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The Victorian funeral sermon

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The Victorian Funeral Sermon

Funeral sermons marked both the literal beginning and ending of the Victorian era. Following the eighteen-year-old Victoria's accession to the throne on 20 June 1837, preachers responded to the death of her uncle, William IV, with sermons usually delivered either to coincide with his funeral at St George's Chapel Windsor on 8 July, or on the following day, Sunday 9 July. Similarly, more than six decades later, Queen Victoria's own death on 22 January 1901 was followed by nationwide preaching of sermons reflecting on the event, normally delivered on either of the two following Sundays, 27 January and 3 February, or to coincide with the funeral on Saturday 2 February. Although only a small proportion of such sermons were published in full, it is apparent from the larger selection reported in local and national newspapers, that clergy and ministers felt an obligation to deliver sermons on such events, and that their utterances were of interest to a wider public than the normal congregations at their respective churches and chapels. In an age before broadcast media facilitated a sense of actual participation in remote observances, for the great majority of the population attendance at such a sermon is likely to have provided their most tangible sense of participation in national mourning.

Many hundreds of funeral sermons were published in Britain during the Victorian period. Just as in relation to eighteenth-century sermons (**cross-ref to Pritchard p. 5**) more precise calculation of the size of the surviving corpus would be an extensive research project in itself. Not only is it necessary to take account of anthologies and multiple editions, but catalogue searches using obvious keywords cannot guarantee comprehensive recovery of titles in which these words do not feature, and there is a need to survey numerous different collections. Funeral sermons that were privately printed, or had a local provincial circulation did not necessarily

find their way into the copyright libraries, and even some sermons by substantial figures were missed. For example, while the British Library holds eleven sermons on the death of the leading Scottish churchman Thomas Chalmers in 1847, two further ones can be found in the Chalmers papers at New College Edinburgh. The British Library holds only six sermons preached in response to the death of the Duke of Clarence in 1892, whereas the Royal Archives hold a further seven published sermons, including ones by the Deans of York and Llandaff (Purey-Cust 1892; Vaughan 1892) which, it would seem, were sent personally to Queen Victoria, but not to the then British Museum library. The collection in the British Library, the main resource used in the research for this chapter, nevertheless provides a rich and broadly representative cross section of Victorian funeral sermons. However exhaustive research on the genre would also require systematic work in other major libraries as well as the investigation of religious periodicals, specialist collections, private papers, and newspaper reports of unpublished sermons.

Published sermons came from clergy of all major Christian denominations, as well as, late in the nineteenth century, a few leading Jewish rabbis. However Methodist and Roman Catholic preachers were under-represented. Motives for publication varied widely: some well-known preachers regularly published sermons on this as on other themes; others did so on a 'one off' basis as a particular tribute to the deceased (Gresley 1888), as a mechanism for making a public statement on wider issues (Steane 1837: 3-6), or in response to requests from a congregation, the family of the deceased, the local community or a particular individual (Falloon 1861: insert; Richardson 1861; Drummond 1865). Publication arrangements did much to determine circulation: a sermon by a metropolitan preacher distributed by a major London publishing house would have been much more widely read than that by a provincial

minister, published locally or privately. Hence provincial clergy preaching on national figures often obtained London publishers or co-publishers.

In contrast to the dauntingly copious primary material, secondary analysis of Victorian funeral sermons is limited. Moreover even scholars who otherwise make substantial contributions to understanding of Victorian cultural and religious responses to death (for example Rowell 1974; Wheeler 1990; Jalland 1996) fail significantly to exploit the potentialities of sermon evidence. The present author has endeavoured to map out some key themes through research on the sermons preached in response to the deaths of prominent people (Wolffe 1996, 2000, 2010) but the numerous published sermons relating to more obscure individuals have hitherto only received incidental attention. Hence, while in the current chapter I widen the scope of my earlier work, particularly by considering some funeral sermons on relatively unknown people as well as those on famous figures, the field remains a rich one for further research, by those interested in Victorian views of death as well as by those studying sermons.

