Episcopal Church Funeral Practices and Guidelines

with Information Specific to St. James' Church

Concerning Grief and the Liturgy (from the Book of Common Prayer)

The liturgy for the dead is an Easter liturgy. It finds all meaning in the resurrection. Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we too, shall be raised.

The liturgy, therefore, is characterized by joy, in the certainty that "neither death, not life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

This joy, however, does not make human grief unchristian. The very love we have for each other in Christ brings deep sorrow when we are parted by death. Jesus himself wept at the grave of his friend. So, while we rejoice that one we love has entered into the nearer presence of our Lord, we sorrow in sympathy with those who mourn.

Concerning the Service

Baptized Christians are properly buried from the church, but for pastoral reasons, the funeral service may be held at the funeral home or at graveside. It should be held at a time when the congregation has opportunity to be present.

There are three types of services for the departed:

1) A funeral is the liturgy for the Burial of the Dead with the body present, either in a coffin or as ashes in an urn. It is usually held within a few days of the person's death.

   A funeral liturgy can also be in the absence of a body or ashes, such as when the body is willed to science or there are no remains. This is to be distinguished from a memorial service (see #3).

2) A graveside service is a brief liturgy (committal) that usually follows the funeral directly at the place where the body or ashes are to be interred. It can also be a stand-alone event.
3) A memorial service is a liturgy without either the body or ashes. It can be held at a stated time from a few days up to a year after death such as an anniversary, or in a place other than where the funeral is being held.

About the Funeral Liturgy:

There are two liturgies for funerals: Burial I and Burial II. As in Rite I and Rite II Holy Eucharist Liturgies, the difference is primarily the language – Burial II being the contemporary, and Burial I being the "old." Both liturgies begin joyfully: "I am the resurrection and the life." The collect states "grant him an entrance into the land of light and joy." (In II, there are more to choose from.) The Old Testament lessons speak of victory, comfort, righteousness. There are psalms from which to choose dealing with praise, trust, strength, refuge, help, redemption, mercy, light; the New Testament selections are about revelation of glory, eternity, wiping away all tears, and making all things new. After the readings, hymns may be sung. Psalm 23 is often done as a musical setting (at that point or elsewhere). The Gospel choices are about everlasting life, good shepherd, resurrection and life, and dwelling places. The prayers are somewhat different in I and II. In either rite, a provision for the celebration of the Holy Eucharist is made, although not mandatory.

Well before the beginning of the funeral liturgy or at the time the body enters the church, the coffin is closed. The coffin remains closed thereafter. The closing of the coffin permits the mourners to acknowledge the parting caused by death and to commend the deceased to God.

In the event of military honors, an American flag may be substituted for the funeral pall over the coffin.

When the services of a priest cannot be obtained, a deacon or lay reader may preside at the service.

If cremation is to take place, burial services may be held prior to this, or if held afterwards, the ashes should be present at the service.

FLOWERS: It is suggested that no flowers be brought into the body of the church except those designated for the altar. Rather than incur the waste of huge bouquets of flowers, friends and family of the deceased should be encouraged to contribute to a charity or some fund of the parish.

ORGANIZATIONAL RITES: Fraternal or other organizational rites are not added to, or mingled with the services of the church. If such a service is desired, it should precede the church service. The vigil would be a good time for these rites if it is held at the funeral home or in a private home. The fraternal meeting place is another appropriate place.

Some Things to Consider

The Vigil: Church, Funeral Home, or Home?

(also called a Wake, Visitation, Calling Hours, or Viewing)

It is common practice to have the body in a convenient place for friends and family to gather and sit vigil, usually on the night before the funeral. In our tradition (though not in popular culture), sitting vigil is most properly done in the church rather than the funeral home. It can also be done in someone's home.

The church's practice is that the vigil is not a time of socializing but a time to lift the deceased up in prayer. Therefore, it is usually a good idea to have a room set aside for socializing and visiting with the family. We see these as two parts of the same function.

It is appropriate to have some form of brief liturgy during the vigil. The "Litany at the Time of Death" (BCP p.462) and the "Prayers for a Vigil" (BCP p.465) are especially good. Or people can simply sit with the body.

