

Preaching at Weddings and Funerals

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In his book, *Grace Notes and Other Fragments*, Joseph Sittler wrote: "Most ministers are aware that it is a tough and delicate labor to insert the lively power of the Word of God into the rushing occupations and silent monologues of human beings." (p. 64) Two occasions at which the insertion of the lively power of the Word of God into the lives of people is a particularly tough and delicate labor are weddings and funerals. In the assemblies gathered to mark these life passages the pastor will, in many cases, be encountering a significant number of persons, perhaps a majority, with whom she/he has had no previous contact. Many in that significant number of persons may not "profess faith in Christ Jesus, reject sin, and confess the faith of the Church, the faith in which we baptize." Both in our occasional service and in our Sunday assemblies there is an increasing number of persons who are divorced, alienated, displaced, or alone.

Given the makeup of the assemblies in which we do our proclamation of law/gospel, and given a societal context where marriage is often viewed as a social convention one can take or leave, preaching at weddings is not an activity limited to a sermon/homily at the service. In our congregations we need to articulate regularly the meaning of Christian marriage and hold up unabashedly models that the Christian young can emulate. Preaching at weddings might then include a sensitive process of relationship building between the engaged couple and the pastor in pre-marriage sessions, the careful employment of persons in the congregation charged with the responsibility of planning for or assisting at the liturgical celebration, alerting the parish community to the forthcoming marriage service, and the need for their ministry of intercession and hospitality. Such communal emphasis on marriage and preparation for the ritualizing of the marriage covenant enfleshes the graceful fidelity of God, a fidelity which is the heartbeat of marriage and the centerpiece of Christian proclamation at the marriage service.

Important as the sermon/homily is at funerals, we dare not limit preaching at funerals, any more than at weddings, to the exposition of the readings

at the liturgy. The way a parish community unpacks the Paschal Mystery in all of its liturgical celebrations, in its efforts to confront the forces of death in society, in its efforts to do comprehensive death education, in its exposure to and ministry with those who are ill or near casket death, and in its intentional planning for compassionate service to bereaved persons all bespeak volumes of homilies on the compassionate, weeping, suffering, crucified, and risen Christ.

The longer term or sudden circumstances leading to death become the individual frames in which the Paschal Mystery is celebrated and expounded in moments that are communal and personal, poignant and painful. Planning for and utilization of the occasional services for funerals (Commendation of the Dying/Comforting the Bereaved/Burial of the Dead) to commend the dying/dead to God and support the Christian hope of the people, the compassionate presence of the parish community and pastor during and following the days of death/visitation-wake/funeral, the proclamation of Easter hope and consolation in the funeral homily, the intercessory prayers of the faithful for the deceased and those who grieve, the thanksgiving intercessions of the faithful on All Saints' Day/Sunday, and the remembrance of the departed on the date of her/his "heavenly birthday" (anniversary of death) are all part of preaching at funerals.

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