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THE FUNERAL SERMON IN THE CONTEXT OF PASTORAL CARE

Introduction

People are dying and funerals are held. Most of them are culturally accepted, without consideration or critical issues related to the objectives of funeral sermons and their achievement. I ask myself the question: what can we do to ensure that the funeral sermon, which is a part of a memorial service, fulfills its diverse tasks?

To answer this question, I have focused on the research of funeral sermons in the Slovak Republic for several years¹. I have observed (with voice recording) 100 funeral ceremonies in a Slovak crematory and have travelled to other cities in Slovakia to participate in funeral ceremonies as a part of my research. Results of this observations I formulated in the form of a funeral sermon theory². On the one hand we could say that the rites I observed were dignified, and if we were to refrain from posing critical questions, we could say that the state of the contemporary funeral sermon is satisfactory.

However, questions about the purpose of man's existence, support of the mourners in their process of mourning, and seeking and finding help in faith in God are areas that deserve to be examined with appropriate attention, because not only

¹ See: A. Masarik, *Analýza nekerygmatických komponentov pohrebných kázní prof. Igora Kišša*. Banská Bystrica 2008, p. 160.

² See: idem, *Aby smútili s nádejou. Vybrané aspekty pohrebných kázní*. Brno 2011, p. 182.

are church funerals respected but also criticized – not only by those participating in the arrangement of funerals but also by the funeral community.

Our task is not criticism for its own sake but to look for ways for the funeral rite, including the sermon, to have its own unimpeachable quality. For this reason we need to pay closer attention to funeral sermons and to do so:

- with courage to face a penetrating, critical inspection of existing practice,
- by engaging in interdisciplinary analysis so that cues for the funeral sermon arise from a discussion with other branches of science,
- and by questioning how these results can be effectively carried over to theological education and the lifelong education of the clergy (although we will not pay attention to this third part in this paper).

I hereby imply that I want to push the question further – from questions of cultural acceptability to deliberate mastering of the complex tasks of the funeral sermon. This requires the elimination of existing problems that we see in contemporary funeral sermons.

1. Critical Inspection of Existing Practice

When I speak of problems with the contemporary funeral sermon, I don't want to appear disrespectful towards the work of the clergy. There is universal consensus that the memorial service represents one of the most difficult parts of pastoral care and these critical remarks are meant to lead to seeking ways of improving this ministry. I would like to point out two spheres of problems:

- problems arising from methodology during preparation of the funeral sermon;
- and problems that arise during collaboration between funeral directors and clergy.

1.1. Problems Arising from Methodology

Ensuring the high-quality of the funeral sermon requires: (a) setting a proper goal for the sermon that should (b) correspond to the specific homiletical situation, that is to the particularities of the deceased person and the mourners and (c) should be grounded in a suitably chosen biblical text and (d) its adequate exegesis and (e) its appropriate application to the funeral context. In practice we find more or less serious shortcomings in all steps of this procedure.

Ad a) setting improper goals for the funeral sermon

Preachers who only see an opportunity for an evangelistic or mission address in the funeral sermon tend to forget that they have mourners in front of them for

whom they are to provide pastoral help³ by proclaiming the Word of God. Their singular goal is thus to address the others present and lead them to faith. If they, however, manage the pastoral address of the bereaved well and show them the significance of faith in the process of mourning, this primarily pastoral approach could have evangelistic impact even without an explicitly evangelistic message⁴. We see a separate problem where preachers implement evangelistic aims with insufficient sensitivity to how the message is formulated. Then, instead of leading people to faith they only achieve the depreciation of the existing religious attitudes of their hearers.

Ad b) insufficient consideration given to the specific situation of the given funeral, that is to the particularities of the deceased person and the mourners.

During my field observations I have come across ministers who didn't take into consideration the specifics of the given case – they labored under the misapprehension that it is possible to officiate a funeral rite without any specific relation to the case⁵.

Ad c) inappropriate choice of biblical text

In classes for ministers I give examples of clearly inappropriate choices of biblical text. In these cases the chosen biblical passage doesn't offer a solution to the problem the minister wants to focus on in his funeral sermon⁶. During research I even found cases that could increase the burden of the bereaved by the very choice of the text.

After the death of a young son a preacher used a biblical text from 2 Sam. 18,33 [NIV] (David's words about Absalom):

The king was shaken. He went up to the room over the gateway and wept. As he went, he said: "O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom!" (NIV).