The subjects of published funeral sermons ranged from major public figures to otherwise wholly obscure individuals. Two particularly high-profile individuals each inspired dozens of published sermons: the Duke of Wellington, who died in 1852, gave rise to at least the sixty-five listed in the British Library catalogue, exceeded only by the Prince Consort, whose premature death in December 1861 stimulated at least seventy preachers into print. Publication on this scale was only exceeded by that relating to two pre-Victorian figures, Princess Charlotte, who died in childbirth in 1817, with eighty-one, and George III (d. 1820), with seventy-five. By comparison the numbers of published sermons on George IV (d. 1830) and William IV, both with eleven identified sermons in the British Library, and Victoria with twenty-one, look

relatively meagre. While the relatively small numbers of published funeral sermons on the last two Hanoverian monarchs reflect the temporary recession in royal prestige apparent in those years, the reduced numbers for Victoria compared with the equally long-lived and revered George III are indicative of a decline in the popularity of the genre itself. In contrast to royalty even major statesmen, such as Peel (d.1850), Palmerston (d.1865), Disraeli (d.1881), and Gladstone (d.1898), gave rise to no more than a handful of published sermons. Indeed, after William IV, Wellington, Albert and Victoria, the most popular subjects for published funeral sermons were Thomas Chalmers, General Gordon (killed at Khartoum in 1885) and the Duke of Clarence, Queen Victoria's grandson who died tragically young in 1892.

The appeal of such subjects provides an initial indication of the motivations for preaching and publishing funeral sermons. Preachers favoured figures, such as royalty or the quasi-royal Duke of Wellington, who represented some kind of national consensus, or those, such as Chalmers or Gordon, deemed to offer exemplary inspiration to the living. The deaths in advanced old age of George III, Wellington and Victoria inspired reflection on the inevitable passage of time, and the ending of eras, while the untimely, sudden or violent deaths of Charlotte, Chalmers (who suffered a heart attack), Albert, Gordon and Clarence moved preachers to dwell on the fragility of earthly life and the possible imminence of death even for the young and healthy.

Among less prominent individuals who gave rise to published funeral sermons clergy and ministers were, as in the eighteenth century (**cross ref to Pritchard**), much the most numerous category. Whereas Church of England and Church of Scotland clergy, conscious of the duties of an established church, more frequently published sermons on national figures, Nonconformists gave particular attention to their own

ministers. Sermons on deceased Baptist, Congregationalist ministers were disproportionately numerous, but there were also many sermons on Anglican Evangelical clergy, for whom there was a classic model in a sermon preached in 1808 by Thomas Scott, the biblical commentator, entitled *The Duty and Advantage of Remembering Deceased Ministers*. However Methodist ministers, Catholic priests and High Anglican clergy were relatively under-represented among the subjects of sermons. Methodist itinerancy precluded the settled connections with a single congregation that caused other branches of Nonconformity to experience the death of long-standing ministers as personal bereavements requiring particular commemoration, while it can be inferred that the very association of the genre with Dissent and Evangelicalism was a disincentive to Roman Catholics and Anglo-Catholics. Alongside sermons on ministers there were numerous sermons on leading lay members of congregations, including many women, who were variously deemed of significance variously as noble patrons (for example Holme 1844), wives of ministers (James 1856), or on account of exceptional dedication to church work (Aveling 1872).

A third significant category of funeral sermons related to individuals who while not especially conspicuous in either the nation, the locality, or the congregation, nevertheless attracted a preacher's attention either in order to draw lessons from the very ordinariness of their lives (Thornton 1863; Lemon 1896) or because of the sudden or otherwise memorable nature of their deaths. Thus the tragic drowning of two young men while swimming in the Thames gave rise to a funeral sermon at Sion Chapel, Whitechapel (Hewlett 1847). Other preachers wrestled with the theological and pastoral problems posed, for example, by the death of a young mother (Martin 1866), a suicide (Shindler 1853), the untimely death of a devoted superintendent nurse

who seemingly still had much to give to others (Smith 1868) and the Tay Bridge disaster of 1879 (Talon 1880).

In the analysis that follows, attention will initially be directed to the changes in the form and structure of the funeral sermon that occurred during the Victorian years. We shall then turn to an account of the attitudes of preachers to death and commemoration, considering first their treatment of the exemplary lives of the deceased, second their views of the nature and significance of death itself, and third their ideas regarding the afterlife. Finally sermons on the death of Queen Victoria will be revisited, as representing something of an apotheosis for the genre as well as for the queen herself.

