

18th February 2022

Shadow

**“Life itself is but the shadow of death,
and souls departed but the shadows of the living.”**

Sir Thomas Browne, The Garden of Cyrus

A funeral, is a funeral, is a funeral ... Apart from location and content, all funerals are much the same. But not on Islay. There are similarities of course: dignity, tributes, coffins, flowers, hymns, funeral directors. And there are *obvious* differences: more burials than cremations, religious services than secular, church-based gatherings than elsewhere. But there are other differences too. So I'm beginning to re-evaluate "a funeral, is a funeral, is a funeral" because of what I'm experiencing here.

If it's a church service, there's a "coffining" the night before. The family gather in the funeral director's parlour for a "viewing", a dram, and the closing of the coffin. Then the coffin is admitted to the church, with the family present, the minister expected to share a reading and a prayer. Secondly, the main family members come to the church an hour before the time of the service. This is welcome, hospitality, engagement, warmth, support, and is integral to the atmosphere of the whole day. Thirdly, the funeral is "owned" by the whole community. In recent funerals I've conducted, the "track and trace" register was taken by someone who knew almost everyone there – by name, circumstance, location and relationship. This is a community bound together around a death and giving much needed support to a family in their loss. And finally, there's often a dram, oatcakes and cheese at the graveside, offered to people before they leave. This is conviviality, sharing, storytelling, connections, humour and warmth.

Death happens in the midst of a community and isn't wrapped in sanitisation and anonymity. It's an engagement of a family with their people and being "up front" in that. It's a community binding round its own, grieving together. It's about hospitality, earthiness and normality.

"Life itself is but the shadow of death" is right. But at least, in this community, under that shadow, the light of honesty, support, hospitality and welcome can do much to dispel the darkness of death and the grief of loss, and allow us to live and walk in the light, even for a little while.

A prayer for today

*"In the midst of life, we are in death"
doesn't mean that in the midst of darkness there's no light at all.*