

# ABSENT YET PRESENT

*(Luke 23.50-24.8)*

## **Funeral Sermon for Bel Simblet**

*Now there was a man named Joseph, a member of the Council, a good and upright man, who had not consented to their decision and action. He came from the Judean town of Arimathea, and he himself was waiting for the kingdom of God. Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body. Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen cloth and placed it in a tomb cut in the rock, one in which no one had yet been laid. It was Preparation Day, and the Sabbath was about to begin.*

*The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it. Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment.*

*On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: "The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.'" Then they remembered his words.*

Nature has its seasons, and we know for sure that winter always follows autumn. In the same way we know, don't we, that death inevitably follows life - no exceptions.

But even so, death is never easy to accept. Even under the best of circumstances, after a long and happy life such as Bel's, death is a terrible thing. So we all come here today with sadness.

Every one of us is sorrowful today but the Bible says that there are two different types of sorrow.

It says, "We do not want you to be uninformed about those who fall asleep [die], so that you do not grieve like those who have no hope."

Some of us here are sad because they hold no hope of anything at all beyond the grave. So this is the end. It is the last goodbye.

But others of us have only the sadness of saying "See you later" to a friend who has gone on a long journey but whom we will be joining a little further on.

When a Christian dies those who remain know they will one day meet again.

Bel was a regular here. But she wasn't just a churchgoer. Most importantly, she knew the Lord. She may have been a little hard of hearing, (just a little!) and she would often lean over to Marion next to her and say "What's that vicar going on about?" but she knew a good sermon when she heard one.

She would certainly let me know in no uncertain terms if I ever preached a duff one! Bel always called a spade a spade, she was *real*, and I appreciated that.

I once asked her what she loved about Saint Mary's. Well, she loved the Lord first of all. But she loved this place and its people too. She told me that she thought all the lay preachers were marvellous. So I said, "I agree with you. And what about the clergy?" She gave me a cheeky smile and motioned with her hand as if to say "oh, so so".

Bel falls into a rare and special category of my parishioners in that I was privileged to present with her when she died. Three of us were there actually; Jen and Margaret were there too - and David joined us soon after. We watched her die. She just slipped away gently. She was totally at rest, totally at peace, comfortable and ready to go. It's almost as if she was waiting for a blessing to leave this world.

That morning, Bel's body stopped breathing, and her heart stopped beating. But in a sense God's children do not ever die. The Bible says this about a Christian's death; "we are absent from the body but present with the Lord." Absent, yet present.

Like when the women came to Jesus' tomb in our reading, they were expecting to see death. The messengers dressed in white said, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, he is risen."

The real Bel, her personality, her mind, her thoughts, her soul, her inner self, is not here either. Bel is absent from her body, but present with the Lord. This coffin contains only her outer shell which we will attend to reverently and respectfully of course.

But Bel's body is only like a chrysalis that a butterfly flies away from. Bel's soul, whatever it is that made Bel essentially Bel, has left to be with the Lord.

Why are you looking for the living among the dead? She is not here!

If my Bible is right, and if I understand anything about the glories of heaven, then I believe that it is safe to say that Bel would not want to come back to this world of sin, pain and sorrow.

She was ready to leave it to be perfectly honest. And she wouldn't feel the need to return if she were given the choice.

Why would she? Bel has already seen angels for the first time. She has heard sounds no ear has ever heard, seen sights no eye has ever seen, walked in Paradise, talked with heroes of the Bible... But best of all, she has met Jesus.

- For Christians, death is not the end, it's only the beginning
- For Christians, death is not a loss, it's gain
- For Christians, death is not a defeat, it's victory

I heard recently about a Christian man who was dying. He was slipping away and on the verge of that glorious world to which Bel has gone. And he suddenly sat up and said, "Beautiful! *What* a morning." His wife had been crying, and she couldn't see what he had seen. She couldn't understand how he had seen it. It was a grey day. The curtains were drawn. So she said, "Shall I open the curtains to give you a better view?" "Oh", he said, with that faraway look people sometimes have. "I have seen a great way beyond the curtains." He had started to see heaven's door open up.

Look beyond the curtains of death today and see Jesus. Look to him as your comfort and as your Saviour.

In the gospels, speaking of the death of John the Baptist, it says "his disciples came and took the body and buried it and went and told Jesus."

Let us also turn to Jesus now and tell him about our emotions and feelings. "Cast your cares upon him", the Bible says, "because he cares for you."

Let's pray...