Despite the commonalities of context and some superficial similarities in content - notably in reflection on the transience of human life and the timeliness of death in the case of monarchs who had both exceeded the biblical allotment of 'three score years and ten' (Psalm 90:10, Graham 1837: 5) - the differences between the funeral sermons on William IV and those on Queen Victoria are striking. In the 1837 sermons, preachers (for example Mardon 1837, Steane 1837) normally focused for much of their time on the extended exposition of their chosen biblical text, which was appropriate to the occasion, but not initially explicitly applied to the immediate circumstances. Only in the closing part of their discourse did they turn to direct comment on the late King and his reign. Sermons that dwelt less on the text and gave more extended attention to the deceased monarch, such as that preached to the University of Cambridge by John Graham, later Bishop of Chester (Graham 1837), were rare. Preaching on the death of Thomas Chalmers in 1847 W.L. Alexander felt it necessary explicitly to excuse himself for discoursing 'from an event in God's providence' rather than 'from a passage in God's word' (Alexander 1847: 5). At the

other extreme it was possible at that period for a funeral sermon to focus so exclusively on the exposition of its text that no explicit reference was made to the deceased (Hutton 1837). In normally giving priority to biblical exposition funeral sermons preached at the beginning of the Victorian era thus still had much in common with those of the eighteenth century (**cross ref to Pritchard**).

The 1901 sermons, however, are much shorter, normally ten to fifteen pages of printed text, as opposed to up to the thirty or more pages characteristic of sermons from the 1830s, which must have taken well over an hour to deliver. In the 1901 sermons the main content was extended panegyric on the dead queen, linked to the drawing of moral, spiritual and patriotic edification from her life. Reference to biblical texts was often merely tokenistic. Indeed the text chosen by Joseph Hammond, Vicar of St Austell, ‘I sit a queen and am no widow, and shall see no sorrow’ (Revelation 18:7), appeared incongruous in the light of Victoria’s long widowhood, although Hammond justified it by romanticising her reunion with Albert in death (Hammond 1901: 3, 7). Nevertheless had he considered the context of the text the effusively loyal Cornish cleric might well have hesitated to apply to his deceased sovereign words originally uttered by the Whore of Babylon. Although other preachers avoided howlers of this kind, they resorted to bland short texts such as ‘A Mother in Israel’ (Judges 5:7; Eldridge 1901: 3), ‘The Memory of the just is blessed’ (Proverbs 10.7; Henson 1901:5) or even the single word ‘Remember’ (Hebrews 13: 3; Little 1901:3), which avoided the need to constrain the direction of their eloquence by any systematic biblical exposition.

It is possible to discern a transitional phase, apparent particularly from the 1860s to the 1880s. In this period preachers – unlike their successors – contented themselves with brief exposition of the text (for example Liddon 1871: 4-6), or

framed it by initial extended reference to the death in question, whereas their predecessors had normally expounded the text at length first, therefore ensuring that it emphatically set the tone for their observations on the deceased. Thus for example, the Wesleyan John Jeffreys, preaching in Rochdale on Prince Albert's death, spent the first part of the sermon reflecting on the unexpected nature of the event, and its impact of the nation, before eventually turning, on page fifteen of the printed sermon, to offer explicit observations on his text, 2 Samuel 3:38 'Know ye not that there is a prince and a great man fallen this day in Israel?' (Jeffreys 1862). In a funeral sermon in 1870 Edward White Benson, a future Archbishop of Canterbury, explicitly excused his limited reference to Scripture by saying that 'the wisdom and goodness of our own day cannot become truly more sacred things than they are by being described in borrowed language' (Benson 1870). In 1881 J.A. Atkinson, Rector of St John's Longsight, mined the book of Esther for a text relating to Mordecai, who was, like the recently-deceased Disraeli, a naturalized Jew who rose to high office. However, despite commenting on the remarkable capacity of 'God's word' to provide an illustration for every circumstance, for the rest of his sermon Atkinson made little further explicit reference to it (Atkinson 1881). The transition was complete in an 1895 sermon on the poet Christina Rossetti, for which the preacher took his text from Proverbs 31:31, 'Her own works praise her', thus ingeniously giving himself a scriptural justification for devoting the whole sermon to an account of the dead woman's life and writings without further attention to the Bible (Nash 1895).

Although the tradition of the expository funeral sermon was maintained, especially by preachers of a more conservative theological outlook who were using a sermon on a particular individual to make more generic points about death (for example Bickersteth 1872; Lemon 1896), its decline during the Victorian era from

being the normal to becoming very much the minority model was a significant transition. It seems that the majority of preachers – including many who subscribed to an evangelical standpoint – in practice lost confidence in the traditional Protestant belief that the literalistic exposition of biblical texts was the best way to provide consolation and edification in the face of human mortality and bereavement. Rather, they came to find their primary inspiration in the life of the deceased, as a starting point for more free-flowing spiritual and theological reflection. The shift was a telling indication of changing attitudes to the Bible.

