

EDITORIAL

Recently my colleagues and I were discussing a training event we had held at Dumisani for Sunday School teachers some weeks earlier. We noted that the attendance was significantly lower than for the previous event and it emerged that one possible reason for this was that there were numerous funerals taking place that day with many potential participants in our event attending these funerals. Of course, you can't make plans for events which take account of funerals. And funerals are a part of human experience in Scotland and elsewhere as much as in South Africa. But funerals within the amaXhosa community seem to me to impress themselves on the normal patterns of daily life more than they did for me in Scotland. Here I suggest (tentatively, as a fairly new observer from outside the Xhosa community) that there may be several reasons for this.

Firstly, practically, funerals are almost always held over a weekend, usually a Saturday (although the preparatory meetings and visits may extend over a week or so). This means that they tend to be concentrated together.

Secondly, the kinship system is understood by the amaXhosa differently from a typical Western understanding. In the West we tend, in general, to operate within a 'nuclear family' (which seems, debatably, to refer to its small, self-contained form – Mum, Dad and two or three children – rather than any explosive characteristics!) whereas among the amaXhosa there is a much greater sense of being part of a wider extended family. In the UK these days, it might (again, generally) be quite rare for someone to attend the funeral of, say, one's father's brother's cousin's wife. (I remember, as a student, having to argue the case for being permitted to be absent from classes to attend the funeral of my mother's brother's wife – my aunt by marriage.) Here such a person would be regarded as part of the family community. Noni Jabavu, a Xhosa woman born and raised as a child in the Eastern Cape, writes, 'I had many maternal "uncles", two of them my mother's surviving real brothers. Others were her cousins or second cousins, but all regarded as close relations because of the extended family system' (N. Jabavu, *The Ochre People*, [London: Cox and Wyman, 1963], 4). Our students frequently tell us that they will not be in classes because they have been bereaved, but when we enquire further,

the deceased person is not what a Scot might call a 'close relative'. Yet that is simply not the way families are regarded here.

Related to this is the sense of community within a village. A funeral is a community event. There will be a big (and probably very costly for the bereaved family) meal. Some advertisements on the local radio and television for funeral directors include the provision of a marquee and an ox! Most people from a local community are likely to attend the funeral of someone from that village. It will be a major social event. And there is likely to be a further similar gathering for the unveiling of a tombstone at a later date. Perhaps, this has to do with the concept of *Ubuntu*. The saying, as Jabavu relates it, is, '*Umntu ngumntu ngabantu*. A person is a person (is what he is) because of and through other people' (Jabavu, *The Ochre People*, 69).

A third reason for the significance of funerals in Xhosa culture is the sheer number of them. Death is an ever-present reality here. When we scan the death notices in *Daily Dispatch*, our local newspaper, we are struck by the contrasts: a notice regarding an old Xhosa lady who dies at 93 might sit next to a notice about the death of a young Xhosa woman of 27. Although it is rarely clearly stated why a person has died, it is clear that violence and AIDS account for many of the deaths of younger people, although at certain times of the year, traditional circumcision rituals which have gone wrong account for an alarming number of deaths among male youths in the Eastern Cape. Regarding AIDS, Pocock, van Rheenen and McConnell cite UNICEF statistics from 2002 that, 'Today some 3 million children are living with HIV/AIDS. And the disease has killed the mother, father or both parents of 13.4 million children still under 15. The vast majority of these children – 11 million – live in Sub-Saharan Africa. Their ranks will soon be swelled by millions of additional children who are living with sick and dying parents. By 2010, the total number of children orphaned by HIV/AIDS is expected to nearly double, to 25 million' (M. Pocock, G. van Rheenen and D. McConnell, *The Changing Face of World Mission* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005], 51). Such figures are mind-numbing, and any theological training in this context must take account of the fact that death will be a very significant pastoral issue during a person's ministry.

