

Allowing Jesus to be Reborn at Funerals

Hour Three of a Four Hour Seminar by Rev. Tongpan Prometta

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Brothers and Sisters, I would like you to understand that there are things that we need to allow Jesus to do. Those things that we cannot change we must allow him to change in us. Thai Christians have been taught to believe that the ways imported into the church from Europe are the ways of God. These ways had meaning back in the places where they came from. The problem was when they came to us we didn't know the meaning. The meaning didn't transfer. I want you to understand just how important it is for Jesus to come in the cultural forms that *our* people can understand.

One of the problem areas for the church is death. When outsiders see what happens when a Christian dies they say they don't want to have anything to do with Jesus. They notice that at a Christian funeral there is just a pathetic group of four or five people who show up. This just reinforces the belief that Christians are just a small group of social misfits. Today we want to make those numbers in society grow by helping people understand Jesus Christ.

Let me share with you our experience holding Christian funerals. This is one other opportunity to bring Jesus into our community. Jesus can be reborn through the funeral ceremony. First, we have to understand our culture. If people think that when they die as Christians there will only be a tiny number who show up for their funeral they will have nothing to do with becoming followers of God. Why is this? Because Thai society loves status and they get it by having lots of people show up. It is humiliating to lose face by having only a few show up at a funeral. The dead (and their families) who have poor attendance at a funeral become the neighborhood laughingstock.

There was a church member who died in the village of Ban Dat. When there is a funeral the family wants lots of people to be there - even Christians want this! A funeral is a great opportunity for people to visit together. As soon as the funeral date was arranged I told the man's children, "Go and invite everyone, Christians and non-Christians. You can even put some pressure on them by saying that if they don't come to this funeral you won't go to theirs either!" So they did. Thank God. The villagers came in mass - all of them! It was the biggest funeral gathering that that village had ever had. There was a real crowd.

When we held the ceremony we held it in the name of Jesus. We had our Christian Isaan band play and people sang and danced. There was good teaching from the word about him. There were lots of people who heard all of this. How did the villagers respond? "If that's what happens when Christians die, I want to die!" they said. "Dying that way is great. What a way to go! And heaven must be even more fun than this! Those who die in God are really happy." That is the way to have Jesus be born again in a funeral.

The music was fun and it spoke the good news. I was able to bring in the message of Christ at the funeral and God increased the numbers of his children. When the good news from the Bible was brought into that funeral people sat and listened.

Everyone was there except for the monks from the village temple. They were upset. I found out later that they were saying, "Everyone was invited except us." I told them, "The next time someone dies I will make sure and invite you, Respected Teachers, so you can also listen." They were very disappointed that they had been overlooked. We wouldn't want them to be upset again!

The monks were particularly upset because the person who had died was actually the younger sister of the head abbot. And he had not been invited. So please understand that the next time someone dies we will make sure we invite the Buddhist monks - all of them - to come to the funeral of the Christians. Why? Because it shows that the Christians want to have unity with everyone in their community. This is the way to bring the gospel into our local society.

If a Christian dies and only a handful of people show up it's so discouraging. When my father died there were eight of us at the funeral. We had a walking procession that went right past the main market, full of people. Everyone stared and shook their heads. I heard them say things like, "Oh, look at that! No way am I ever going to be one of them! I wouldn't dare tell anyone I was part of a group like that! Too embarrassing. Pitiful!"

At that moment I told myself that this would never happen to another Christian's funeral if I could help it. Lots of people! That's the way to go. It is absolutely necessary. The more there are, the better the opportunity to share the good news, the story of Jesus, with others. Lots of people together make other people curious. Many have heard and received blessings this way.

It's important to understand that the *reason* we hold a funeral is distinctly different from the Buddhist reason. The Buddhist way relies upon the living doing something for the dead so that they can work their way to heaven. But for us as children of God, we **celebrate** because the believer has now gone to heaven! That's why people say, "Dying in Jesus is great!"

And that is how Jesus is reborn, using the cultural forms of a funeral. Use the ceremony as a place to share the good news. Invite everyone. Where there are lots of people, many ears will listen. The problem is we don't believe that others can be influenced or that we can influence them! The majority of Christians have an attitude problem. We've got something already decided deep inside of us that says, "Those people don't believe. We won't invite *them!*" That's wrong. We can make a difference. We may need to do a little influencing. "Oh, Respected Uncle, Dear Auntie, this friend has just gone to be with God. I'd really appreciate your participation in coming and helping at the funeral." No one can refuse a request like that. Crowds show up. People come to show they are sympathetic. When the ceremony gets started everyone gets quiet. That is your chance. Share the good news with people then. That is the best church planting time.