Those who know this text know that it goes on: "If only I had died instead of you. O Absalom, my son, my son!"

In choosing such a text, the attitudes of the bereaved are only strengthened instead of offering something that would help them take the next step in coping

³ As examples of characterization of the situation of mourner i.e. after a suicide, see: *Bereavement Care in Practice: the Cruse Approach to Working with Bereaved People*. Richmond (Surrey) 2004. Cf. *Bereavement Support when You Need It Most (Thematic Letter: Bereaved by Suicide)* [n.p., n.d.]. Cf. *Bereavement through Suicide*. Belfast [n.d.].

⁴ See: A. Masarik, *Aby smútili s nádejou...*, with accent on section 3.3: *Aims of Funeral Sermon as Preaching in Specific Homiletic Situation*, p. 66–91.

⁵ To the structure of questions to define specific homiletic situation of funeral, see: J.A. Melloh, *Homily or Eulogy? The Dilemma of Funeral Preaching*. „Worship” 1993, vol. 67, no. 6, p. 518; or J.H. Wray, *Preaching Life in the Face of Death*. „Living Pulpit” 1995, vol. 4, no. 3, p. 40.

⁶ Positive possibilities to choose biblical text for the funeral sermon, see: idem, *Analýza nekérygmatických komponentov pohrebných kázní prof. Igora Kišša*, especially section 2: *Vol'ba kázňového txtu a homiletická diferenciacia (Selection of the Biblical Text and Homiletic Differentiation)*, p. 28–44.

with the loss. I ask a question: Why did the preacher decide to proceed in this way? Was it his task to help the parents express their pain? Wasn't he supposed to preach God's Word in this hard situation? Was this paragraph of the Scripture God's Word into their loss?

Ad d) insufficient exegesis and unsuitable homiletical interpretation of biblical texts

In practice we have come across cases that show insufficient exegetical (biblical interpretational) work. This deficiency is manifested in that the preacher doesn't ask during preparation what the given text meant for the original readers and what it means for today's hearer but instead assigns meaning to the biblical text that it doesn't have (eisegesis).

Ad e) eschatological statements about resurrection and eternal life without sufficient perception of present pain

The hope of faith that overlooks existing pain can sound like an escape from reality to religious dreaming. The preacher of God's Word doesn't need to escape reality. Faith in God can bear the stress between existing pain of loss and a hope of faith – resurrection and eternal life. That is the reason why more openness for understanding the situation of the mourners is needed⁷.

1.2. Problems that Can Arise in Collaboration between Funeral Directors and Clerks

In Slovakia I have observed situations where funeral directors secure the minister in an attempt to provide "full service" and thus ease the administrative stress of the bereaved. This motive is commendable but it turns out that:

- the minister only gets basic information about the deceased and the time of the ceremony;
- the bereaved don't get any form of pastoral help before the funeral;
- they do not develop a positive relationship with the minister which could positively influence their perception of the entire ceremony and could be very supportive for them in their process of mourning.

In other words – if the relationship between the bereaved and the minister is absent, the minister becomes a mere "hired orator"⁸ and his significance for the bereaved is limited.

Naturally, some ministers have the special ability and personality needed for the support of the bereaved and some don't. That is why this matter needs to be revised according to local conditions.

⁷ See: idem, *Potešenie smútiacich alebo heroizovanie viery?* In: *Tempus clausum. Ad honorem Pavla Procházka*. Ed. I. Peres. Banská Bystrica 2012, p. 210–219.

⁸ See: W. Carr, *Brief Encounters. Pastoral Ministry through Baptism, Weddings and Funerals*. London 1994, p. 15, 30.

From what we have stated so far we conclude the need for these tasks:

a. We need to develop a dialog among the participants (service providers, clergy, funeral participants) that gathers positive evaluations and critical feedback, both of which will need to be professionally processed in relation to the aims and tasks of funerals.

b. As for the context of the funeral rite we think it necessary that pastoral care be offered to the bereaved before the funeral and, where needed, after the funeral. The bereaved are free to reject this offer but churches should offer it as standard policy.

