THE PURPOSE AND IMPORTANCE OF RITES OF PASSAGE – MICHELE GUINNESS

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WHAT I MISSED THE MOST, WHEN I FIRST BECAME A CHRISTIAN, WERE THE GRAND OCCASIONS. MY BAPTISM – ADULT, INEVITABLY, FOR A JEWISH GIRL – WAS A RATHER LOW-KEY AFFAIR, GIVEN ITS MOMENTOUS IMPLICATIONS.

My parents had told me that if I went ahead, I could never come home again. I was supposedly exchanging one extended family for another, a more loving version, but there was no wrestling my way to the buffet table (there was no food at all), no being spun like a top in the centre of a circle of dancing viragos (dancing was a taboo in the Church in those days), no presents (too unspiritual), and little to suggest the entrance to membership of a community that Bar or Bat Mitzvah is. I remember the congregation sang a chorus of ‘Trust and Obey’ with extra gusto after each of the production line of five or six was dunked in the baptistery, and I think I gave a short testimony, but otherwise the event was fairly unmemorable, and saddest of all, appeared to change precisely nothing – no greater responsibility or enhanced role in my ‘new family’, no greater access to the decision-making processes, or even to the additional hospitality due to a new member. It was barely a ‘rite of passage’ at all.

Yet that is precisely what people are searching for today – dramatic punctuation in the dreary, daily script of their lives. But where is the Church when the door of opportunity flies open on its hinges? It’s rushing for the cover of archaic rituals that are often a final kiss of death, rather than a breath of new life. In the name of dignity, British Christians sacrificed fun to innate Anglo-Saxon reserve, more comfortable with the Greco-Roman model of Church that owed more to the intellectual rationalism of Aristotle, Socrates and Plato than the Hebraic culture of Jesus and the Apostles. And so the Church tended to reduce celebration almost to the point of going through the motions, for fear of people, heaven forbid, enjoying themselves. Done, almost for their own sake, rituals like confirmation, vital to the individual, are reduced to a shared process and divested of their celebratory feel until, instead of being the centre of attention, the candidates can feel as if they are on a conveyor belt in the Church factory.

And so, in this sensual, sensation-loving, postmodern world of ours, young people have sought out more pleasurable, more tempting, rites of initiation to adulthood – the first cigarette, the first drunken binge, the first sexual experience. The unspoken message they have received is that God is a killjoy, and disapproves of anything other than serious, adult solemnity. And this so misrepresents the Jewish Jesus, who told stories about banquets and parties and angels in festive mood every time a sinner repents, and performed his first miracle at a wedding in Galilee. He turned water, we’re told, into 800 litres of wine. That’s the approximate equivalent of 1,000 bottles. This man risked mayhem – but certainly didn’t leave his generosity in doubt or his commitment to the best possible enjoyment of an important rite of passage.

As a Jewish girl growing up in the 1960s, when Bar Mitzvah in the orthodox community was reserved for boys only, I felt badly done by. I had to wait for my moment of glory – a wedding under the chuppah, the traditional canopy and symbol of the wonderful home I would make. It seemed a long way off.

There's no doubt the occasion is something of an ordeal for a 13-year-old boy – and his parents. He stands up in the synagogue before a packed congregation and must sing a very long portion of the Torah, in perfect ancient Hebrew and with faultless musicality, proving he is now ready to take his place as an adult in the community. And when he succeeds (the rabbi ensures that every boy does) he is cheered and clapped, and pelted with sweets from every part of the congregation. And then there is the dinner dance in his honour, and the presents – five suitcases, six sports holdalls, ten alarm clocks, and twenty fountain pens, though a 'Bar Mitzvah list', like a wedding list, now eradicates the problem of multiple, unwanted gifts.

