



Funerals - teachers' notes

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Additional information – Funerals

A funeral is a special service held soon after a person's death, usually in the presence of the person's body. It usually includes the person's burial or cremation (where the ashes are buried). Funerals can be religious or non-religious.

A thanksgiving (or memorial service) is like a funeral, but it usually takes place after the person has been buried or cremated. This means that a memorial service can take place many months after the person has died.

Additional information - Funerals at Westminster Abbey

3,300 people are buried and hundreds of others are commemorated at Westminster Abbey, including some of the most significant in the nation's history.

The most recent royal funeral was that of Queen Elizabeth II on 19th September 2022.

You might also find the following resources useful:

- A page explaining the [State Funeral of Queen Elizabeth II](#)
- "What is a Christian funeral?" [explanation](#) as part of an article introducing Christianity
- The [Order of Service](#) for her funeral.
- A page explaining the [history of royal burials and funerals](#).

On slide 8, the image on the left of the slide shows an illustration of a king's funeral from the Litlington Missal, one of the largest surviving English medieval manuscripts. The missal gave instructions for royal funerals and coronations which could be used by the abbot of Westminster. Richly decorated with illuminated initials, pictures and borders made from coloured inks and gold leaf, this manuscript is a work of art. You can find out more [here](#).



On slide 8, the image on the right of the slide shows the grave of scientist Professor Stephen Hawking whose memorial service (and internment of ashes) took place at Westminster Abbey on 15th June 2018. Further information about his life and a link to the order of service for his memorial can be found [here](#).

Additional information – What happens at a funeral?

Christian views on death: When Jesus died on the cross, his family and friends were filled with sadness and despair. Then just days later, they found his tomb empty, and they were filled with fear. Finally, they saw the living Jesus himself; they were able to speak with him and they were filled with joy. Jesus had been resurrected (he had come back to life). Christians believe that God is more powerful than death, and that Jesus' resurrection shows how there is no area of life or creation where God's love cannot reach.

The arrival: Sometimes families choose to play special music at this point, sometimes silence is preferred. This can be a very emotional moment in the service, when people really understand that the person has died. It is traditional to wear dark, sombre coloured clothes to a funeral to show respect. Sometimes, the family will ask people to dress in bright colours as a way of celebrating the life of the person who has died.

Prayers: Prayers are said not just for the person who has died, but also for those left behind. A priest might say this prayer for those still living:

'Eternal God, you give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death; let your light shine on those who mourn that they may rejoice in your holy comfort and live in the light of the resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord'.

Bible readings: Christian funerals must contain a Bible passage. One of the most popular Bible passages is Psalm 23:

**The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.**

**Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil; for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—they comfort me.**

**You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.**



**Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long. (Psalm 23)**

The eulogy: The eulogy might cover some of the person's life story and may include personal memories and even amusing stories. It is an opportunity to celebrate the life of the person who has died. Sometimes there may be more than one eulogy and people may be invited to share their memories of the person who has died.

Sermon: A sermon at a funeral will often focus on themes including God's mercy, justice, forgiveness and love. The Archbishop of Canterbury gave the sermon at Queen Elizabeth II's funeral. This is the text of the [sermon given at the State Funeral of Queen Elizabeth II](#).

Music: Whilst it is traditional to sing hymns at a funeral, it can be very comforting to listen to a favourite piece of music of the person who has died too.

Commendation: The priest commends the person who has died into God's care. This echoes Jesus' own words on the cross: **Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.'** **Having said this, he breathed his last.** (Luke 23:46)

Committal: Students may have heard the phrase 'earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust' before. Sometimes, close family members throw handfuls of earth over the coffin before it is buried. This idea comes from the Bible passage where God creates Adam from the earth and tells him that since he came from the earth, he will return to the earth.

**'By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread
until you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
you are dust,
and to dust you shall return.'** (Genesis 3:19)