2. The Need for Interdisciplinary Cooperation for the Advancement Special Occasion Homiletics

In 2014 I participated in international research that was based on structured research dialogs with sample groups of mourners from Romania, Slovakia and Poland. The group of mourners that I led in structured dialogs didn't state that they received help for coping with the loss during the church funeral rite even when it was a church funeral and they considered themselves practicing Christians⁹. The question is, why is this so? Either the funeral rite doesn't have the potential to be of help for the mourners or it does and those mourners questioned didn't get the form of help they could and should have gotten in the rite and funeral sermon itself.

These questions lead us to ask about the potential of the funeral sermon and the possibility of its full development from pastoral, missionary and even philosophical perspectives, so that its tasks for the diverse groups of the funeral community are fulfilled.

Precisely at this point we have room for discussion with other branches of science that have the knowledge to improve the Christian funeral sermon – by showing it problems or asking questions it is supposed to deal with theologically – so that the funeral sermon doesn't just give "something" but seriously addresses the plight of those coping with the question of the finitude of existence – before God.

2.1. Non-Theological Fields of Study (i.e. Collaboration with the Psychological Research of Mourning)

One example that can offer significant help are the results of rich psychological research in the field of mourning and coping with loss. Funeral sermons, however,

⁹ A. Masarik, *Verstorbenenrauer unter Mitgliedern der Baptistengemeinden in der Slowakei*. In: P. Dobříková, *Trauerbegleitung in unterschiedlichen kulturellen, sozialen und religiösen Kontexten*. Dziegielów 2015, p. 189; or idem, *Smútenie za zosnulou osobou u členov Bratskej jednoty baptistov na Slovensku*. In: *Sprevádzanie smútiacich v medzináboženskom a medzikultúrnom kontexte*. Ed. A. Kacian. Martin 2015.

do not take advantage them in contemporary practice. We can ask questions such as:

— What does the acceptance of the reality of death¹⁰, which Worden states is the first task in coping with mourning, mean for the Christian funeral?

— What does the dual process model of grief¹¹ according to Margaret Stroebe mean for the Christian funeral when she speaks of the fact that a person in his season of mourning oscillates between focusing on the loss and focusing on the restoration? How is it theologically legitimately possible to use this and similar knowledge to support the bereaved?

2.2. THEOLOGICAL ANSWER (COLLABORATION WITH THE BIBLICAL AND EXEGETICAL RESEARCH)

Naturally, special occasion homiletics needs to deal in an extensive way with the findings of the psychology of mourning in order to better understand the homiletic situation and to seek suitable ways to give a biblical and exegetical response to these impulses. The ministers need to consider psychological findings, nevertheless, their tools are the tools of theology and faith in God.

Conclusion

In this contribution we pointed out the hazards that arise in particular stages of preparation of the funeral sermon. We need to seek opportunities to make the funeral and the funeral sermon itself understood not just as part of a routine performance of clerical service but as a specific, important and precious opportunity for proclaiming the Word of God into the life situations of the hearers.

Sets of knowledge and observations that we gain from empirical observations, critical discussion of the participating parties and from interdisciplinary discussion need to be complexly, theologically processed and carried over into the theological education of future ministers as well as into the lifelong learning of ministers of particular Christian denominations, which we already endeavored to do within the limits of this paper.

¹⁰ J.W. Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy. A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner*. 4th edition. New York 2009, p. 39 ff.

¹¹ M. Stroebe, H. Schut, *The Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement: Rationale And Description*. „Death Studies“ 1999, vol. 23, no. 3, p. 197–224.

Kazanie pogrzebowe w kontekście opieki duszpasterskiej**Streszczenie**

Autor tego artykułu zwraca uwagę na problemy dotyczące współczesnych kazań pojawiające się w związku z metodami stosowanymi przez pastorów w celu ich przygotowania, a także będące wynikiem współpracy pomiędzy domem pogrzebowym a pastorem. Niewłaściwe metody wpływają niekorzystnie na proces powstawania kazania pogrzebowego, natomiast współpraca domu pogrzebowego z pastorem może negatywnie wpłynąć na postrzeganie pastora i jego znaczenie dla żałobników. Autor spodziewa się, że studia interdyscyplinarne, a zwłaszcza wnioski płynące z badań psychologicznych nad żałobą mogą pomóc w procesie konstruowania takich kazań pogrzebowych, które w odpowiedni biblijno-teologiczny sposób odniosą się do sytuacji. Pastorzy winni brać pod uwagę wiedzę psychologiczną, lecz ich narzędzia powinny pochodzić z umiejętnego zastosowania teologii i wiary w Boga.