Changes in the role of women now mean that the Jewish community has introduced Bat Mitzvah, an equivalent ritual for 12-year-old girls. For one day that child is the centre of the community's attention. They are now deemed old enough to know the difference between right and wrong, to exercise self-control, and account for their behaviour. The boys in the orthodox tradition, and girls as well in Reform or Liberal Judaism, are full members of the community, and can be called upon to read the Torah in the synagogue, lead prayers, or be elected to the synagogue council. And the Church has no real equivalent – some have confirmation; some adult baptism. Neither is a 'coming-of-age' in its truest sense. Candidates play a very small part in the service, which often has no immediate or obvious practical consequence or access to what are regarded as strictly 'adult' roles – leading prayers, reading lessons, or becoming a member of the church council. The service is rarely followed by any kind of festivities.

In the secular world, apprenticeship to a trade or job once heralded the vital transition from childhood to grown up. Now, there is no event to steer a young person through the stormy seas of adolescence to responsible adulthood. Fewer children than ever walk through the Church's doors. A tiny trickle survive the early teenage years. If, when they do, we treat them as second class citizens and expect them to be passive observers, if we patronise them and do things to and for them, rather than receive, in humility, whatever spiritual gifts they bring to us, we can hardly be surprised when they look for significance elsewhere.

In the Hebraic tradition rites of passage take place both within the home and the community. A new meaningful Christian celebration of adulthood could involve both. For example, I know several men who have taken their daughters out to dinner when her menstrual cycle started, to celebrate the arrival of womanhood. Another friend gave a huge dinner party for her son on their eighteenth birthday (though it could accompany the adult baptism or confirmation of a teenager), inviting all the key men in the church to eat with him, as a way of handing him over to their company.

When my wedding finally came, to a non-Jewish man, it left me with the same vague feelings of disappointment I have for most of the other rites of passage I have celebrated in the Church. There was no canopy suggesting the home we would have, no drinking from the same cup reflecting the life we would share, no stamping on a glass symbolising the vulnerability of the relationship and the commitment involved in ensuring it remains intact. There was definitely no being hoisted up on a chair, like my bridegroom, in two separate circles of men and women, and whirled round and round until the community, exhausted, finally handed us over to one another. In fact, there was none of the colourful symbolism suggested in the Song of Songs.

Perhaps it is this lack of symbolism, as well as the exploitative and prohibitive cost of the ceremony, that has made it seem such an irrelevance to so many couples today. We have been unable to convey the importance of community and public commitment, to make the concept of ‘sacrament’ accessible. A public ceremony clarifies a couple’s intentions and expectations. Christian marriage is about taking the calculated, prayerful risk of committing yourself to one another, publicly renouncing all the rest you might have had, for however long your life may be. And that expressed rejection of disloyalty is the bedrock of home, family, community and society. Studies confirm that cohabiters are more likely to split up, that children do better in a secure environment. This is one rite of passage that should see an entire congregation sobbing into their handkerchiefs for sheer joy. There is something inexpressibly touching about the wonder and enormity of the commitment being made.

More than that, we should celebrate the relationship annually, and with gusto. It is a destructive myth that marriage destroys passion. It sustains it and we need to explain to couples that we fall in an out of romantic love many times in this special relationship, but that when he or she drives us barmy, and we’re having an out-of-love moment, it is marriage that keeps us together until we fall in love with the same person all over again. Amy Bloom said, ‘Love at first sight is easy to understand; it’s when two people have been looking at each other for a lifetime that it becomes a miracle.’

In biblical times, when the secular and the sacred, family life and faith were interwoven, children were encouraged to ask their parents about their own history. Remembering the faithfulness of God, recalling the deeds he had done, was the key to thriving in the future. Significant places were often marked with large stones as prompts. Every wedding anniversary should provide an opportunity for the couple to recount the struggles and joys of the previous year, perhaps using meaningful symbols or photos, in their extended family or home group. A really big anniversary can be shared by the entire church with renewal of marriage vows and a shared Sunday lunch or evening meal.

