

Prayers and promises of reform at Tyre Nichols's funeral

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Vice President Kamala Harris speaks during the funeral service for Tyre Nichols at Mississippi Boulevard Church on February 1. (Video screengrab)

Tyre Nichols, the 29-year-old Black man fatally beaten by police officers after a traffic stop in Memphis, Tennessee, was mourned on February 1, the first day of Black History Month, in a funeral that featured messages of faith from Vice President Kamala Harris and Al Sharpton.

The service at the Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church in Memphis mixed prayers with promises to work toward change to prevent future violence against Black people at the hands of police.

“Mothers around the world, when their babies are born, pray to God when they hold that child that that body and that life will be safe for the rest of his life,” the vice president said. “Yet we have a mother and a father who mourn the life of a young

man who should be here today.”

Harris voiced support for the proposed George Floyd Justice in Policing Act, noting her role as a co-author of its original version. “As vice president of the United States, we demand that Congress pass the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act. Joe Biden will sign it and we should not delay and we will not be denied. It is nonnegotiable,” she said.

“When we talk about public safety, let us understand what it means in its truest form: Tyre Nichols should have been safe,” she said, before reading a favorite passage from the Gospel of Luke about being a light amid darkness.

Mourners, including clergy, politicians, and celebrities—among them filmmaker Spike Lee and scholar Michael Eric Dyson—filled the sanctuary as images of Nichols’s photography and pictures of him enjoying times with his family and his skateboard appeared on screens. A YouTube video carried the livestreamed service at the church, which is affiliated with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

“We have come by varying modes of transportation and through treacherous weather and road conditions,” said J. Lawrence Turner, the senior pastor of the church. “We have come with heavy hearts that can only be healed by the grace of God, full transparency, accountability, and comprehensive legislative reform.”

The prayers, too, sought divine intervention for structural change.

“We will not rest until this family can rest knowing that Tyre’s life is honored by our . . . unwavering, unrelenting commitment to dismantling systems and cultures and institutions that destroy rather than protect,” said Rosalyn Nichols, pastor of Freedom’s Chapel Christian Church in Memphis. “We will, Lord God, continue until transformational restorative change is not in the future but in our here and now.”

Ministers and others who spoke recalled the video footage of five officers beating Nichols, a FedEx employee, as he called for his mother, who lived nearby. Family members of several other people who had died after encounters with law enforcement stood in solidarity, and one spoke and sang at the service, which lasted more than two hours.

“We are fighting together and all the mothers all over the world need to come together, need to come together and stop all of this,” said Tiffany Rachal, the

mother of Jalen Randle, who was shot and killed by a Houston police officer in April. She dedicated her rendition of “Total Praise” to Nichols’s family.

As he began his eulogy, Sharpton said he had stopped that morning by the site of Memphis’ [Lorraine Motel](#), where Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in 1968. Sharpton expressed disgust that five Black police officers were involved in an incident that led to Nichols’s death.

“What has happened to the dream?” he asked. “In the city where the dreamer laid down and shed his blood, you have the unmitigated gall to beat your brother, to chase him down and beat him some more.”

Sharpton compared the attack to the biblical story of Joseph, whose brothers threw him in a pit.

“No empathy, no concern,” said the president and founder of the National Action Network, a civil rights organization. “Nobody came to help him, like nobody came to help Tyre.”

Citing the 1955 bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, and the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, Sharpton noted that some civil rights struggles lasted for years. The key, he said, is not the time they take, but the necessity of the reforms.

“It’s not about a timetable; it’s that we cannot continue to live under these double standards and under these conditions,” he said. “We don’t care how long, but I can tell you one thing: Those of you that keep voting against that bill, we’re going to vote against you. We got more numbers than the police union.”

Near the conclusion of the funeral, members of Nichols’s family stood before the congregation, with one sister describing losing faith when she lost her brother and another reading a poem about her brother saying to the officers, “I’m just trying to go home” and how “God replied, ‘Come home, my son. Now you can rest.’”

His mother, RowVaughn Wells, described her son as a “beautiful person” and expressed thanks for worldwide support before sounding a similar theme, as the poem did, about divine decisions.

“I guess now his assignment is done and he’s been taken home,” she said, dabbing her eyes during her brief remarks.

Ben Crump, a lawyer for the Nichols family, issued a “call to action” for continuing work to recognize the humanity of their loved one.

“Why couldn’t they see the humanity in Tyre?” he asked about the Memphis police officers. “Because we have to make sure they see us as human beings. And once we acknowledge that we’re human beings worthy of respect and justice, then we have the God-given right to say I am a human being and I deserve justice. Not just any justice, but equal justice. And that’s what we’re going to get for Tyre Nichols—equal justice.” —Religion News Service