I am concerned that so many Christians feel inferior about this whole subject. Am I right? We know we are few in the society at large and other groups are bigger. Our group is small because we invite so few. A good three-day funeral will include many opportunities to share: songs, testimonies, dance, Bible teaching, music playing. I want you to understand that you can influence your society. Your influence may involve applying a little tactful pressure such as; "If you come to this gathering I will never forget it. I won't abandon you when your time comes."

Yesterday someone asked the question, "Can we still wai¹ the corpse of our mother or father or relative at a funeral?" Yesterday the speaker touched on this. When our father and mother

were alive we wai-ed them didn't we? Why can we not wai them after they die? You can wai them. You can wai them as your parents or relatives.

But you must understand that we do not wai them as other people wai corpses. My older brother passed away recently. I said to him, "Thank you God, Elder Brother you are now with God." When we wai we don't speak as others do. Other people cry or complain or curse the dead when they wai. We, as followers of Christ, give thanks to God. We thank God that our loved one is now with Him. At my brother's funeral I said, "Elder Brother, you're with God now. You're enjoying all of the blessings of God. Thank God that you are happy in heaven now. You got there ahead of me but just wait. I'm looking forward to joining with you one of these days."

When people hear that what do they say? "How can he talk like that?!" Buddhists are afraid to die. When someone is dead they believe that that is the end, they'll never see that person again. The dead are no longer a brother or a sister. What is worse is the fear that the dead may come back to haunt them. They're afraid that the spirit of the dead might be angry and try to come back and seek revenge. They're so afraid that they attempt to confuse the spirit so that it gets lost trying to find its way home. They take the bed and turn it upside down. They turn the mats over. Anything that can be moved is rearranged. The possessions of the deceased that can be burned are laid on the funeral pyre to be disposed of with the body so that the angry spirits will get lost and never be able to return. Thai people are afraid to death of the dead!

But for those of us who are children of God, we believe differently. Death is something we look forward to. We believe that one day we will meet again. We have salvation and others can have it as well. That is a great hope.

Whatever we do, if there is someone who asks us why we are doing it we should be able to answer that person. If there is something you do but have no answer to those who ask you why you are doing it, then you shouldn't do it. If you can answer, go ahead and do it. In this instance, we clearly understand that the person whom we wai is our father or our mother or our beloved relative. If the deceased is a believer we thank God for the fact that they are now in the presence of God. We are thankful that they are now experiencing great happiness and will not have to be troubled with the things of this life anymore.

That is the way we can allow Christ to come into the funeral ceremony. In other words, we shouldn't just let these opportunities go by. Give the funeral to Jesus. Let Jesus transform the ceremony into a means of sharing the gospel. This will have a positive affect on our churches.

In order to communicate effectively, it is imperative that every time we have a Christian Isaan funeral we explain what is happening. Explain to those gathered where the dead in Christ has gone. People will ask questions, such as, Why don't you put a coin the mouth of the corpse? We explain that no money is able to buy heaven for the dead. This person has already reached heaven now! Declare it to those gathered. Other questions arise: Why don't you turn the mats upside down? Why don't you have a ceremony the same way everyone else does it? We answer clearly that this person is in heaven now, he is not an evil spirit who will return to haunt us. He is God's child so he is with God now. The dead will not come back to be reincarnated on this earth again. We need to have answers when people ask.

We're not trying to explain things in a Buddhist way. We're explaining the truth that we know. People may ask, "Why don't you tie a string to the corpse and have the monks lead the body

to the funeral pyre (and on to heaven)?" We explain that God has led this person's spirit to heaven already. We explain clearly and simply. People listen and the gospel is being shared right there through the funeral ceremony.

That is how we celebrate a Christian funeral. We do it this way to allow Christ to be reborn in the midst of the ceremony. When we have these opportunities we need to take advantage of them in the best way possible. Does anyone have any questions regarding funerals?

One woman asked, "Where do you bury the bodies?"²

Excuse me, I forgot to say that in our church we have only cremations. In our denomination, The Church of the Grace of God³, we don't have burials. We've studied this and concluded that the body, this temporary temple, can be burned. It is more sanitary. It kills any germs. Burials or cremations are both fine but in our group we only practice cremation.

Another woman asked, "Where do you have the cremation?"

