

Dead Certain

If you're working in a country parish, the whole town can turn out to hear you at a funeral - it's a golden opportunity for getting across the gospel, says PHIL CAMPBELL.

Funerals are an excellent opportunity for communicating the gospel - yet they also present plenty of difficulties. Many of your listeners will be grieving deeply - and at times, maybe you will be too. Others will be attending the funeral out of a sense of obligation, or through a more distant association. Most will probably have little or no religious affiliation, and sit through the service with an air of cynicism or disdain - thinking back to other funerals where the bloke up the front has raved on for what seemed like an hour, taking advantage of a captive audience.

And what about the eternal destiny of the departed? There's nothing like the funeral of a typical nice-guy non-Christian to turn the toughest of us into committed universalists - and yet if you want to be true to the gospel, what can you say? It's a tough job, but here are some guidelines that were passed on to me by a helpful mentor when I was starting out...

- ♦ **Make sure you separate the Eulogy from the Sermon.** Use the Eulogy to reminisce positively about the deceased, passing on family stories and memories. This, in effect, is the time when you'll speak on behalf of family and friends. The Sermon, on the other hand, should follow a bible reading, and reflect on the passage rather than the person. This is the time you'll speak on behalf of God. Say what the passage says, applying it to the LISTENERS rather than the life of the deceased. I only break this rule in the case of the funeral of a committed Christian, whose life has been a positive illustration of the gospel.
- ♦ **Keep the funeral sermon SHORT.** The best thing you can do for a captive audience is to make a positive impression by keeping the captivity to a minimum. They'll love you for it.
- ♦ **As in any other sermon, illustrate,** and make your content simple and interesting.
- ♦ **Have the courage to acknowledge the doubts of your audience.** Here's a time for some positive "apologetics", particularly focussing on the reality of the resurrection of Jesus.

A Sample Funeral Sermon

Psalm 23

"The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever."

Those are one hundred and fifteen of the most profound words ever written. Seven sentences. That have given more hope to more people than any other seven sentences ever written. Seven sentences that have lasted through thousands of years. Seven sentences that even in the time of Jesus were part of the ancient scriptures. That everybody knew off by heart.

The Lord is My Shepherd, I shall not be in want. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me." We hear it. We know it. But I wonder if you can actually say it as if you mean it?

"You spread a table before me in the presence of my enemies. YOU LOOK AFTER ME," says the Psalm. It's talking about GOD THERE. And I want to ask you, why do we bother getting together like this at a time like this if we really don't believe that?

I want to tell you about something that happened a long time ago. On the side of a hill. There's a huge crowd of people there. And Jesus looks at them, and the Bible says, he's sad. Because they're like SHEEP WITHOUT A SHEPHERD.

And it says he gets them together, and he makes them sit down in the GREEN PASTURE. And he sets a table before them - a banquet. It's a story you might remember from Sunday School. Five loaves and two fishes. And he dishes it out and he dishes it out and he dishes it out. Until they've all had more than enough. Their BASKETS OVERFLOW.

It's a story you might have heard. But this morning I want you to hear what he's SAYING. He's saying HERE I AM. The GOOD SHEPHERD. Who makes you lie down in green pastures, who sets a table before you, who can provide everything you need." He's saying I'M THE ONE IT'S TALKING ABOUT when you say THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD, I SHALL NOT WANT."

Which means he's also the one who can lead you through the valley of the shadow of death. And he can. Because history tells us that he didn't just DIE like the rest of us. He died and rose.

History tells us that three days later he came back from the cemetery. They took him out there and buried him. And three days later he was back. Because he passed through the valley of the shadow of death. And lived to tell the tale.

I don't know where you want to pin YOUR hopes at a time like this. I don't know where you want to pin YOUR hopes for your own future. Because we're reminded at a time like this that there's only a heartbeat between the NOW and ETERNITY for all of us.

Jesus is the one who says "I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me, though he was dead, yet shall he live; and whoever lives and trusts in me shall never die. And he can say that - cause he's been there. The good shepherd who leads the way through the valley of the shadow of death. Friends, I want to recommend to you today that you take Jesus seriously. That you find out more about what he said. What he did. And ask yourself whether maybe you should Trust him with your life. So you really can say THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD, I SHALL LACK NOTHING. And when that day comes for you, you can follow him with confidence through the valley of the shadow of death.