



Joyfully Serving Jesus
Holy Trinity Parish Church
Church St, Cuckfield, Haywards Heath
West Sussex, RH17 5JZ
www.holytrinitycuckfield.org
Registered Charity Number: 1131432

The United Benefice of
Holy Trinity Cuckfield
and
St Mary Magdalene Bolney

Vicar: The Rev'd Daniel Valentine
Benefice Office: The Old School, Church Street, Cuckfield,
West Sussex, RH17 5JZ
T: 01444 456461 E: office@holytrinitycuckfield.org



St Mary Magdalene Parish Church
Church Lane, Bolney
West Sussex, RH17 5QR
www.stmarymagdalenebolney.org.uk
Registered Charity number: 1190593

THE FUNERAL TRIBUTE

A funeral tribute is a way of saying farewell to someone who has died that, in a sense, brings the person to life in the minds of the audience. It can be delivered by the priest conducting the service or by a close friend or family member of the deceased.

You don't have to be a great writer or orator to deliver a heartfelt and meaningful tribute that captures the essence of the deceased. For some people, the opportunity to speak during the funeral service about the person they knew is a welcome one. Others prefer that this is dealt with by the Priest.

There is no right or wrong way to write a tribute: each is as unique as the person giving it and the person it describes. But even if you're used to speaking in public, finding words to say can be difficult because of the special circumstances of a funeral. You may be coping with your own grief. You may feel a heavy burden of responsibility to get it 'right', in terms of both content – what to say – and tone – how to say it. You may prefer to ask someone else to write it, or perhaps have them on standby to give it for you.

Whatever your thoughts, you should not feel pressured into giving a tribute or guilty if you feel unable to do so. If you feel you did not know the person well enough or are simply not that interested in characterising this person's life, please just suggest that the priest delivers it and just help by providing the information that will make the tribute personal. This is a hugely important job.

Thinking about your Audience and the Person

Start by thinking of the people you are addressing, as well as the person you are describing: the tribute is about the person, but for the audience.

Key thoughts about your audience

Who are they – family and close friends only or others too? There may be specific things to say or avoid.

How will they feel? Listening to you will obviously be highly emotional for those closest to the person, and some people will be in tears. But this doesn't mean the tribute should be mournful and depressing. People will be grateful if what you say is uplifting and inspiring.



What do they want to hear? Most people want to hear good things about a person who has died, and forget the bad things. But people don't become saints just because they die. Your audience will want to feel you have captured the essence of the person – what makes them special. So be honest, but selective.

How long should it be? Even in the circumstances of a funeral, many people find it difficult to listen to one person talking for a long time, so a tribute should really be over in a matter of minutes – it should not be more the around 800 – 900 words.

Think of the person

A good tribute doesn't just tell the audience about the person – in a sense it brings the person to life in their imagination and gives them something by which to remember them. You can do this by telling stories about the person: the happy things, the funny things, the sad things, the unusual things that happened, which sum up their life. Talking about these and the enduring qualities which describe what they were really like as a person, will help you build a picture for the audience with your words.

You may have all the information you need, or you may want to speak to other people close to the person to get precise details and check your facts. You may have arranged the funeral as a friend of the deceased, not knowing too much about them and having no relatives to turn to for information, in which case you can base your tribute on your impressions of them as a person. Once you have the material and have thought about it in relation to the people you are talking to, you are ready to start putting it together.

Use these points to help build memories and stories.

You could start by looking around the house and pulling out old photo albums, going through old letters or emails, and any other memorabilia.

Perhaps go for a walk around your loved one's house and garden as this may trigger memories and ideas.

Talking to close relatives, friends, and acquaintances is also an excellent way to remember things.

Here are some prompts to help you get started:

1. Who am I speaking to?
2. How would the person like to be remembered?
3. What made them special? Favourite pastimes and interests, likes and dislikes?
4. When were they happiest?
5. Who was really close to them?
6. What did I really like about them? What did other people really like about them?
7. What are the highlights of their life story?
8. If I could say only three things about them, what would they be?
9. Who can help me check my facts?
10. Do I want someone else to give the tribute on my behalf on the day?



11. Is anyone else planning to speak about the person at the funeral? Do we need to avoid saying the same thing twice?

How to Write a Tribute

The hardest task in preparing any talk is often not so much deciding what you're going to say as deciding how to organise it into a structure with a beginning, middle and end. There are no hard and fast rules – here are some suggestions about preparation and use our Guide to Public Speaking for more in depth tips.

Write the tribute with the deceased's family and loved ones in mind

Dwell on the positive but be honest. If the person was difficult or inordinately negative, avoid talking about that or allude to it gently. Make sure you don't say anything that would offend, shock, or confuse the audience. For example, don't make any jokes or comments about the deceased that would be a mystery to the majority of the crowd.

