

Jimmy Carter's life celebrated at state funeral

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—A prestigious group of mourners, including a slate of current, former and future presidents and vice presidents, assembled in the Washington National Cathedral on Jan. 9 for the state funeral of President Jimmy Carter.

They celebrated the life and legacy of the peanut farmer-turned-politician from Plains, Ga.

Carter's casket, which had been lying in state at the U.S. Capitol since Tuesday evening, was welcomed at the door of the snow-covered cathedral by Episcopal prelates including Mariann Budde, the Episcopal bishop of Washington.

"Let us also pray for all who mourn that they may cast their care on God and know the consolation of his love," Budde prayed from the Book of Common Prayer, her robes billowing in a frigid wind.

'Most enduring attribute: Character'

A short time later, President Joe Biden offered his eulogy for Carter. The president noted when Carter ran for national office in 1976, then-Sen. Biden was among the first to endorse his candidacy. Biden said he was drawn to what he called Carter's "most enduring attribute: character, character, character."

Biden, like many who spoke at the state funeral, highlighted the importance of Carter's faith, saying it overlapped with broadly held American ideals,

including that “we all are created equal in the image of God.”

“Jimmy held a deep Christian faith in God … faith as a substance of things hoped for and evidence of the things not seen,” Biden said. “Faith founded on commandments of Scripture: Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and all thy mind and all thy soul, and love thy neighbor as thyself. Easy to say, very, very difficult to do.”

The spoken tributes to Carter, which included eulogies written by Carter’s predecessor and his vice president and delivered posthumously on their behalf, were interspersed with music.

In a testament to Carter’s long life and broad spectrum of allies, both the living and the dead shared reflections on a legacy of leadership, which one eulogist referred to as “a miracle.”

Besides “Amazing Grace” and the U.S. Navy hymn “Eternal Father, Strong to Save”—Carter was a U.S. Naval Academy graduate—the crowd heard a rendition of John Lennon’s “Imagine” by Garth Brooks and Trisha Yearwood.

Looking on somberly from the front pews were Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barack Obama and recently reelected Donald Trump.

Several of their spouses, including Melania Trump and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, were also in attendance, as was former Vice President Mike Pence, who served under Trump, and current Vice President Kamala Harris, who lost her own presidential bid in November.

Seated nearby were foreign dignitaries, such as Prince Edward, Duke of Edinburgh, the brother of King Charles III, and Justin Trudeau, outgoing prime minister of Canada.

Joshua Carter, Jimmy Carter’s grandson, first addressed the gathering from

the pulpit, recounting the late president's history of teaching Sunday school—a tradition, he said, that began when Carter served in the Navy before his classes became a fixture of his time at Maranatha Church in Plains, a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship church where thousands have come to hear his weekly lessons. A longtime Southern Baptist, Carter disavowed the convention in 2000.

Carter outlived two who left tributes behind

Carter, who died at age 100 as the longest-lived U.S. president, had outlived many of his contemporaries. As a result, sections of the program were delivered by their descendants.

Steven Ford, President Gerald Ford's son, read a tribute his late father wrote about Carter, detailing the warm friendship the two forged over the years despite being rivals in the 1976 election.

"God did a good thing when he made your dad," Ford said to Carter's children sitting in the front of the cathedral.

Ford explained that his father and Carter jokingly agreed to deliver eulogies at each other's funerals, a promise Carter made good on when Ford died in 2006. Steven Ford said it had been left to him to return the favor.

"As for myself, Jimmy: I'm looking forward to our reunion," he said, reading his late father's words. "We have much to catch up on. Thank you, Mr. President. Welcome home, old friend."

Ford was followed by Ted Mondale, a former Minnesota state senator and son of Walter Mondale, Carter's vice president.

Reading a tribute written by his father, who died in 2021, the younger Mondale said: “I was also a small-town kid who grew up in a Methodist church where my dad was a preacher, and our faith was core to me, as Carter’s faith was core to him. That common commitment to our faith created a bond between us that allowed us to understand each other and find ways to work together.”

‘Brought integrity to the presidency’

Stuart Eizenstat, a former White House adviser, also addressed the power of Carter’s strongly held religious beliefs, saying they “brought integrity to the presidency” in the wake of the Watergate scandal and discord over the Vietnam War.

Eizenstat said Carter’s faith also “respected other religions,” noting he was the first president to light a Hanukkah menorah and hosted a Shabbat dinner at Camp David for the Israeli delegation while negotiating the historic Camp David Accords.

Carter’s religious values, Eizenstat said, “gave him an unshakable sense of right and wrong, animating his support for civil rights at home and human rights abroad.”

He added, grinning: “Jimmy Carter has earned his place in heaven, but just as he was free with sometimes unsolicited advice for his presidential successors, the Lord of all creation should be ready for Jimmy’s recommendations on how to make God’s realm a more peaceful place.”

Guided by love for neighbors

Jason Carter, another of Carter’s grandchildren and a one-time Georgia gubernatorial candidate, also spoke. Noting Carter and his wife Rosalynn

spent more of their lives outside the halls of power than in them, he reflected on his grandfather's dedication to the biblical edict to "love your neighbor as yourself," and how it informed his work with the Carter Center, which observes democratic elections around the world and has helped eradicate disease.

"I believe that love is what taught him and told him to preach the power of human rights, not just for some people, but for all people," he said.

"It focused him on the power and the promise of democracy, its love for freedom, its requirement and founding belief in the wisdom of regular people raising their voices, and the requirement that you respect all of those voices, not just some."

He also recalled Carter's efforts to broker peace between Israelis and Palestinians that resulted in the Camp David Accords, and his more controversial advocacy for the Palestinian people.

"His heart broke for the people of Israel," he said. "It broke for the people of Palestine, and he spent his life trying to bring peace to that Holy Land."

'Something of a miracle'

Andrew Young, a pastor, aide to Martin Luther King Jr. and congressman before serving as U.S. ambassador to the U.N. under Carter, was the last to offer thoughts on Carter's life.

Referring to Carter as "something of a miracle," he related that when Carter enrolled at the Naval Academy, the future president requested his roommate be the Black midshipman at the school.

"But that was the sensitivity, the spirituality that made James Earl Carter a truly great president," said Young, who also previously served as head of the National Council of Churches. "James Earl Carter was truly a child of

God."

"Jimmy Carter was a blessing that helped to create a great United States of America," he said, adding, "He may be gone, but he ain't gone far."

'Did justly, loved mercy, walked humbly'

As the event concluded, Carter's casket was slowly removed from the cathedral by members of the military, ending a multiday string of events and services in Washington, D.C., meant to honor the late president. The casket will return to Georgia for a final, private funeral at Maranatha Baptist before he is buried alongside his wife at their home.

In his eulogy, Biden blessed Carter's final southern journey, pairing one of Carter's favorite Bible passages—Micah 6:8—with one of the current president's favorite hymns: "On Eagle's Wings."

"As he returned to Plains, Georgia, for his final resting place, you can say goodbye in the words of the Prophet Micah, who Jimmy so admired until his final breath: Jimmy Carter did justly, loved mercy, walked humbly," Biden said.

"May God bless a great American, a dear friend and a good man. May he be raised up on eagle's wings, bear you on the breath of dawn, make you to shine like the sun, and hold you in the palm of his hand."