Although the exemplary function of the subject's life thus assumed much greater prominence as the period wore on, it was nevertheless a feature of almost all Victorian funeral sermons. In sermons on ministers and pious lay people well known to the hearers, it was normally a straightforward matter to present the subject as a model Christian, although the permutations of personality and theology produced significant variations of emphasis. For evangelicals this was a matter of demonstrating the saving faith of the deceased as an inspiration and challenge to the living. In the eyes of the Baptist Octavius Winslow, preaching in 1849 on James Harington Evans, it all came down to showing 'his close adherence to the Lord Jesus Christ' (Shepherd, Winslow and Noel 1850: 10). When the Vicar of St Saviour's Retford was drowned in a shipwreck in 1859 the preacher of his funeral sermon entitled *The Death of the Righteous* argued that righteousness came from faith in Christ and was demonstrated in the nature of a man's life not his death (Mitchinson 1859: 8, 13). Such evangelical sermons were apt to close by calling unconverted hearers to repentance and saving faith, presenting the recollection of the life and witness of the deceased as an appeal from beyond the grave (Shepherd, Winslow and Noel 1850: 37; Mitchinson: 14). In a sermon on the death of a local benefactress, the Vicar of Kirkleatham took the

opportunity to urge children to be diligent in their study of the Scriptures out of respect for the memory of the lady ‘who as an instrument under God gave you the bread of life, enabled you to read and wished you to learn and understand your Bibles that you might find the way to heaven.’ (Holme 1844: 6)

Non-evangelical preachers focused more on outward observance. The High Church Benjamin Harrison, preaching in 1855 on the leading Anglican layman Sir Robert Inglis, built his case rather by dwelling on his subject’s conspicuous manifestation of the cardinal Christian virtues of faith, hope and charity (Harrison 1855). Frances Mary Gresley was described as holding ‘fast to the Faith, as a staunch member of the glorious Church of England being a regular and devout communicant, loving the Church Services with their ancient Prayers and Psalms and Creeds’ (Gresley 1888: 6). In a rare published Roman Catholic funeral sermon, the subject’s devotion to God was evidenced by her love for her local chapel and her responsiveness in her last illness to the voice of the priest as the earthly representative of the Almighty (Proctor 1877: 3-6).

Where subjects possessed virtues that were not exclusively religious they were presented in a Christian context. Thus in the eyes of Henry Liddon, preaching on a leading scholar and philosopher: ‘That which in Dean Mansel appears to me especially to challenge your Christian homage and admiration is not the possession of high intellectual power, but its consecration to the service of God.’ (Liddon 1871: 9-12) Sermons on women were particular liable to highlight practical virtues whether in energetic Christian service which hearers were explicitly urged to emulate (Aveling 1872: 30), or in more unassuming qualities, as in the case of the wife of a fellow minister described by the leading Congregationalist John Angell James: ‘Her course through life was not that of a rapid and roaring torrent, but of a gentle noiseless

stream, attracting little notice, yet scattering benefits as it flowed onwards.’ (James 1856: 30)

In sermons on major secular national figures preachers often found the exemplary function more problematic, as there were greater moral and spiritual ambiguities, and the great majority of preachers lacked first-hand knowledge of their subjects. These difficulties are well illustrated by funeral sermons on the Duke of Wellington in 1852. For example Francis Maude, preaching in Trinity Church Ipswich, felt it necessary both to defend the morality of defensive war and to acknowledge that Wellington’s standing as a statesman was inferior to that he had had as a soldier. He then went on to discuss at length the question of whether the Duke had been a Christian. He felt that those who spoke ‘of our deceased hero, as of a lost soul’ were judging hastily and harshly, but recognized that from lack for personal knowledge it was impossible to be confident about his eternal future. Nevertheless one could be a child of God without being a conspicuous saint, and Wellington had at least been a conscientious attender at divine service (Maude 1852). Extant published sermons generally show a charitable or agnostic view of Wellington’s spiritual state, but Maude had evidently encountered more negative views, perhaps in unpublished sermons. Most preachers therefore found firmer ground in highlighting the Duke’s more mundane and patriotic virtues, such as his integrity, sense of duty, and loyalty (Blunt 1852; Bowhay 1852). The issue was most effectively stated by George Steward, preaching in Glasgow, who compared Wellington with his near namesake John Wesley, affirming that while Wesley was a ‘saint’ who had reformed the populace and roused the nation from spiritual slumber, Wellington was a ‘hero’ who had preserved it from thralldom and given it ‘rank and glory in the scale of empire’. In

the perspective of eternity, however, Wesley's had been much the greater work (Steward 1852: 47-8).

