

Second Thoughts on Cremation



I am a pragmatist and thus cremation of the dead has seemed to me to be the sensible way to avoid the cost and sometimes macabre aspects of funerals. My mother, though well-schooled in the reality of decay and the theology of resurrection, said she wanted to be buried, not cremated, because she wanted Jesus to be able to find her body when he came again. Amateur theologian that I am, I laughed at such naivete. But the longer I live and the more memorial services I attend and/or conduct, the more I question my cavalier attitude toward cremation.

Recently, I reread David Mills articles on the subject and decided it might be helpful to others to also have some second thoughts about cremation.

Two deaths but different arrangements

“The young woman wanted to empty her savings account – money needed for college and saved over a year of nannying demanding and ill-behaved children – to help bury her grandfather, who had left instructions that he was to be cremated. This was characteristic of him: to be buried as he had lived, no fuss, no bother, no public display, no postmortem assertion of self, costing his widow as little money and work and worry as possible.

“I explained that the process (of cremation) had already been set in motion, and that her grandmother would never agree, and that even raising the subject would upset her unnecessarily. And there was, I added, something to be said for respecting her grandfather’s wishes, as she would want her own children someday to respect hers.

“About two and a half year later, her other grandfather died. At the funeral, the minister began with what she thought were comforting words. The body, she said, was only a shell, and shells get old and break, and when they do they open to let out the spirit, which freed from the body can then go to God.

“Yet sitting behind her was the man’s body, in a plain wood coffin just carried into the church with ceremony and reverence – our eldest son and I among the pallbearers – which seemed fairly pointless if his body were merely a discarded shell, and one that had prevented him from seeing God. That man-sized box belied her gnostic attempt to palliate the pains of death.

The idea of cremation repelled her

“That young woman is our eldest daughter, and the first grandfather to die was my father and the

second to die was her mother's. We had never discussed burial, as far as I can remember, but the idea of cremation repelled her, and when my father died she begged me repeatedly to find some way to have her grandfather buried rather than burned. That I could not do so is a pain I still feel.

"She could not explain her objection, but I understand it, and share it. I know, and explained to her, the arguments allowing cremation. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church tersely puts it, "The Church permits cremation provided that it does not demonstrate a denial of belief in the resurrection of the body."

"But still, it feels wrong to burn a body that could be laid to rest. It may be 'licit' (legal), in the technical language of church law, but it does not seem to me proper. It may be permitted, but that does not mean it is good when you can accomplish the ideal.

You burn something to destroy it

"My daughter and I were both thinking of what it means, what it symbolizes, to bury and to burn the body. You burn something to destroy it, often, as in burning brush, because that is the easiest and cheapest way to dispose of it. Nothing, except the human body, do we reduce to ashes and then treat the ashes as if they were the original. Ashes are in every other case something you throw away. They are waste, trash, leavings, debris, a burden and often an expense.

"Sometimes, of course, we burn things as a gesture of contempt and defiance of the realities for which they stand. Think of book burnings and flag burnings. Think how you would react to the news that someone had set down a Bible on the town square, soaked it with gasoline, and lit it.

We bury the body in hope of its rising again

"We bury things we want to preserve, like time capsules, or to transform, like seeds and bulbs. Planting is the main symbol we think of when we think of burying something. It is an act of hope, of trust. And so we bury things we reverence, like the bodies of those we love, in the hope of their rising again.

"There is a reason pagans burned their dead, and still do, while Jews and Christians buried them. I suspect, but could not now argue that there is some connection between the growth in cremation among Christians and their declining birth rate. We burn what we will not bear.

The coffin means something different than the urn

"I don't think belief in the Resurrection will long survive cremation, once it becomes the standard among Christians, since it goes so hard against the natural instincts, guided by the natural symbols, to lay to rest those we have loved. The coffin means something different than the urn.

"After my father's memorial service, we left the church and went home. After my father-in-law's, we carried the coffin out of the church, again with ceremony and in a long procession of cars drove it slowly to the cemetery near his home, where it – where he – was carried from the hearse to the grave and then put into the ground.

“Her father’s grave is permanent blessing for my wife and our children, my father’s lack of one a permanent and irreparable loss for me, for my children, and perhaps, for our grandchildren and their children.

“A few months ago I passed on to some colleagues a remark from a Christian writer who said that the dead body was a ‘vacated temple,’ in response to the argument that it was the Temple of the Holy Spirit and deserved reverence. His metaphor (of a vacated temple) was “very disturbing,’ I wrote...

‘Disturbing?’ wrote Patrick Reardon. ‘It is heresy. It violates every Christian sentiment to imagine that the Holy Spirit abandons the Christian’s body at death. On the contrary, that body will rise from the dead because of the Holy Spirit’s presence in the body.’”

“The Grave Not Taken” and “Temple of the Holy Spirit” by David Mills From Touchstone magazine September 2008