celebrant, stands in the tradition of such hope. And the church at its best is able to offer practical support in the follow-up in the days, weeks, months and years following the funeral. Newly crafted services like Bereavement and Longest Night services, along with contact on the anniversary of death and other significant dates, are among the gifts

the church offers in the ongoing healing of memory and the establishment of order and meaning in the life of an individual, a family and a community.

We have been privileged in this work to hear directly from the dying and the bereaved who would not call themselves religious and yet have had a clear spirituality which trusts absolutely, without any sense of fear, in the love of a creator God. In their written and spoken word, the final thought the dying wanted to convey was love. The final thought the bereaved wanted to convey was love. The church, having done its best over centuries to scare people into believing, has largely failed to make that final passing of this life a time of fear. Rather it is a time of regret and of loss. The one gone is now at peace and still concerned for those left behind. The Christian minister can help the bereaved look back with gratitude and forward with hope. Human suffering is past; the life of saints and angels is ahead.

I have shown that words and phrases, whether inherited or newly minted, are important. Traditionally the only way we have been able to speak of the next world has been to borrow language from this world. Little by little such metaphorical language has been taught as literal. Tom Long singles out phrases like “streets of gold”, “mansions on high” and “shady grove across the river” as cases in point. He suggests that “to picture our Uncle Sid actually standing on a cloud in the middle of a gaggle of choristers, wearing a robe, strumming a golden harp and crooning ‘praise to the Lord’ 24/7 is ... a fatal failure of imagination”.⁵³² All religious language is metaphor and 21st century people rightly reject these metaphors if they are taught as facts. But, as Wittgenstein pointed out, the limits of language mean the limits of a world view.⁵³³ All we have is language and so, as we have seen, the language of metaphor is still used and continues to perform an invaluable function. But the suggestion that they are literal truths is, rightly, increasingly abandoned.

We have seen that most 21st century people in Essex are not at all aware of, let alone concerned about, Canon Law with regard to the disposal of ashes. The disposition of

⁵³² Long and Lynch, 2013, 103

⁵³³ Wittgenstein, 1968

ashes is an opportunity for the bereaved to control the narrative of the ongoing place in their lives of the one who has died. Grief in the face of loss can be mitigated by imaginative transformation of the ashes into jewellery, paintings and tattoos, set apart in decorative urns, placed in ornate spaces at the crematorium or given a special place in the home or garden. The business of dealing with the dead body having been contracted out to professionals in hospitals and funeral homes, the work of grieving can be bypassed with a direct cremation and/or a failure to collect the ashes. Wearing bright colours, choosing upbeat music and leaving the curtain open at the end of a funeral service are other ways of easing the finality of leave-taking in contemporary bereavement. Similarly, as we have seen, the setting up of fundraising events to raise money and awareness in relation to a cause of death gives meaning to the loss and ameliorates the lament of the un-consolated mother. The Christian minister is called to recognise and bless these ways of coping with loss while drawing attention to the underlying hope of ongoing life.

We have seen that the people of Canvey Island and elsewhere have new formats in which to express deep realities. No longer is there the sole option of a conversation in private with a minister of religion. Thoughts, hopes, confessions and fears of birth and death may all be committed to posts on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and other social media. Such musings can be open to a select few or the world at large simply by typing on the keypad of an iPhone or laptop. And the responses, support and challenge to the thought as expressed are swift. Such means of conversation would be quite unimaginable to those who came before us. But they are here to stay and to evolve.

Secular words, phrases and concepts have needed to be acknowledged and utilised by the church so that those who make contact with the church in a time of grief recognise what is being said. Sacred time and sacred space are no longer only to be found in church on Sundays. Business for the professional medium and psychic is brisk, unfettered by the dictates of a sometime powerful, judgemental church and society. The desire of the bereaved to preserve a continuing bond with the dead must be recognised, gently challenged and counselled. The increasing preference for terms like “passed away” and “passed over” rather than “died” must be taken seriously and explored. The desire for

lasting memorials in a peripatetic digital age has not abated. Large mausoleums have for the most part given way to social media posts and immense fund-raising efforts in memory. We saw in Chapter Twelve that the proliferation of modern icons and the sanctifying of secular objects by communities proceeds apace. In all this the church, as usual, has had to play catch up.

The church in Canvey Island has had to be available in many and varied ways in addition to providing the more traditional methods of sermons, catechetical classes, appointments and times of preparation for baptism and marriage. The 21st century way of being church in Canvey Island would be quite unrecognizable to the Revds Hayes, Haggar, Brown and Dobree of previous ages in the same parish. Those ministers would recognise the geographical co-ordinates of the physical community of Canvey Island but the nature of that community is no longer bounded by the sea wall. It reaches across time and across space. Someone suffering from a rare condition can belong to an online support group whose members span the globe. Spirituality, religious observance, sexuality and the conveyance of grief are no longer specific to the culture of a particular place.