When one attends funerals as frequently as many of the amaXhosa do, there is perhaps the risk that one loses sight of the fact that death is an offence against God's purposes for his people. Perhaps one begins to resign oneself to death as an all-embracing reality. But the Bible calls us to a different perspective. Certainly, death entered the world as God's judgement on sin, but Paul is clear that it was human responsibility which brought that about (Rom. 5:12). In fact, God immediately intimates his

own purpose for dealing with death (Gen. 3:16). Yet throughout human history, physical death serves as a reminder of human sin and of an even more fearful experience of spiritual death which must be addressed. Even as we live and breathe, says Paul, we belong either to those who are perishing or those who are being saved (1 Cor. 1:18).

During his earthly life, Jesus is not described as attending a funeral as such, but when he observes the impact on Mary of the death of his dear friend Lazarus, John says that he was 'deeply moved in spirit' and 'greatly troubled' (John 11:33, ESV). The wider usage of the former term, *enebrimesato*, seems to hint at anger at the effect, possibly even the existence, of death. There is certainly no sign of resignation. We also know, famously, that 'Jesus wept' (John 11:35). When Jesus encounters death, he does not diminish its pain and awfulness, but he does relativise it by describing it as 'sleep' (John 11:11; cf. Mark 5:39) – an approach which is completely misunderstood by those who are mourning around him. In addition, however, he tackles death head on, overcoming it by raising Lazarus and Jairus' daughter and others to life again. But these events are simply foretastes of the most significant battle which is waged on the cross and through the resurrection (Col. 2:14-15). Now death is defeated (1 Cor. 15:55-57) and the hope of the Christian is resurrection life in all its fullness which death can never again influence (Rev. 21:1-4). For those who reject Jesus as Lord and Saviour, on the other hand, there are no such promises; only the prospect of justice which, for a sinner, is no good news at all.

When a lot of work has been put into preparing for an event, it is easy to feel rather frustrated when a funeral or a number of funerals have a significant impact on the attendance. But in fact these funerals are vivid reminders that Sunday School teaching and theological training are not ends in themselves, but means of bringing good news to a world that may have become resigned to the reality, perhaps even the victory, of death. The gospel declares that death is not the way it was supposed to be, that death does not have the victory now and that death will ultimately be entirely abolished. Rather than consider funerals (in the Eastern Cape of South Africa or anywhere else) as an interruption to our events, let them remind us that all our theological teaching, reflecting and writing should be done in the context of the great realities of death and (even more so) life in all its fullness as promised in the gospel.

In this number

We are pleased to include the following articles in this Bulletin:

First, we have the second part of a two-part study by Daniel Kirk of Biblical Seminary, Hatfield, PA, USA, in which he continues to discuss the nature of Christ's obedience, building on his previous historical and theological reflections to engage in exegetical study of several key Pauline texts.

The following essay by Oliver Crisp, recently appointed as Lecturer in Theology at the University of Bristol, England, evaluates the thought of the nineteenth-century Reformed theologian W. G. T. Shedd with respect to how Christ represents us in bearing the penalty for sin.

Next, Nigel Anderson, Minister of Martyrs Free Church in Ayr, Scotland, offers a study of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology of discipleship, which is both appreciative and critical, focussing on Bonhoeffer's famous book on that subject and on his controversial *Letters and Papers from Prison*. This study builds nicely on recently published articles on the theme of discipleship which have drawn on Bonhoeffer among a wider range of studies.

Finally, Dr Michael Bird, my successor at Highland Theological College, Scotland, and already a prolific writer, provides a helpful survey of the so-called 'Third Quest' for the 'Historical Jesus', a title given to a great deal of recent scholarly publication on Jesus in the last thirty years or so. In the light of recent expressions of doubt concerning the validity or value of the designation, Bird provides a cautious analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the phrase (including a wealth of bibliographical information) and calls for further engagement in this field from Evangelicals.

As always, I am grateful to these authors for submitting their research to *SBET* and I trust that their labours will inform *SBET* readers and spur them on to further personal study of the Bible; further reading of the significant authors discussed; further careful reflection on these weighty theological issues; further debate and discussion in a spirit of love; and respect and further faithful service of Jesus Christ within his church.

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