If the vigil is to take place at the church, the coffin is closed before entering the church and it remains closed thereafter. If family members wish to have a viewing of the body, a funeral home would be a more appropriate place to do this.

The Burial Service: Church, Graveside, or Funeral Home?

The Church strongly encourages church funerals – it is our home, not a strange place. It is where we most properly acknowledge our life with Christ. If the cleric determines that it is inappropriate to conduct the service in the church, then a graveside service is usually the preferred alternative over the funeral home.

Memorial Gifts or Flowers?

In lieu of flowers, memorial donations may be made to St. James' Church, a hospital, organization, or charity such as the American Cancer Society, etc.

Will it be Burial I or Burial II?

Will there be Holy Eucharist?

Disposition of the body: will there be a body present? ashes? nothing?

Will burial take place immediately following the service? prior to?

In the case of cremation, will the cremation take place before or after the funeral?

Where will be the final resting place?

How many lessons will be read?

The only requirement is that there be at least one Scripture reading and that, if there is to be Communion, one lesson from the Gospel.

What lessons will be read?

Appropriate lessons are suggested as follows (from the BCP, pp 494-495).
At the burial of a child, the passages from Lamentations, 1 John, and John 6, together with Psalm 23, are recommended.

From the Old Testament

Isaiah 25:6-9 (He will swallow up death for ever)
Isaiah 61:1-3 (To comfort those who mourn)
Lamentations 3:22-26,31-33 (The Lord is good to those who wait for him)
Wisdom 3:1-5,9 (The souls of the righteous are in the hands of God)
Job 19:21-27a (I know that my Redeemer lives)

A suitable psalm, hymn, or canticle may follow. The following Psalms are appropriate: 42:1-7, 46, 90:1-12, 121, 130, 139:1-11.

From the New Testament

Romans 8:14-19,34-35,37-39 (The glory that shall be revealed) 1
Corinthians 15:2-26,35-38,42-44,53-58 (The imperishable body)
2 Corinthians 4:16--5:9 (Things that are unseen are eternal)
1 John 3:1-2 (We shall be like him)
Revelation 7:9-17 (God will wipe away every tear)
Revelation 21:2-7 (Behold, I make all things new)

A suitable psalm, hymn, or canticle may follow. The following Psalms are appropriate: 23, 27, 106:1-5, 116.

The Gospel

John 5:24-27 (He who believes has everlasting life)
John 6:37-40 (All that the Father gives me will come to you)
John 10:11-16 (I am the good shepherd)
John 11:21-27 (I am the resurrection and the life)
John 14:1-6 (In my Father's house are many rooms)

Will there be other readings?

Technically, the Prayer Book liturgy does not make provisions for any non-scriptural readings. However, it is often permitted for a poem or other beloved reading to be read at the funeral. If there is something that was particularly loved by the deceased, it might be good to have someone read it (or a portion of it).

Who will read the lessons?

For each family, this is different. Some can't imagine trying to get up in front of the crowd. They merely wish to sit quietly. For some, however, reading at the service is a healing thing to do.

Eulogy/Speakers

In the Episcopal Church, eulogies are discouraged because of how we understand the purpose of the funeral. The funeral is the place to lift the deceased up to God and to cast our cares at God's feet. In short, the funeral is all about where God is in the midst of death and mourning. Exceptions can be made for pastoral reasons, so this is not a hard and fast rule, but multiple speakers are discouraged.

It *is* appropriate to make time a space available for friends to share their experiences of the deceased, since this is a healthy and healing activity. A luncheon or reception following the funeral is well suited for this.

Open vs. Closed Coffin

Episcopal rubrics require that the coffin be closed during the funeral (or once it enters the church). Why? Because our theology teaches us that the body is a shell, that the person has already left it, and that we are both grieving the person who has lived, and celebrating the person's soul which lives in peace and joy. These are not bound by the body. If family members wish to have a viewing of the body, a funeral home would be a more appropriate place to do this.

Will there be music? Will there be singers or additional instruments?

The organist's fee is $225 (which may be waived for parishioners). St. James' organist has first refusal, which means if a different organist is chosen our organist still needs to be paid this amount in full. This is standard protocol. Furthermore, a guest organist must have the permission of St. James' organist to use our organ.