Nevertheless I have shown in Chapter Thirteen that the people of Canvey Island have a strong sense of community, surrounded by a sea wall and united as they are by the memories of the 1953 floods. We have seen that the members of the community also recognise the sense of community on the national and international stage particularly in times of pandemic, a marriage or a death of a celebrity or a member of the Royal Family. And where there is a community the church can thrive. No longer is the vicar the sole provider of information, teaching and debate. The proliferation of easily accessible films, television programmes, songs and social media platforms ensures that people have access to vivid debate on matters of life and death, good and evil, heaven and hell. Script writers and directors of modern films think nothing of portraying a life continuing after death to affect those still alive in this world. And in the context of this internet of everything the church is still well placed to help the bereaved navigate the meaning of the life now ended, the place of the one now dead in the story of family and community, and the burden or resource of the digital legacy to add to the other legacies left behind by the departed one.

The task of the Christian minister is not just to get the bereaved through the funeral but also to remind our communities of what it is to be part of connected humanity; to be members of a human race connected with each other and with the whole created order of the universe. The church must recognise that people are no longer connected simply by geography but also by common interests which flourish through the World Wide Web. We need to remind ourselves what it is to love and what it is to lose the one loved, even when the one loved was never met in the flesh but was perhaps a gaming partner on a social media platform.

The Christian funeral majors on a respect for the once-living body – a respect which many were robbed of acting upon during the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020/21. A Christian funeral well done is one of the greatest gifts we can offer a community. A funeral well done offers meaning, comfort and hope not only to the immediate circle of bereaved but also to the wider penumbra of friends and neighbours. The context of church, crematorium chapel or graveside, the Sentences of Scripture, the clerical collar, the words that speak to the heart of the bereaved, and the music – whether allegedly secular or religious - all go to creating a communal phenomenon that not only reflects but also shapes the opinions and viewpoint of the bereaved. The participants recognise that others have shared the loss, the vision and the hope. Humankind learns far more by shared loss and suffering than it does by acquisition and success. George Lindbeck puts it well when he writes, “just as an individual becomes human by learning a language, so he or she begins to be a new creature through hearing and interiorizing the language that speaks of Christ.”⁵³⁴ The minister in Canvey Island, by taking seriously the often unspoken convictions and hopes of the bereaved, is able to give shape and substance to them. The weaponised questions asked in the agony of loss gradually give way to the hope of tentative answers.

We have seen in Chapter Fourteen that the church must keep up with evolving language of the bereaved in seeing the dead as now part of the angelic host. The church must

⁵³⁴ Lindbeck, 1984:62

sanctify concepts like angel babies and rainbow babies and the desire of the unchurched to have the name of the one gone recorded and voiced in a place set aside for such things.

This is the gift of the minister. It is a working out of the divine gift of grace which is freely given and, in being received, affects the recipient. This is what some call an inalienable gift. It is a working out of the divine dance of the Holy Trinity in which the bystanders are invited to join: to see themselves in the mirror and know that they belong, that they are loved, that they are forgiven and that death is only an horizon which is nothing except the limit of our sight. Long describes the funeral as “a piece of community theatre, one which enriches our own lives, in which we announce our deepest convictions, and one in which we act out the drama of what we believe to be happening in this world and beyond. This allows us to take bodies seriously, even sacredly, but not ultimately. It allows us to embrace and anoint the dead tenderly, but also to let them go where they need to go.”⁵³⁵

The gift of the ritual allows the bereaved to touch in their grief on the transcendent, the other-worldly, the bigger picture of ongoing, eternal life. So, just as the audience at the end of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* is ready to see the stage littered with the bodies of the dead and to pin their hopes for the future on the newly-revealed Edgar, so the widow by the end of the funeral is ready (or at least more ready) to see the curtain drawn across the catafalque or the soil piled on top of her husband’s coffin. And the minister, particularly one who has been in the parish for a number of years, enables the bereaved to build on their understanding of life and death and eternal life in each successive funeral as previous bereavement is alluded to and the opinions of the one now gone as expressed at the last funeral are quoted.

We have seen that a large proportion of those who live in Canvey Island have their roots in a non-church-going community of working class East London. And yet when it comes to the fact of loss and bereavement many have turned to a minister of the church or a civil celebrant who is fluent in the vocabulary of on-going life, the soundtrack of comforting

⁵³⁵ Long and Lynch, 2013:109

hymns and the soothing rhythm of prayer. We have seen how poetry and literature, whether classical or home-spun, help the bereaved to enunciate that which cannot otherwise adequately be expressed. Such folk will join happily in singing hymns with words like *Hallelujah* and *Hosanna* without necessarily being able to translate the Hebrew in much the same way that thousands each day shop at cafés like *Pret A Manger* without knowing what it is the French phrase actually means. Joining in with others who seem to know what is going on is essentially all that matters in making a community of sympathy, courage and hope.