In the crematorium in the temple⁴. In our churches we don't separate from society. We teach that we are not trying to separate ourselves from people in our community. We have our cremations in the temples. I first held a Christian funeral in a Buddhist temple in Nong Han amphur (Udon Thani province). All the Buddhist abbots and monks gathered for the ceremony. They had prepared the chairs for everyone to sit but they did not lead the ceremony. We were the ones who had asked if we could use their facilities.

There was no problem. Our desire is that Jesus Christ be reborn in that situation. We held a Christian funeral ceremony right there in the temple and it was not a problem. But be sensitive! If you're in that situation don't start badmouthing Buddhism. Usually when Christians are in a setting like that they want to separate themselves from Buddhists.

Someone from the audience asked for clarification, "Did you hold a *Christian* ceremony in the Buddhist temple?"

Yes, it was our own Isaan Christian ceremony.

"But you used the *Buddhist* temple and facilities?"

Yes, that is correct. We used their facilities. And we invited them to come as well.

"And were you able to share about Christ freely?"

Yes, we were able to share. It was not a problem. When we held the ceremony we did not do it in a spooky way or with a lot of spiritual mumbo-jumbo. We brought Jesus into the ceremony - in the singing, in the ritual, in all we did in the temple.

Further question, "Suppose the temple doesn't allow us there? Or they won't let us have a Christian ceremony there, then what?"

It is most important that you talk with the temple leadership beforehand and come to some agreement. If they don't allow it, then you can have a funeral elsewhere (for example, hold the cremation in a field). However, since I have been doing this I have never heard of a Buddhist

temple official not allowing a Christian funeral ceremony to take place in their grounds. Other villagers have talked and wondered about it. We've heard them say, "Don't let Jesus come back here again!" But no temple official has ever refused us.

Don't forget. After we have the cremation what do we do? We pay them! Three hundred baht⁵. Don't be stingy. It's true that they don't have to do anything but we're using their place. If you don't pay they won't want you to come back, will they? Don't start building up unnecessary barriers. Don't start saying, "You're a Buddhist, I'm a Christian. Christians and Buddhists can't be together so I'm not going to pay." If we pay we've got a right to use the facility just as much as anyone.

A man stood to ask, "If a relative of ours dies who is not a believer should we participate in the funeral?"

Do you mean "participate" in regards to the ceremony or personally? (Personally, was the reply). In that case, let me share what our church does. Our churches are divided into eight districts. If a relative of any believer dies in any of our districts we have an offering that goes to that family whether or not they are believers. This is to show the love of God that we want to demonstrate to everyone.

When my other brother died the church in Udon contributed towards his funeral expenses. This brother was the only one in my family who had not believed in God. All my other siblings have. The church came and gave this gift to my brother's family. They were so glad to get it and gave thanks to God for us!

But when it comes to doing a Christian ceremony for someone who was not a follower of God - we have done that also. Who do we do a funeral for anyway? For the living. We don't do it so we can help send the dead to heaven. Followers of Christ are already in heaven when they die. So we have a ceremony for the living - for the relatives and family who are still here.

A man from the audience asked, "What if we give a donation to the family of the deceased and they announce it to others? Won't it look like we're just trying to make merit that way⁶?"

For myself, I'm not upset if they announce my gift. We gave the gift and if people want to say something they will. We've helped as we were able. If you put a lot of stipulations on a donation it becomes a problem for both the giver and the receiver. If we give a gift and then tell people, "I don't want you to tell anyone about this" I think that would create an awkward situation. That's not really helping freely. Deep in our hearts, when we help others we're not thinking we're only going to help those who are fellow children of God. We want to help all but we can't dictate what other people's reaction is going to be to what we do.

It is most important that we ourselves understand what we are doing. We're not giving money to a spirit. We're not giving gifts to an idol. We're giving money to help a family in their time of need. That is not wrong.

If I don't help my neighbors in their time of need I am useless. People will label me as selfish. I must help. This is a good principle to follow. No matter what kind of gathering it is, Christian or Buddhist, if we're afraid of what other people might say about us there is very little we would be willing to do. Fear can tie us up to the point of immobilizing us.

One of the basic principles of grace is that of helping one another. Forgive one another, give to one another. These are important fruit that grow out of our having received salvation already through Jesus Christ. Now is our chance to share with others. How they are going to use what we give will depend upon them. No matter what their reaction is we should be prepared to help.

