

All funerals are sad. Even in the twenty-first century where every other final goodbye wants to be a celebration of life complete with jaunty pop tunes and don't-wear-black invitations. Even in this age where we are desperate as never before to sweep pain and loss and bodily decline and dying under the carpet, all funerals are sad. No matter how hard we try to make ourselves focus on the life lived rather than the life lost there is always a tinge of sadness to our farewells, a forced falsity to the celebrations, a quiet desperation to our denials.

Time was when a parish priest spent a lot of his time taking funerals: now there are fewer and fewer Christian funerals, fewer and fewer religious funerals of any kind. Instead, increasingly, funerals are, whether it is consciously acknowledged or not, 'humanist' ones, ones that boot God out the building or more gently forget to issue him with an invite, and instead focus on the life lived of the dearly departed. There is no denying that such funerals can be rich, meaningful events that just about make rational as well as emotional sense. *If* that is, the person was good, long lived or loveable, successful, creative or sociable.

But what about the others, the more difficult lives? What about the funerals of the people who live and die alone, their bodies found in their flats weeks later? The funeral of the pathetic accidental overdose taken after a pathetic waste of a life that made no impact at all on the world other than the temporary distress caused by his breaking and entering? What about the woman whose only meaningful human contact for the 10 years before she died was the receptionist at the funeral directors who helped her plan her funeral? What about the stillborn, or those who die as babies or infants? What about those funerals, vagrants, homeless wanderers where not even the name of the departed is known, where the chief mourner is the local council who must, grudgingly, foot the bill for the no-frills funeral? What then? How do you celebrate a loser's life? How would an unbeliever send-off society's write-offs? What is the point of humanism for human failures? I have never heard an atheist answer to that question. But for a Christian, the answer is given today.

Nailed to the wood of the cross on that hillside all those years ago died an abject failure, perhaps the biggest of all human failures. The Romans, who hammered in those nails, may have had their statues and their idols, but we would see straight away that that empire state was a humanist one. For the Roman Empire, this life is all there is, and now for Jesus, they are going to take that away from him. This life is all there is, and take that from a person and you have taken away everything. All will die, but some may have renown to remember them, an after-life in the memories of their

descendants, life-after death in their achievements, their works, their legacy. The humiliation of crucifixion does away with any of that, wipes away any good of the life being extinguished: the horror of the death erases anything of that life that could have been celebrated. Deliberately, coldly, bureaucratically, the last moments of the life that is being taken are framed in such a way as to not only take the life, but to strip it of its value. No king but Caesar and no god but the Empire.

But anyway, if anybody had wanted to fight the facts and celebrate the life the Romans had taken, it was not to be: denied his life, denied his dignity in death, Jesus is also denied a funeral. He is hurriedly bundled away, placed in a borrowed grave, no rituals or formalities, no preparation or ceremony, no songs or eulogies, no tributes and memories. And the stone is rolled over the entrance and the light is gone.

Today is the bleakest day in the whole Christian year. Not all Good Fridays are cold and grey: sometimes they are warm, sun-bathed bank holiday days, but they are always sober, sombre even. Though we know the happy ending is mere days away, there is something about this terrible tale of life extinguished, of degradation and humiliation and lonely failure; something about the Good Friday story that sucks the heat out of the sun, drains the world of its colour, takes the spring out of our steps and stops us dead in our tracks.

But hope did not die that day. On the contrary, Good Friday is the day that hope was born.

The heart of Good Friday is the mystery of the Cross, the mystery of our redemption, the redemption of a fallen creation, the redemption of humanity, the redemption of each and every human.

Whatever the circumstances of our passing from this world, peacefully in our beds, in a tangle of metal on a motorway, by our own despairing hands or the hands of the state; surrounded by loved ones or unnoticed in the chill of a lonely room; having lived life to the full, or never really having got off the starting blocks; happy, sad, successes, failures, rich, poor: however we live and however we die, we never die alone, we never die unnoticed and we never, but never, die unloved.

Those arms stretched out on the cross, those arms stretched wide in that timeless gesture of eager, passionate, yearning, unconditional love, those arms are open for all of humanity, for each and every one.

So we have there the answer to the question posed earlier: 'How do you celebrate a loser's life?' You celebrate the only thing that gives each human life its value, and that is one thing and one thing only: that Jesus died for that person.

There is someone who is always celebrating every human life: the one who created it, and he now hangs on the cross.