In this thesis I posed the question with regard to what Brooklyn and the other bereaved families require of the church in time of bereavement. Simply put, they require the church to be faithful to itself: to be faithful to the message of hope - that God loves his creation absolutely and that the end of this life is merely the gateway to a new and glorious life. The church's message has been honed over two millennia. The story has been told, nurtured and pondered over in a vast range of contexts by just about every race and culture. Ministers stand in that tradition. In short, the minister must practise a life of resurrection in a world in which death gets the biggest headlines.⁵³⁶

And the church in the current age must accept that if ministers cannot or will not embody this hope then the bereaved will turn to Civil celebrants and others who will. In this age of the connectedness of everything and everywhere, this hope must be demonstrably inclusive of everyone, in every place and in every time. As we have seen, the church is but one option to which one may turn in the face of death and bereavement. Church ministers have a head-start given the historical place of the church building in the affections of a large part of the community. This head-start is a gift to be cherished rather than a right to be taken for granted.

Other researchers take up the challenge of studying different local, discrete populations to discover how the church relates to the people who live in its environs particularly in times of bereavement. In this work I have limited myself largely to a consideration of the views

⁵³⁶ Peterson, 2010:12

and history of many of those who live in Canvey Island, Essex. As noted, where there is a sense of community the church can thrive. And where the church thrives the ministry at the time of bereavement will be of greatest importance. This is true of Canvey Island. Before the shielding and social distance requirements wrought by Covid-19 some three thousand people would come to the Anglican church services in the Christmas period and a further seven thousand were reached by the ministry team in schools, care homes, uniformed groups and sundry other gatherings. The church at its best, in Martyn Percy's words, is "a holding together of celebration and consolation, life and death, birth and decay, pain and joy."⁵³⁷

Every six years it is required that all parishes in the Church of England compile a new Electoral Roll – the register of those who identify as belonging to the gathered congregation of the church. Of the 359 persons on the newly compiled Electoral Roll for the Parish of Canvey Island in April 2019, some 110 had come to the church as a direct result of their experience of the church's ministry at a time of bereavement. That is, over 30% of those worshipping regularly as part of the gathered congregation of the church came actively to belong to the worshipping Sunday congregation as a consequence of the ministry offered following the death of a loved one. This is a positive side effect of bereavement ministry, but at no time must a minister enter the house of the bereaved with the express purpose of recruiting members of the congregation. Rather, as in the vision in Zechariah, the bereaved should be so moved by their experience of incarnational care that they say, "Let us go with you, for we have seen that God is with you".⁵³⁸

I have shown that the option of direct cremation has not been taken up yet by a wide cross-section of the community. The degree to which it was taken up during the lockdown occasioned by Covid-19 was seen as a necessary evil rather than an optimal choice. There still remains in Canvey Island a deep sense of respect for the body and the importance of leave-taking in acknowledging the place of the person now gone in the ongoing life of family and community.

⁵³⁷ Percy, 2010:42

⁵³⁸ Zechariah 8:23 (NRSV)

According to research carried out by *The Funeral Project*, sponsored by The Archbishop's Council, the cost of funerals across the country has risen seven times faster than the cost of living in recent years. Yet it is a cost that most are willing to bear. One in four families find themselves unable to pay the bill but they see that as a problem to be dealt with after they have done what they need to do for the one now gone and, in the process, for themselves.⁵³⁹ The increasing popularity of pre-paid funeral plans helps to give the bereaved one less thing to worry about. One of the concerns of older people who live in Canvey Island – a concern inherited from generations of life in the East End of London – is the fear of being unable to have a decent funeral and being buried by the state. The younger generation, interestingly, often feels no awkwardness in setting up a *Justgiving* page shared on social media to raise funds to pay for the funeral where the death has been tragic and/or sudden and particularly if the deceased has left young children behind.

We have seen in the snapshots of Lin, Joss, Harry, Dan, et al that the bereaved people of Canvey Island have time and time again chosen to turn to the church at a time of grief when they themselves did not belong to the worshipping congregation of any church. Not only did they not actively belong, but neither had their parents or grandparents before them in East London. So much has changed in the very fabric of society in the last twenty-four years in Canvey Island. But what the bereaved found when they came was a church faithful to the message it proclaimed. They found hope when all seemed lost. They found compassion and understanding when they were not sure they deserved it. They found an absence of judgment of themselves or of the one departed. Their lives, hesitant words and practices were recognised and sanctified. In the music and the raised language of the funeral service, in the ritual of coffin, words, music, earth, candle, water and curtain, they felt that in turning to the church they were coming home.

⁵³⁹ *The Funeral Project* sponsored by the Archbishops' Council of the Church of England

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