For example, after every Christmas gathering our church groups decide to do something for their community before they all go back home. In the past it has included cleaning up trash and digging new latrines for the schools. These are the kinds of activities that break down social barriers. There are no complaints about Christians in those villages. The followers of God are one with the local community. Actions are a better way to share Christ than words.

A woman from the audience asked, "Teacher, what is your opinion of donating your body to a medical school for research purposes?"

Good question. I thank God that I have had the opportunity to tell my family that when I die I want to donate my body to the Khon Kaen Hospital. I have told my children and my wife that when I die not to worry about my body. My spirit will have gone to heaven to be with God. Donate my body to the hospital. You can have a worship service, have fun singing and dancing and some teaching from the word, whatever. But I will be with God.

I've already taped my message about going to heaven and being with God. I'm not going to have anyone else preach at my funeral. I'm going to speak myself. I've taped it now on three cassettes. One of my sons listened to it and said he laughed until his sides ached. My second son said, "I'm not going to listen to it now. I'm afraid it won't be funny anymore by the time you die."

Actually, I told my sons they really don't need to have a funeral ceremony for me when I die but they were upset about that. I wanted to challenge the cultural norm! I'm going to be with God at that time anyway. But if they have a worship service that glorifies God that is fine with me. I have told them in advance. It is important to give your instructions beforehand. I told them I wanted my body donated to the hospital. If it is simply burned up it has no use for anyone. But if my body goes to the hospital then I will be the professor! Medical students will address me as, "Respected Professor" before they cut me up and learn all about the body. That is useful. This doesn't mean you have to do as I do. This is a personal decision.

Another question came from a woman in the audience, "What should we do at a Buddhist funeral when it comes to the time when people listen to the monks chant⁷? Should we put our hands together and wai as everyone else does or not?"

The question is should we, as Christians, put our hands together when monks are chanting. I don't think we should. I have been to funerals and not done it. Some of those who don't believe in God, or Buddhists, not all of them put their hands together either.

There was one time when I went to a funeral and they invited me to come and give a robe to the monks.⁸ When they called my name I went forward and gave the robe but I did not wai the monks. The next funeral they didn't ask me to do it again. The host was more concerned about what others would see but I was more concerned about the other Christians who were there. Jesus talked about not doing things just so others could see us.

But we don't act in an obnoxious way. We don't take a seat in the front row where everyone will notice we are not wai-ing. We can sit in the back, in a corner or wherever you want to. There is freedom to think what you want. Thai people are free.

At this point Tongpan read a written question which had been turned in, "Please tell me, if a relative or friend becomes a monk should we be involved in the ceremony or should we tell them we can't be involved?" I have experienced this. Remember we have freedom. We can choose to be involved or not. We can choose the good areas in which we will participate. If they asked me to go and buy the saffron robes, I would decline. But if it is to help in other ways, to give a donation to help the family, I have done that.

What feels right in your heart? We need to decide which areas are those with which we will be involved. What is right and what isn't? What is idolatry and what isn't? We have to have a spirit of discernment. If we tell people, "I'm not going to help you with that!" what is going to be the effect? Sometimes we can give money so that food is provided when needed. People appreciate being helped.

We'll have nothing to do with idolatry. If they ask you to go buy a big idol to donate to the temple - that is wrong. There was a member in one of our churches who won the lottery on the first of the month: three million baht. He bought a huge Buddha statue for over 10,000 baht and donated it to a local temple. Today, he has drifted from the Lord. As soon as he no longer followed Jesus all that money, all three million baht, was all gone. His new truck is gone. He walks around on foot now. I had told him, "Don't ignore God." But he did. He didn't honor God. He was addicted to the lottery every month. I gave him this reminder many times before he finally won. Whatever gives God glory is what we should be doing. What does not we should not be involved with.

A woman stood up to say she agreed that it is okay for Christians to attend a Buddhist funeral in order to demonstrate compassion and show God's love. "In fact", she said, "we should hurry to go since we do it not for the dead but for the living. This will also cause people to ask, 'Can Christians really join with us in this?' But just a moment ago you shared with us your experience where you were asked to give a saffron robe to the monks. You didn't refuse but went ahead and did it. Suppose that a new believer was there and he felt it was wrong. If he saw you doing this he might be confused. At that point you are involved in Buddhist religious practice (this is my opinion, she added). What I think is that we should separate ourselves and not be the one to give robes to monks. It's okay to be there, attend, but not participate in the religious activities. As for me I wouldn't do it. There was man in our church who was a highly respected schoolteacher who was asked to take the robes to the monks. He came and asked me what he should do. I told him he should separate himself from the old practices so that his reputation would be clear. If he did not other church members would not be able to distinguish him (from Buddhists). So this respected teacher declined. He was one who clearly differentiated between the two."

