

Churchyard – Theology and Parable

The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it [Psalm 25.1], but some of the earth is more obviously his, perhaps. A churchyard is consecrated to the Lord, and all parishioners have the right of burial. But there is no legal right to erect grave stones. In early days only the rich could afford a monument, and no-one else would expect otherwise.

What was the need to mark the grave place? Some vague sense that the departed was actually there because the body was, despite St Paul's teaching on the spiritual body? But there was nothing private about burial, and the churchyard was communal. The rich had always had the means to mark the passing of their number. Stone funeral monuments for the elite survive from pre-history. Monuments in the churchyard made the use of space less flexible. A way of adjudicating rival claims other than by favour was needed. Monuments were erected, some of great beauty and some of very doubtful taste: some dedicated to the greater glory of God, others by people whose main belief was in themselves. The poor were tumbled into their graves, unmarked and remembered for their number rather than their individuality.

The situation in churchyards was sustainable while wealth was concentrated and labour dependent. With spreading affluence from the late 18th century, smaller and more standard gravestones came within the reach of more families, often beautifully hand cut in regional stone by local masons. The advent of pattern-book monuments in the mid-nineteenth century undermined local craftsmanship, and foreshadowed the situation today when foreign stones and mechanical lettering have brought the cost of memorials down to the expectation of modestly well-off families. Most churchyards have lost their aesthetic harmony.

If the personal need for memorial strayed over the border of good taste at times, this was to be expected. The churchyard was now a place of individual choice and privatised mourning. Attachment to community values which had been slim during life, became slimmer still at death. The authority of the parish priest was easily challenged: the rich would get their wish, the rest would follow affordable fashion. There was a need for planning, otherwise it became a free-for-all. Churchyard regulations were made at diocesan rather than national level. The local priest was delegated to apply these rules on the ground. Some did, some did not, and the regulations changed over the decades so there was always a precedent for individual choice somewhere – quite apart from the confusion in many people's minds between cemetery and churchyard. In parallel to the changing population of many villages, we also see graves turned into trim little suburban gardens, rather than left to grass.

We moved from grace to law, from social freedom to private concern, from the immaturity of feudalism to the mature democratic society with its more hidden rivalries being displayed by decisions as to what is on the ground. The question concerning grace is who arbitrates how its generosity is earthed. The problem with rules is enforcing them within a rhetoric of individual rights. Because mourning is difficult these days, and the grasp of the theology of resurrection so attenuated, much is emotionally invested in monuments and markers. The earth is ours and all that is within it. This is a huge failure of shared spiritual imagination and trust in community and in God.