

The British traditions of ‘public mourning’ have been on full display since the departure of our beloved Queen Elizabeth. In times of upheaval, calm is often nurtured through observing ‘tradition.’ The time-honoured words and actions that have served us well in the past bring familiar comfort into unsettling times.

Our inter-faith world quickly reminds us, though, that ‘tradition’ is not the same for all religions or cultures. Indeed, as our circuit’s new Chinese Lay Pastor recently presided over his first funeral, we recognised there would be varying expectations about how the ceremony should be conducted. While the deceased was a Christian, many of the family members and friends gathered were not: they were Taoists. One of the first lessons for any clergy doing a funeral is not to argue with the bereaved! Instead, the Lay Pastor and I worked through the *Methodist Worship Book* liturgy, which he then translated into Mandarin for the service, aware that there would be different understandings of what would happen at the time of death – and beyond.

We recognised, for instance, that many Chinese are baffled by what they interpret as an almost flippant British reaction to death: how could a 30-minute service at a crematorium possibly show sufficient honour to the deceased? The proper way to show such honour was to refrain from any merriment, celebration, even from smiling or laughing, or wearing the colour wed (associated with joy) for forty days. A ‘celebration of a life’, much less a ‘wake’, was a puzzlement indeed!

Recognising this difference, our Lay Pastor gently emphasised in the service the Christian concept of eternal life, giving comfort to those mourning the passing of a loved one. Perhaps it is the Christian sense of ‘this is not the end, but only the beginning’ that gives us permission to celebrate the deceased’s life, knowing that death is not the end and not the punishment. In a Christian funeral, we can also celebrate ‘the community of saints’ which links us spiritually with those who have ‘gone on before’.

Not long ago, my local inter-faith group provided a panel discussion on death and dying at a hospice. A Jewish colleague spoke of her community ‘sitting shiva’ with the bereaved, remarking that ‘a sorrow shared is a sorrow halved.’ She spoke of lighting candles and eating a hard-boiled egg, symbolic of the cycle of life. My Muslim friend quoted an Islamic mantra: ‘to God we belong and to God we return.’ Our Baha’i representative spoke of human life as a journey of spiritual growth in which death is a reunion with God. In Buddhism, the deceased person’s spirit is believed to remain in an intermediate state of *bardo* for 49 days during which family and friends chant to aid a fortunate rebirth/reincarnation. Each of these called on understandings of how our bodies and spirits are integrally connected, how pastoral care is especially necessary in times of grief, and the importance of community in dealing with personal times of change and passage.

Some years before, I attended a public consultation of faith leaders summoned by the local authority as pre-emergency planning for a catastrophic health event such as Bird Flu. Along with faith leaders from Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Roman Catholicism, and, of course, several Anglican colleagues, we were asked to consider how we would handle an unprecedented demand on funeral, cremation, and burial services. It was estimated that an extremely high number of deaths in a short period of time would overwhelm the capacity of the local crematoriums, even if they were put into service 24 hours a day. We were asked to consider whether mass burials – with the possibility of subsequent removal of bodies later for reburial -- would be permissible within our religious traditions. We were also asked to

consider whether faith leaders might be able to take 'shifts' during which they would say prayers over the masses to be temporarily buried.

In the lively conversations that ensued, the Jewish rabbis insisted that the deceased could only be buried in consecrated ground and that the burial had to take place before sunset. The Muslims likewise insisted that the deceased must be buried facing Mecca. The Hindus and Sikhs needed the bodies to be cremated before sunset. The Roman Catholic priest was alarmed at the suggestion I might be allowed to say Last Rites over one of his flock (though I wasn't sure if his objection was based on my being Methodist or female). When asked directly about any requirement for the disposal of Methodist bodies, I could only respond that we knew God was with us in life and death and we should treat bodies and souls with respect.

A further suggestion was made: in the case of a mass burial, each body could be buried with a tag attached to indicate their religious affiliation, thus aiding appropriate reburial or cremation. We were then informed that current NHS hospital policy was to not keep records of religious affiliation of patients. There was a moment of silence as we all recognised the reality of living in a secular society.

In her death as in her life, our Queen has made us think more carefully about what we do believe and why. As Christians, we value anew the life and death and resurrection of Jesus -- as God coming to be one with us in this life and the next. Much to celebrate!