Decide on the tone

How serious or light-hearted do you want the tribute to be? A good tribute need not be uniformly sombre, just appropriate. Some tribute-writers take a serious approach, others are bold enough to add humour. Used cautiously, humour can help convey the personality of the deceased and illustrate some of his or her endearing qualities.

The tone can also be partially determined by the way the deceased passed away. If you're giving a tribute about a teenager who met an untimely death, then your tone would be more serious than it would if you were giving a tribute about a grandparent who happily lived to see his ninetieth birthday.

Do I write it word for word?

Yes, the priest conducting the funeral will ask you for a copy of it. If it helps. But as you are writing, speak it out to yourself, otherwise your words may sound stilted when you actually come to deliver it. When we speak normally, we don't speak in perfect sentences. What's important isn't the grammar, but the points you are making and the stories you are telling.

Briefly introduce yourself

Even if most people in the audience know you, just state your name and give a few words that describe your relationship to the deceased. If it's a really small crowd, you can start with, "For anybody who doesn't know me..." If you're related to the deceased, describe how; if not, say a few words about how and when you met.

Avoid clichés like "We are gathered here today..." and begin as you mean to go on, with something special to that person. After introducing yourself, it may be best to get straight to your point as everyone knows why they are there. For example:



“There are many things for which s/he will be remembered, but what we will never forget is her sense of humour...”

State the basic information about the deceased

Though your tribute doesn't have to read like an obituary or give all of the basic information about the life of the deceased, you should touch on a few key points, such as what his family life was like, what his career achievements were, and what hobbies and interests mattered the most to him. You can find a way of mentioning this information while praising or remembering the deceased.

Include Family

Write down the names of the family members especially close to the deceased. You may forget their names on the big day because you're overwhelmed by sadness, so it's advisable to have them on hand.

Make sure you say something specific about the family life of the deceased — this would be very important to the family.

Illustrate parts of their life with a story and give specific examples of great or kind things they have done.

Use specific examples to describe the deceased

Mention a quality and then illustrate it with a story. It is the stories that bring the person—and that quality—to life. Talk to as many people as you can to get their impressions, memories, and thoughts about the deceased, and then write down as many memories of your own as you can. Look for a common theme that unites your ideas, and try to illustrate this theme through specific examples.

If the deceased is remembered for being kind, talk about the time he helped a homeless man get back on his feet.

If the deceased is known for being a prankster, mention his famous April Fool's prank.

Pretend that a stranger is listening to your tribute. Would he get a good sense of the person you're describing without ever meeting him just from your words?

Organise & Structure your Speech

Give the tribute a beginning, middle, and end. Avoid rambling or, conversely, speaking down to people. You may have a sterling vocabulary but dumb it down for the masses just this once. The average tribute is about 3-5 minutes long. That should be enough for you to give a meaningful speech about the deceased. Remember that less is more; you don't want to try the patience of the audience during such a sad occasion.

Decide the best order for what you're going to say:



Chronological? This would suit the life-story approach, beginning with their childhood and working through the highlights of their life.

Reverse chronological? Beginning with the present or recent past, then working backwards.

Three-point plan? Decide three key things to say and the order for saying them.

Theme? Choose one big thing and give examples, anecdotes, stories to explain and illustrate it.

Get feedback

Once you're written the tribute and feel fairly confident in what you've written, have some close friends or family members who know the deceased well read it to make sure that it's not only accurate, but that it does well with capturing the essence of the deceased. They'll also be able to see if you've said anything inappropriate, forgotten something important, stated incorrect facts or wrote anything that was confusing or difficult to understand.

Some questions to consider when writing a funeral tribute

When and where was the deceased born?

What were the names of the deceased's parents and brothers and sisters?

Where did the deceased and any siblings grow up?

Where did the deceased go to school?



Can you tell me anything about the deceased's childhood?

Did the deceased go straight to work after leaving school (eg National Service)?

Can you plot the deceased's working life (with dates if possible)?

Did the deceased marry and have children, grandchildren?

Who were the key people in the deceased's life?

What were the deceased's pastimes, interests and hobbies?



Did the deceased travel much?

What was the deceased like as a person/what would people say about the deceased's character?

Tell me any anecdotes or funny stories you remember about the deceased?

Did the deceased have a faith and was any faith important to the deceased?

Did the deceased attend church?

Did the deceased belong to any clubs or organisations?



Did the deceased enjoy good health?

How would describe the last few years of the deceased's life?

What were the stand-out features of the deceased's life?

What four words would you use to describe the deceased?

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____