Thank you very much, said Tongpan. I think what you said is good. Next time I won't do it. I'd like you to understand that the time this happened to me I didn't consider myself someone of importance to do that. I did not wai the monks, I just gave the robes and left.

Another woman came up to the mike and shared an experience in order to get some advice, "One day we were having a gathering of our women's group at our church. A missionary was teaching the word to us. While we were meeting a Chinese person came into our meeting and

asked us to give donations towards their work to provide funerals for people who die who have no relatives⁹. The group of us looked at each other. We didn't know what to say. The farang¹⁰ missionary might not have really understood the tradition of this Chinese group so he said, "Sorry, right now we are studying. We don't have time right now." The Chinese replied, "You're Christians aren't you?" "Yes, we are Christians." At that point we figured the Chinese would leave but no, he went on, "Christians have a responsibility to help others, isn't that right? Our project also helps poor children and orphans as well. Please donate towards this worthy cause - whatever you are able." We still didn't know what to do. Since we just sat there without doing anything the Chinese person finally left. What do you think we should have done as Christians in this situation?"

A simple answer to this question is to say that as Christians we will not be involved in other religions' practices and in those instances we will not give a donation. However, if, for example, there is a village project to build a sala for the mutual benefit of everyone in the village, we should donate to its construction. We should do what benefits society. I believe that we can differentiate the kind of assistance we give between that which is religious and that which is social. That is the principle that we follow.

A man asked the question, "After the funeral do you practice collection of the bones and ashes? And if so, where do you put them? Do you take them to the temple and bury them?"

Good question. Some people have wondered about this. Some people have buried the ashes in the temple grounds, some in their fields; it just depends. But in my opinion if people are going to keep the ashes at home, high up on a sacred shelf¹¹, because people say they miss their deceased loved ones, I don't agree with that. The reason is that if they leave them there or in any other special place they tend to become objects of worship. If you leave the ashes at the temple, that is fine. There is no problem in the temple because there are already lots of people buried there. This has not been a problem in our churches. Ashes are simply ashes and are scattered or buried wherever people want.

Yes, we do practice collection of ashes¹² and we make it into a special celebrative event. We have worship, singing, and a short Bible Study before we bury the remains. This is an external ceremony to help the living, not the dead.

Are there any other questions? Thank you for your questions and comments. If you have listened today and have some helpful suggestions please write me at P.O. Box 1, Udon Thani and I will thank you. We don't do it for ourselves but so that others can receive salvation.

Let us close in prayer.

Endnotes

¹ To "wai" is to raise the hands before the face with palms together. It is the normal greeting used throughout Thai society. The higher the hands are raised, the more respect is being shown.

² Many Thais commonly believe that Christians bury and Buddhists cremate.

³ The Church of the Grace of God is the Thai name for the Thailand Covenant Church.

⁴ Most Buddhist temples in Thailand have a special facility on their grounds specifically for

cremations.

⁵ 300 baht is standard payment to have a cremation. More is usually paid if monks are involved in the ceremony to do chanting or other roles.

⁶ Public announcement is usually expected by donors as a way of giving status to the meritorious act. This is to make merit-making more appealing to the Buddhist public.

⁷ The primary role of the Buddhist monks at a funeral is to do all they can to help send the dead to heaven - including the chanting of mantras in Bali or Sanskrit, the Buddhist sacred languages. They also hold the string, which is tied to the corpse, and lead the person symbolically to heaven. It is felt that a person cannot get to heaven without a monk leading them.

⁸ Donating robes to monks at the funeral is another form of merit making for the dead as well as a status symbol for the family hosting the event. It is considered an honor to be asked on behalf of the family to give the robes since only persons of high social standing are usually requested to do this.

⁹ There are well-known Chinese Buddhist foundations all around Thailand which collect the bodies of the dead (so that the family's vehicle is not haunted by the spirit of the dead) as well as provide coffins for the destitute.

¹⁰ "Farang" is the Thai term referring to any white foreigner.

¹¹ Urns are commonly available at Buddhist artifact stores throughout Thailand for the specific purpose of storing ashes of the deceased to be placed on a sacred shelf (also available at the same store) located high on the wall in the home for veneration.

¹² In Buddhist tradition, the collection of ashes is held three days following the funeral.