Nine years later Prince Albert was a more straightforward subject for preachers, because his career lacked the moral and political ambiguities that had been inescapable in relation to Wellington. Nevertheless there was a sense that preachers who felt the need to speculate on his spiritual state were building bricks with very limited straw (for example Lord 1862: 8). Hence they tended rather to dwell upon his outward virtues, his sound judgement, and patronage of the arts and sciences, and above all for demonstrating that 'it was possible for the husband of a queen to be a virtuous man, an exemplary husband and parent' (Clark 1861: 6-9) and for bringing about a 'moral revolution' that made royalty a normative pattern for family life (Vaughan 1861: 12).

In reflecting on the careers of their subjects, early Victorian funeral preachers were not afraid of injecting a controversial or partisan edge into their sermons. Nonconformist ministers preaching on the death of William IV celebrated the advance of liberty and equality during the reign, in a manner that must have seemed provocative to Tory and Anglican opponents (Hutton 1837; Steane 1837). A Unitarian preacher attacked Anglican evangelicals who, he asserted, while professing 'to be the most closely allied to the principles of Protestantism' actually 'retain much of the leaven of Popery' (Mardon 1837: 18). The Duke of Wellington's political record was attacked from both sides, by Tories because he has conceded Catholic Emancipation, and by liberals because he had resisted Reform (Croly 1852:43-4; Binney 1852: 38-9). Similarly while some preachers on the Duke used their sermons as a basis for developing moral and theological justifications for war (Ottley 1852, Steward 1852), the radical Scottish cleric Patrick Brewster turned his sermon on the Duke into an

attack on aggressive British foreign and imperial policies. He acknowledged that the nation was indebted to Wellington ‘in so far as ... he has contributed to the defence of his country against foreign aggression’, but condemned him as ‘the friend and ally of every despotic power in Europe’ who had fought an unjust war to restore the Bourbons to the French throne. (Brewster 1852: 6, 13)

By the last third of the century, however, it had become conventional for preachers to avoid controversy. Thus in a sermon on Walter Kerr Hamilton, the first Tractarian bishop, Henry Liddon, despite his personal sympathy for his subject’s more controversial actions in asserting his theological convictions, sought to reach out to his critics by setting them in the context of his ‘transparent sincerity’, and then moved on to highlight Hamilton’s ‘large heartedness’, evidenced by charitable attitudes towards Nonconformists and a desire for Christian unity (Liddon 1870: 7-14). In 1885, published sermons on the death of General Gordon held aloof from the intense political storm arising from the Gladstone government’s perceived abandonment of him to the forces of the Mahdi, and focused rather on his qualities as an exemplary Christian soldier (Fleming 1885; Hitchens 1885). William MacDonald Sinclair highlighted the ‘betrayal’ of Gordon, but presented it as the collective treachery of the nation as a whole, rather than the fault of particular individuals (Sinclair 1885: 20). As the importance of the Bible as a common point of reference declined, it became all the more important that exemplary lives affirmed consensus rather than division.

For many Victorian preachers it was important that exemplary lives were shown to culminate in exemplary deaths. Thus, although some preachers deemed detailed accounts of a subject’s ‘departure’ to be ‘improper’ (Green-Armytage, 1857: 3) others gave what, to present-day eyes, seems excessive and rather prurient attention

to the subject's final illness. The purpose of doing so was to provide evidence of a positive spiritual state that would thereby inspire the living with knowledge that the subject's faith had withstood its final earthly test. Some subjects, especially ministers, had known exactly what was expected of them, and were careful to provide utterances that could be duly reported in sermons. Thus the dying James Harington Evans had said:

Tell them [his church] that I stand accepted in the Beloved, notwithstanding all my sin, and infirmity, and hellishness. I never felt more that I do now my sin and hellishness; but in Jesus I stand – Jesus is a panacea. (Shepherd, Winslow and Noel 1850: 8-9)

Ambrose March Phillips de Lisle, a leading convert to Roman Catholicism suffered from a long and painful terminal illness, but according to Caesarius Tondini, who preached his funeral sermon this only served 'to bring to light a new and yet undiscovered power of God's grace in his soul' as well as demonstrating the efficacy of the sacrament of extreme unction in enabling him to face death calmly (Tondini and Collins 1878: 19, 24).

