

Homily for the Burial of the Dead,
Saturday in the Third Week of Lent, March 10, 2018

Jon Alan Bryant, 1947–2018

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Wisdom 3:1–9; Psalm 23; Romans 8:14–19, 34–35, 37–39; John 10: 11–16

The burial of the dead and the continual commemoration of the departed are part of the deep biology of humankind. The available evidence strongly suggests that Neanderthals buried their dead¹—though there is a big dispute now about whether they buried their dead with flowers.² (Who knows?)

In his book *A Brief History of Everyone Who Ever Lived: The Human Story Retold Through Our Genes*, British geneticist Adam Rutherford writes that he has discovered that 2.7 percent of his DNA comes from Neanderthal ancestors.³ He also writes that if you and I are “of broadly European descent,” we probably have Neanderthal DNA too.⁴ It is always hard for

¹ <http://www.nyu.edu/about/news-publications/news/2013/december/neanderthals-buried-their-dead-new-research-concludes.html>, (accessed 10 March 2018).

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<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/earth/environment/archaeology/11919272/Neanderthal-flower-children-burials-theory-debunked.html>, (accessed 10 March 2018).

³ Adam Rutherford, *A Brief History of Everyone Who Ever Lived: The Human Story Retold Through Our Genes* (New York: The Experiment, 2017), 50.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

human beings to mourn when we are not able to be present for the burial of a relative or a friend. I'm glad we are able to be here today to say goodbye to Jon.

Christianity was shaped by the way the believers of the first centuries faced death with the fundamental Christian conviction that the dead live. The door was very open for this belief and teaching when Jesus was challenged in the temple just before his last Passover. Recalling Moses and the burning bush, he reminded his hearers that “[God] is not God of the dead, but of the living; for all live to him.”⁵

“Inculturation” is a word historians and theologians use to describe how Christianity is shaped by the society in which the gospel is preached and lived out. One example: inculturation remains a challenge in some parts of the world where a man may have more than one wife—like the biblical marriages of the patriarchs and kings of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Another example: the burial of the dead in the Greco-Roman world of late antiquity helped to shape the practice and theology of Christianity in the first

⁵ Luke 20:38.

centuries of, what some of us still call, “the Christian Era.”

It was common in the Roman world for bodies and ashes to be buried in tombs slightly away from cities and towns—but close enough to be visited.⁶ A meal known by the Latin word for “refreshment” would be shared by family and friends at the grave.⁷ Graves often contained a tube into which wine could be poured. Graveyards became a place for celebrating the Eucharist. It’s an enormous subject, but since the beginning of the Christian era, the Breaking of the Bread has been one central way Christians have proclaimed God’s loving purposes for humankind, in the face of all tragedy, all hardship, and all sin.

In his 2004 book, *Eucharistic Origins*, Paul Bradshaw, a priest of the Episcopal Church and professor emeritus of liturgy at Notre Dame, wrote, “We do not possess one scrap of direct testimony that the earliest Christian Eucharist ever conformed itself to the model of the Last Supper.”⁸ Instead, “The focus of their

⁶ Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 4–5.

⁷ Paul F. Bradshaw and Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Origins of Feasts, Fasts and Seasons in Early Christianity* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011), 774.

⁸ Paul F. Bradshaw, *Eucharistic Origins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 13.

ritual meal was feeding on the life-giving Jesus”⁹—
Jesus Christ, God of the living, not of the dead.

When I was first ordained, I served for two years in a very large parish in Dallas that was embroiled in a battle not just over the new Prayer Book, but also whether the Holy Eucharist would be celebrated every Sunday at the 11:15 service. When I became a rector for the first time in Michigan City, Indiana, they were having a Rite I and Rite II fight. Saint Mary’s was struggling with the same issue in the interim period before I became rector.

Jon and the late George Blackshire—the two trustees who took me to dinner the second night I was here to be interviewed to be rector—both loved the traditional rites. I was ordained early enough to be able to say by then that I could do, and had done, the 1928 rite and both rites from the 1979 book. My answer to their questions about my preferences has not changed much over the years: I tell people that I can celebrate all of them, but I think the future belongs to worship in contemporary English, not because of its

⁹ Paul F. Bradshaw, “The Eucharistic Sayings of Jesus,” *Studia Liturgica* 35 (2005), 11.

vocabulary but because of its broader, richer theological exposition of our Easter faith.

I do miss the beauty of many words in the old Prayer Book, especially these words from the Burial of the Dead: “We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.”¹⁰

But my better self knows these words from Job and the First Letter to Timothy don’t proclaim all that God wants us to know and believe deeply. We were born with life, and we die with Christ’s promise of eternal life.

Blessed be the name of the Lord.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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¹⁰ *The Book of Common Prayer* [1928], 324.