

You can tell a lot about a society by the way it treats dead bodies



You can tell a lot about a society by the way it treats dead bodies. Some cultures revere them.

One of my favourite films *Departures* is the story of a young man who returns to his small hometown after a failed career and takes a job as an assistant to a *nōkanshi* — a traditional Japanese ritual mortician. The respect shown to the departed by the *nōkanshi* as he prepares them for burial — washing, oiling, dressing, honouring — is truly beautiful.

In Jewish societies, burial takes place as quickly as possible after death, with a *chevra kadisha* (a team of volunteers) preparing the body, by showing it proper respect, ritually cleansing and shrouding it. When their work is done, a *shomayr* or watcher is appointed to sit with the body so that the deceased should not be left alone or unwatched until burial.

We've all heard about Norwegian water-borne funeral pyres and South Indian cremation ceremonies and the ancient South Pacific practice of excoriation. The manner of dealing with the dead is rich and varied throughout the world.

In America, bodies are embalmed and displayed in open caskets at the funeral home, prior to and during the funeral.

I've read it owes its popularity to a combination of the effect of the national grief felt at Abraham Lincoln's death (his embalmed body was displayed across America before being buried), and the ingenuity of big business

(chemical companies rolled out embalming schools and promoted the practice as healthier and more respectful).

Interestingly, us non-American Westerners find the open casket funeral somewhat too morbid.

Looking at dead bodies is not our thing. At all.



An open casket might look good if you're Aretha Franklin and we just focus on your very cool 5-inch Louboutin red stilettos, but I've heard most departed loved ones look more like Lenin than the Queen of Soul — heavily made up and pumped full of formaldehyde.

So what does it say about British/Australian culture that we are so squeamish about viewing dead bodies?

In fact, it's common in Britain or Australia for family members to not even want to see their loved one in the hospital or nursing home immediately after death. I've heard several people, when offered the opportunity to view their dead parent or grandparent, decline, saying they would prefer to remember them when they were alive. They really don't want to see their lifeless relative.

Moments after our mother died, I asked my brother if he wanted to touch her. "No," he replied, "that's not her. She's gone."

My own response was the opposite. I held her lifeless hand, kissed her forehead, pushed her hair back from her face, spoke words of farewell into her ear. Far from believing she was "gone," I saw her being very much present in her bed. Lifeless, yes. But her body was still her.

I'm not suggesting my brother's response was wrong. His was what I've observed to be the normal reaction in those circumstances.

This prudishness about dead bodies might be the last vestige of the old Victorian-era beliefs about bodies as dirty or shameful. Wherever it comes from, it reveals an interesting disconnect between the physical and the spiritual. Many people (my brother included) appear to take the Platonic view that our body is just a kind of fleshly overcoat our spirits walk around in. The real us is inside.

Television shows like *Altered Carbon* and movies like *Upgrade* reinforce this dualism – that we are spirits or souls or personalities and that our bodies are just dispensable repositories for us. When our bodies lie lifeless upon our deathbed no one wants to look at us because it is assumed our true self has left.



This month that I am spending Lent meditating on this painting of the body of the dead Christ by Renaissance artist, Andrea Mantegna. For a typical Aussie, unaccustomed to looking at corpses, even painted ones, it has been an interesting challenge.

In fact, it could be tempting to imagine that Christ is not present at all in this tomb, that his spirit has departed, leaving only this bruised and battered lifeless body.

But giving into that temptation leads you toward heresy. Believing that the spirit of Christ merely invaded the body of a Galilean man, walked around in it, eventually dying in that body on a cross, before departing to the heavenlies, denies a core Christian belief — that Jesus Christ was fully God and *fully human*.

The baffling miracle of the Incarnation is this: not that Christ's spirit entered a human body, but that God was human in the initial mitosis, with the fusion of gametes, the splitting of cells, the condensing and compacting of chromosomes within the uterus. Christ was fully human from the beginning so

that his death was the death of God, not the death of the body he had invaded or used for such a purpose.

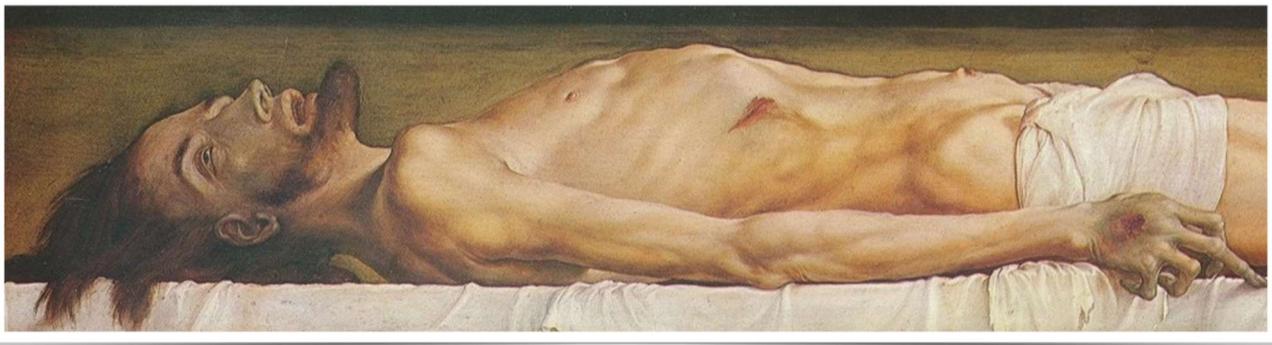
So when I contemplate Mantegna's depiction of Christ in that painting I try to be present to a terrifying concept: God the corpse. For if this corpse is not Christ what kind of death has he died? A proxy death?

Christ was fully human. He experienced all the limitations of human existence. He was captive to bodily needs and functions of being human. And so his death was truly his death, and his corpse is truly his body.

On Easter Sunday we will celebrate Christ's resurrection, his victory over death, the triumph of grace, the glory of God. And a month later we will celebrate the most baffling miracle of all — the Ascension — in which a piece of this material world, Christ's body, ascends into the heavenly realm. It's all too great to imagine.

But I still have two weeks of Lent to go.

Two more weeks with the dead Christ, contemplating my own temporal existence, confessing my many sins, bearing the burden of my humanness, trusting in redemption.



[Above: Hans Holbien the Younger, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (detail). Cover picture: Charles Cottet, *In the Land of Sea. Pain.*]

by Michael Frost