Preachers had various strategies to handle subjects where evidence of the ideal deathbed was not available. Some were of course too inarticulate or gravely ill to make spiritually uplifting utterances, but a calm uncomplaining disposition in a last illness could still be reported as evidence of the desired spiritual state (Thornton 1863: 20-1). Preachers also faced a difficulty when responding to the deaths of national figures, because of their lack of detailed firsthand information regarding the deathbed scene: however some could not resist the temptation to speculate on the basis of circumstantial or fragmentary information (Dibdin 1837: 14-17; Dibdin 1865: 12-13). A more unusual and poignant problem faced a minister who preached a funeral sermon for his own wife following her suicide. He argued against the view 'that a child of God will never be suffered to commit suicide when in a state of insanity' by

describing not only the evidence for her authentic Christian experience before she became ill, but also the dying professions she made before the poison she had drunk took full effect (Shindler 1853: 5, 43).

In the later Victorian period reference to the deathbed was liable to become much briefer (Gresley 1888: 6) or to be omitted altogether (Nash 1895), but for other preachers its appeal persisted, as evoked in 1883:

Who could afford to miss the prayers, the counsel, the consolation of the dying, which are never so effectual as when they are breathed in pain, and never so wise and gentle as when they are spoken by one half over the border, almost in sight of the Far Land? (Cure 1883: 12).

In 1898 following Gladstone's protracted and widely-reported terminal illness a preacher could still observe that the eyes of the nation had been focused on Hawarden Castle 'where the old warrior was vanquishing death by submitting to it.' (Garnett 1898: 3)

If there was broad continuity of interest in drawing spiritual lessons from well-ordered deathbed scenes, preachers' views of sudden and untimely deaths changed significantly over the course of the period. Princess Charlotte's death in 1817 had been widely perceived as a judgement on the nation for its collective spiritual failings, and echoes of this view could still be found as late as the death of Prince Albert in 1861 (Wolffe 2010: 193-8). A variant on this view was the idea, based on Isaiah 57:1, that the death of a righteous man was a forerunner of impending judgement on the survivors (Hoare 1847; Lorimer 1847). Sudden deaths could also be viewed by preachers as providentially ordained warnings to the living causing them to highlight the need always to be spiritually prepared to die (Hewlett 1847; Richardson 1861). The death of a child was seen as intended by God to stimulate the spiritual growth of the bereaved parents:

It was one part of His purpose in taking to Himself your treasure, that you should feel a void, an aching void; that so you might be brought to fill up that sense of vacuum with an enlarged and more vivid realisation of His own presence. ... when at any time your minds too fondly dwell on your gathered flower, let the certainty of her eternal blessedness create increase earnestness in the pursuit of your own heavenly prize. (Hose 1859: 16)

From the 1860s, however, when faced with tragic deaths, preachers began to show greater perplexity and less readiness unhesitatingly to discern the intentions of providence. Thus in 1863 Samuel Martin, ministers of Westminster Chapel, preaching on the death of the young wife of a nearby minister acknowledged:

Many may ask – some do ask – Why did God permit to become a wife one whose time to die was within fourteen short months of her wedding day? Why did God permit to become a mother one who could retain her motherhood but a few days? Why did God permit work to be commenced and service to be undertaken which should so soon be left? This is mysterious and inexplicable to us all. God has a reason for this dispensation and a perfect reason; but to our question “Why,” echo answers “Why”! We cannot say really for what intent our sister has been removed, but we can say, “It is the Lord, let Him do that which seemeth good unto Him.” (Martin 1863: 21-2)

Similarly in 1868, the Chaplain of the Liverpool Workhouse agonised over the death of the Lady Superintendent of the local Nightingale Nurses. He suggested that, like Paul in his text (Philippians 1:23-4), she might be glad to depart and be with Christ, but that her loss was a ‘painful riddle’ for those left behind. God, he suggested, might need her for an even nobler work in heaven, or might want to make others more aware of their dependence on him, but ultimately one could only affirm trust in the overriding Will of God (Smith 1868: 10-12). The Tay Bridge disaster of 1879 stirred explicit sermon controversy between those who saw it as a judgement on Sabbath breakers and materialists, and those who ridiculed the idea that the Almighty had a specific purpose in destroying ‘a poor remnant of railway travellers’ (Wolffe 2010: 198). While in an earlier generation the Duke of Clarence’s premature death in 1892 would have given rise to numerous sermons on divine judgement, to his

contemporaries God's purpose in the tragedy was largely mysterious (for example Purey-Cust 1992: 10).