Birth rituals have a very small place in Judaism. The circumcision of a boy on the eighth day takes place at home, in the heart of his extended family. It is a low-key affair since it’s only for boys, and they’re hardly going to enter into the occasion or acknowledge it every year. On the other hand, there are complex rituals surrounding death, since it has such a profound impact on so many of the living. Christian culture, by contrast, lays great store by Christening, yet doesn’t do death well. It is important to commit or dedicate a child to Christ, and to do it publicly, for who knows when that commitment might not be called upon. But these rituals also make a demand of the Church too, to receive and welcome, and support, and we need to think of ways of making that more than mere lip service.

Learning to come to terms with death is essential, judging by the response to the loss of Princess Diana. There is little for folk to do other than bring flowers. There are no flowers on Jewish graves, nothing that will wilt and fade. Instead, mourners bring pebbles, smooth and polished, which will survive the elements and the passage of time, and symbolise the way their loved one will live forever in their hearts and in the tales of them they tell their children.

‘Christian’ society has surrounded death with formalisation rather than ritual. Undertakers take over and go through the professional motions. The coffin is often carried by four po-faced professionals in black, expressions fixed by habit and expectation to fit the sobriety of the occasion. In a Jewish family the coffin remains at the deceased’s home, with their lit Sabbath candles on top, watched and prayed over until the funeral, by members of the community who come and go in shifts, day and night. When my father died, we rolled his coffin up to the grave on a trolley, lowered him down, then took it in turns to take up the spade and shovel earth over him. It was all very natural.

Then, for the seven days of official mourning, known as *shivah*, the Hebrew word for seven, members of the community came to our home morning and night for the familiar prayers. I still remember how comforting it was to wake up to the chanting of those hauntingly sad, yet beautiful words from the Hebrew Scriptures rising softly up the stairs to my room. ‘The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. May the great name of the Lord be blessed forever.’ It is a wonderful song of praise and trust, transcending all pain and sorrow. Singing it at every *shivah* is the reflex that enables the participants to let down the emotional defences that human beings hold onto so tightly, enabling them to weep together and identify with each other in the common experience of loss and bewilderment. It is the trigger that says, ‘Permission to cry now’ – even to the men.

My mother, brother and I found old pullovers to wear so that the rabbi could make a cut in them, about four inches long, harking back to the days when people would rend their clothes in grief. It was a distinctly odd sensation to walk around for a week with your jumper hanging in shreds. It marks you out. It makes you feel conspicuous. It is a powerful external symbol of the tearing sensation inside which bereavement undoubtedly is. The world sees your pain. You don’t need to explain irrational behaviour. And that is an immense relief.

Throughout the day we sat on low stools and received a countless stream of visitors, who came to hold my mother’s hand and reminisce. It amused me to see my mother’s non-Jewish friends arriving with flowers, while her Jewish friends humped in vast tureens of chicken soup, fresh salmon and casseroles. Not having to shop, plan meals or cook at a time when we least wanted to eat was a relief. Even the children were taken off to play, so that we had time and space to grieve without distraction.

Sitting on our low stools, waiting to be served, we were reduced to a kind of childish dependency on the loving support of others, and bereavement is the one time in our lives when that is not only acceptable, but necessary. When a loved one dies the body seems to produce its own instant anaesthetic. The faster the numbness wears off, the sooner the real grieving process can begin, and all the Jewish rituals are designed to create the kind of environment in which that can happen.

But with all our apparent belief in the afterlife, Christians tend to run from death, rather than confront its inevitability. My sister-in-law was shocked when a colleague came into work the day after her mother’s death, to ‘take my mind off things’.

‘You must keep your mind on them,’ my sister-in-law replied. ‘You need time to grieve, so that the wound can heal properly. That’s why we Jews have so many rituals surrounding death. They really work for us.’

Every year I light a memorial light on the anniversary of my father’s death. It gives me a chance to reflect on how my father's life was an inspiration to me, and how much I still miss him.

How much Christians miss by not making more of rites of passage, and how sad that the Church has failed to surround them with rituals meaningful enough to survive in a secular society. But perhaps, now, when there is a new awakening of interest in spirituality, it might not be too late to start.

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