

*An address given by the Dean of Melbourne at St Paul's Cathedral  
on the occasion of the funeral of Belinda Barker-Wong,  
on Tuesday in Holy Week, 30 March 2021:*

*Ecclesiastes 3.1-8, St John 14.1-7, 15-17*

Every time I met Belinda, it seems, she was singing. We first met twelve years ago, when I had just been appointed College Chaplain at Trinity College Melbourne, where Belinda sang in the chapel choir while she was an undergraduate. It was in the College Chapel that Belinda learnt the art of Anglican chant; was steeped in the cadences of the Book of Common Prayer as set to music by Byrd and Tallis, and Smith of Durham, Howells or Stanford; became acquainted with many other wonderful hymns, anthems and spiritual songs.

It was at Trinity Chapel that she made many life-long friends; most of them fellow musicians, many of them with us today. It was there that she married her partner at work and partner in life, Marshall. On the occasions that Belinda and I met, we talked about music; an enthusiasm she shared with many of us here today. We would talk about forthcoming productions and projects either of us were involved in. Trinity College Choir tours to Europe, concerts and tours with Ensemble Gombert, and projects with the Consort of Melbourne.

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'For everything under heaven there is a season', the preacher tells in our first lesson. There are times and seasons for every experience. No experience is unknown to God. The times of celebration, as at a birth or a wedding, the times of laughter and dancing. Many of us have been privileged to share in such celebrations with Belinda, from whom joy and laughter was never far away. And now the time for mourning and disbelief at a life cut short in its prime; a time for tears and sadness, for questions about the rightness of this untimely timing.

No experience is unknown to God, the preacher tells. All seasons are in God's hand: the times that are filled with great joy, and those that are filled with profound sadness and anger at the loss of the life of a dear friend, a beloved daughter, partner and mother. God is in the joy, and in the sadness, our first reading tells us. God is there at every moment of our lives; he puts eternity into our hearts. He is present at the time when we are born, and he receives us into his eternal care at the time we die. Just as God is present in the in-between times; is with us in every situation.

Our gospel reading from St John's account of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, takes us to a time when Jesus' own friends were facing the reality of parting from their friend. In an extended night-time conversation, Jesus talks with his friends about life, and death, about loving and parting. And he assures them that he will be present with them in their time of trouble, will not leave them comfortless. 'Do not let your hearts be troubled', Jesus assures them at a time when their hearts would have been exceedingly troubled and heavy: 'believe in God, believe also in me'.

In times of trouble and sadness, in times of disbelief, Jesus tells his friends, rely on what you hold true. 'Believe in God, believe also in me'. Hold fast to the trust that you have, that God knows every situation under heaven, that God inhabits every season, that God has implanted eternity in your hearts. Even as he comes to the end of his own life, Jesus' disciples do not yet know what we know: how the story of Jesus will end. Not in tragedy, but in triumph. Not in death, but in life. Not in fear and mourning, but in joy at life restored and relationships transformed and renewed.

'If you know me, you will know my Father also', he tells his friends. 'From now on you do know the Father, and have seen him'. When we look on Jesus, we see God, Jesus tells his friends. When we hold to Jesus, we hold to God. Even and especially at the times when Jesus leaves us, when he goes to prepare a 'place' for us 'so that where I am there you may be also'. When we are with Jesus, we are with God. When we call on Jesus in the time of mourning, he will comfort us by giving us the gift of his Spirit.

Jesus' friends were deeply troubled and confused by these words. It was only with the benefit of hindsight, having lived through the season of darkness and pain at his parting, and having experienced the bewilderment and joy of his resurrection, that they were able to make sense of Jesus' prediction. That Jesus had not abandoned them, but gone ahead of them; that he had not left them comfortless, but given them the gift of his Spirit to dwell within them.

In their time of darkness and mourning, it was the Spirit of God that enabled them to remain connected, empowered them to keep going, keep waiting, keep loving, keep believing, keep following Jesus' instructions. And to continue to do so until the time when Jesus will come again, 'and take you to myself, so that where I am there you may be also'. The words that Jesus spoke to his friends, are offered to us today, as we wrestle with the same questions that they felt. Uncertainty as to the next steps. Grief at the loss of the centre of their lives. Fear of what lies ahead, and the lack of confidence that they will be able to cope in their own strength.

'I will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever', Jesus promises his friends as they make their farewells to another. The Spirit of truth who will abide with you, remain close by you, forever. That Spirit is the Spirit of love, Jesus tells his friends. That Spirit is the Spirit of life, and of truth. And with the help of that Spirit, Jesus assures his friends (and us with them), they (and we) can always navigate the way to the Father, always find the way back to God – even when the path before us right now seems uncertain, seems a struggle.

'I am the way and the truth and the life', Jesus promises his friends, and tells them that he himself will be the path to God the Father. 'You know the Spirit, because he abides with you, and will be with you'. When the path to God's presence is not apparent to us, when the path of life of our loved ones has been abruptly cut off, and we are left bewildered – even angry – at this separation, then it is that the Spirit may give us strength for living and loving, for keeping going, for re-orienting ourselves.

One of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, one of the ways in which we can experience God's presence with us is, of course, music. In psalms and hymns and spiritual songs we share in God's Holy Spirit. Belinda knew that Spirit in her own life. She gave that Spirit breath and voice. And that should give us, who mourn her untimely death, hope.

Hope that God will also sustain us in this season of mourning and weeping. Hope that God would give us breath to sing of the strong love that knows every season under heaven, and that, in Jesus Christ, has entered even death so that the eternal song may resonate in our hearts. Hope that enables us to face the stark reality of the grave with words of praise: 'alleluia, alleluia, alleluia' we sing.

Our singing has the capacity to span heaven and earth, is able to pierce through the unseeable and unknowable. It is our singing that may be able to hold us together when our world is falling apart. In our singing that we share with Belinda in the song of heaven. In our singing we share here on earth something of those who already dwell in the house of the Lord for ever. We share the same song, and give voice to the same hope, the same reality: that Jesus conquered death, to give us life and his eternal song.

It is to the merciful Father, who put eternity into our hearts that we commend Belinda for safe-keeping forever. It is to the loving Son, who shared our life so that we might have hope for living, that that we entrust one another. It is to the life-giving Spirit that we pray, that he would give us his breath and share his song with us, as we grieve Belinda's death.