Something of the transition may be illustrated in two funeral sermons, delivered nearly half a century apart, by the prominent Broad Churchman Charles John Vaughan. In 1847, as headmaster of Harrow, Vaughan preached on the death at the age of sixteen of a boy at the school, Francis Ashley, son of the future Lord Shaftesbury; in 1892, now Master of the Temple and Dean of Llandaff, he preached on the Duke of Clarence's death. In both cases Vaughan was evidently moved and troubled by the tragedy of untimely death and unfulfilled promise, but whereas in 1849 he described young Ashley's death as a 'chastisement with circumstances of peculiar mercy' (Warner and Vaughan, 1849:23) in 1892 he sought comfort rather from stressing Christ's sympathy with sorrow and suffering, and from the power of universal human sorrow (Vaughan 1892: 3-6, 13). He ended his 1847 sermon in language that sounded almost evangelical, reminding his hearers of the possibility of unexpected and premature death and calling them to personal repentance (Warner and Vaughan, 1849: 25); in 1892 by contrast he concluded with an exhortation to pray for the bereaved to find comfort in sorrow (Vaughan 1892: 15). While something of the contrast can be explained by Vaughan's sensitivity to the evangelical convictions of the Ashley family, it is nonetheless indicative of how the approach of one leading Victorian preacher changed between his early thirties and his mid-seventies.

Early Victorian funeral preachers frequently made general references to judgement, eternity, heaven and hell, but they had little to say about the specifics of the afterlife. The Unitarian Benjamin Mardon rather quaintly visualised the deceased William IV exchanging 'an earthly for a heavenly crown' although 'not occupying one of the highest stations in the heavenly kingdom' (Mardon 1837: 17-18). The

leading evangelical Baptist Noel vividly evoked the gloomy nature of death from a purely human perspective, which was ‘frightful’ for the ungodly man, who carried with him to eternity all his lusts and passions. People of faith, however, could look forward to a very literal bodily resurrection at the Second Advent of Christ:

The time is coming – God knows when the hour will be – when that poor body, which some of us lately saw consigned to the grave, to have the dull earth heaped on it – when that very body, radiant with immortality, shall spring forth from the cemetery where we laid it, and shall rise into the presence of a returning Saviour, when he comes again to judge the quick and the dead. (Shepherd, Winslow and Noel 1850: 29-30)

Noel, however, did not speculate on the intermediate state of the soul, perhaps because like other premillennialists of his day, he perceived the Second Advent as an imminent rather than distant prospect. He chose to challenge the unconverted with the prospect of facing divine judgement with their deceased minister as a witness against them, rather than by dwelling on the horrors of hell (Shepherd, Winslow and Noel 1850: 37).

In the 1860s and 1870s, however, preachers gave more attention to the intermediate state, reflecting both ongoing theological controversies over the nature of the afterlife (for detailed accounts see Rowell 1974 and Wheeler 1990), and a surge in popular interest demonstrated by the large sales of works such as William Branks’s three books on heaven, published between 1861 and 1863, and Edward Henry Bickersteth’s epic poem, *Yesterday, Today and Forever* (1866) (Wolffe 2000: 204-5). In 1860 Samuel Ley Thorne’s funeral sermon for his grandmother Catherine O’ Bryan, wife of the founder of the Bible Christian Connexion, was indicative of the emerging trend. Taking his text from Revelation 14:13, Thorne expounded the idea of death for a Christian as deliverance from bondage and exemption from the labour, in exchange for the physical perfection of a spiritual body in heaven. He suggested that the doctrine of the future state was gradually revealed in the course of Scripture from

initial hints in Genesis to a full account of the glories of heaven in a literal reading of the final chapters of Revelation (Thorne 1860: 14-19). In striking contrast to Noel in his sermon a decade before, Thorne's emphasis was thus on the immediate prospect of a spiritual heaven for those who had been 'in the Lord' in life rather than the expectation of bodily resurrection at the *parousia*. E.H. Bickersteth, preaching on the same text in 1872, believed he could have it both ways, but it was clear that for him the intermediate state of the blessed dead was one of conscious enjoyment of Paradise and perhaps continuing awareness of loved ones still in this world, rather than merely one of 'sleep' until the Second Advent:

The hope, the glorious and blessed hope of the Church, is indeed the second advent of her Lord, when this corruption shall put on incorruption, and when death itself shall be swallowed up in victory. But TILL HE COMES, Paradise is the next stage of our delightful existence, that Paradise which has already received all who sleep in Jesus and which, if we die in Him, will shortly receive us into its blissful bosom of repose. How narrow the frontier line that separates that world and ours! (Bickersteth 1872: 18)