Suggested Hymns for the Burial of the Dead

(from the Hymnal 1982)

358 Christ the Victorious, give to your servants (1 Cor 15) (Cantakion) (Commendation)
355 Give rest, O Christ (1 Cor 15)
354 Into paradise may the angels lead you (Rev 7 & Rev 21) (In Paradisum)
357 Jesus, Son of Mary (Communion)
356 May choirs of angels lead you (Rev 7 & Rev 21) (In Paradisum)
671 Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
688 A mighty fortress is our God (Psalm 46) - also 687
665 All my hope on God is founded
208 Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia! The strife is o'er (1 Cor 15)
658 As longs the deer for cooling streams (Psalm 42)
695 By gracious powers so wonderfully sheltered – also 696
487 Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life
669 Commit thou all that grieves thee (Psalm 37)
287 For all the saints, who from their labors rest
151 From deepest woe I cry to thee
326 From glory to glory advancing, we praise thee, O Lord
677 God moves in a mysterious way

379 God is Love, let heaven adore him
690 Guide me, O thou great Jehovah
637 How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord – also 636
517 How lovely is thy dwelling place (Psalm 84)
335 I am the bread of life (Jn 6 and Jn 11)
692 I heard the voice of Jesus say
668 I to the hills will lift mine eyes (Psalm 121)
635 If thou but trust in God to guide thee
429 I'll praise my Maker while I've breath (Psalm 146)
620 Jerusalem, my happy home (2 Cor 4-5)
624 Jerusalem the golden (Rev 7 & Rev 21)
194 Jesus lives! thy terrors now (Rom 8 & Jn 14) – also 195
526 Let saints on earth in concert sing
621 Light's abode, celestial Salem (Rom 8, 1 Cor 15, 2 Cor 4-5, Rev 21) – also 622
702 Lord, thou hast searched me and dost know (Psalm 139)
691 My faith looks up to thee
664 My Shepherd will supply my need (Psalm 23)
14 O God, creation's secret force – also 15
680 O God, our help in ages past (Psalm 90)
448 O love, how deep, how broad, how high – also 449
455 O Love of God, how strong and true – also 456
623 O what their joy and their glory must be (Rom 8, 2 Cor 4-5, Rev 21)
388 O worship the King, all glorious above! (Psalm 104)
666 Out of the depths I call (Psalm 130)
373 Praise the Lord! Ye heavens adore him (Psalm 148)
560 Remember your servants, Lord (Mt 5:3-12)
685 Rock of ages, cleft for me
492 Sing, ye faithful, sing with gladness (1 Cor 15)
679 Surely it is God who saves me (First Song of Isaiah) – also 678
447 The Christ who died but rose again (Rom 8)
645 The King of love my shepherd is (Psalm 23, Jn 10) – also 646
663 The Lord my God my shepherd is (Psalm 23)
457 Thou art the Way, to the alone (Jn 14)
338 Wherefore, O Father, we thy humble servants
625 Ye holy angels bright (Rev 7)
618 Ye watchers and ye holy ones (Rev 7)

Also see Easter selection:

178 Alleluia, alleluia! Gove thanks to the risen Lord
191 Alleluia, alleluia! Hearts and voices heavenward raise (1 Cor 15)
174 At the Lamb's high feast we sing
181 Awake and sing the song
212 Awake, arise, lift up your voice
182 Christ is alive! Let Christians sing
185 Christ Jesus lay in death's strong bands --- also 186
184 Christ the Lord is risen again!
183 Christians, to the Paschal victim
199 Come, ye faithful, raise the strain – also 200
205 Good Christians all, rejoice and sing!
180 He is risen, he is risen!
207 Jesus Christ is risen today, Alleluia!
188 Love's redeeming work is done (1 Cor 15) – also 189
204 Now the green blade riseth from the burial grain

176 Over the chaos of the empty waters – also 177
210 The day of resurrection!
202 The Lamb's high banquet called to share
211 The whole bright world rejoices now
192 This joyful Eastertide
187 Through the Red Sea brought at last, Alleluia!
209 We walk by faith, and not by sight

Reception

The Parish Hall is available to parishioners for the family's use after a funeral *at no charge*, although donations are always welcome. For non-members, please see Space Rentals on the website for prices.

Service Bulletin

The church office will provide bulletins.