Queen Victoria's known anxiety to be reassured of her continuing spiritual communion with Albert was influential in encouraging dissemination of views of a conscious afterlife where loved ones would be reunited, a belief reflected down to the 1890s in sermons on her subsequent bereavements (Fleming 1899; MacGregor 1897). In particular James Fleming's sermon on the Duke of Clarence, entitled 'Recognition in Eternity' first preached in front the Prince and Princess of Wales shortly after their son's death, sold over 50,000 copies and was still being reprinted in 1899 (Fleming 1899: 1). By the end of the century, moreover, Thorne's and Bickersteth's evangelical view that heaven was reserved for those who had been demonstrably converted to Christ in life was being eclipsed by universalist views of the afterlife, where the subject's eternal happiness was not necessarily dependent on their manifestation of saving faith before death. Just as published preachers on the Duke of

Clarence's death in 1892 did not see it as a divine judgement on the nation, they did not feel it necessary to justify their expectations that he was enjoying a fulfilled afterlife by claiming that he was a truly converted Christian. Fleming quoted the Princess of Wales's view that her late son 'did cling to the Cross' but earlier preachers would have looked for less indirect evidence (Fleming 1899: 2).

By the time Queen Victoria died in 1901, despite the continuing appeal of productions such as Fleming's that addressed a particular topic of widespread interest, the funeral sermon as a published genre was already in significant decline. The British Library holds less than forty funeral sermons from the 1890s, in contrast over a hundred from the 1830s. Newspaper reports indicate that countless such sermons were preached in response to Queen Victoria's death, but the fact that far fewer of them were published than in 1852 or 1861 is indicative of the realization of both clergy and publishers that there was no longer a substantial market for them. After 1901 the decline became precipitous: a thorough search of the British Library catalogue yields only eighteen examples for the whole of the rest of the twentieth century, most of these from the first two decades (including five on Edward VII), and the last of them Bernard Delany's sermon in 1943 on the leading Roman Catholic intellectual Father Vincent McNabb. It therefore seems apt to conclude this chapter by considering the published funeral sermons on Queen Victoria, both as representing the final significant flowering of genre, and also because they may provide clues to the reasons for its subsequent rapid demise.

The dominant tone of the sermons on Queen Victoria was eloquently, even movingly elegiac. Preachers were conscious that they were mourning not only an individual but a woman who had come to symbolise a whole age, and who had been part of the fabric of life for longer than they or most of their hearers could remember

(Buxton 1901: 4; Hyamson 1901: 2). They saw her as focal point of unity in nation and empire and highlighted her conscientious discharge of the duties of a constitutional monarch, in the face of personal sorrow (Hyamson 1901: 4). They praised her for setting a high standard of morality and family life, and suggested that her motherliness was central to her public as well as her private role (Sturges 1901:7). Above all they presented as an inclusive figure, someone with whom everyone could identify even though they had never met her and who gave potentially oppressed and excluded groups a sense of being part of the imagined national family. Thus a Jewish preacher affirmed: 'She loved all of us, both great and small, with a great love, and we loved her with a great love.' (Adler 1901: 4). This assertion of inclusivity helps to explain why a substantial proportion of the published sermons came from more marginal groups that wanted to assert their participation in the national community; there were four from Jews, two from Anglicans overseas (Sandford 1901; Wirgman 1901), and two from the clergy of the small Reformed Episcopal Church (Eldridge 1901; Sturges 1901), who claimed they had been driven out of the Church of England by ritualism. On the other hand, it seems that no Nonconformist minister published a funeral sermon on Queen Victoria, indicating that they no longer felt a need to use this medium to assert their civic role.

Thus by 1901 the funeral sermon's primary role had become one of constructing and affirming consensus, comfort and participation in the context of bereavement. One looks in vain in these texts for any less than adulatory tone, or of any spiritual or moral challenge to the hearers beyond vague exhortations to be inspired by the memory of Victoria, and to affirm national solidarity in the face of her loss (Sturges 1901: 14). It had been different in previous generations when preachers had purposefully sought applications to the situation from the text of Scripture, had

readily acknowledged the human fallibility of their subjects, speculated provocatively on the Almighty's purpose in their deaths, or pointedly confronted their hearers with reminders of their own mortality and the prospect of divine judgement. The 1901 sermons are interesting to the historian as powerful articulations of an intense but transient mood of national grief, but once that phase had passed they could have had little to offer to contemporaries but nostalgia. Preachers also said little that was not said in similar ways by secular speakers and obituarists. They symbolise the apotheosis of the funeral sermon as of Queen Victoria herself, and its transition at the end of a long life into the conventional twentieth-century funeral eulogy, in which the speaker pays tribute to the deceased and comforts the bereaved, but seldom says anything that merits the attention of a wider audience.

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