

You tell me Betty is now in heaven,

how can you be sure of that?



My beloved wife, Betty, died on Monday evening (13th October), and the staff in the hospital have been so kind. Many other friends have also reached out to me offering comfort and consolation. So many say things like “she is in heaven now” *and I do believe she is*. But I wonder: do we all have different reasons for that assurance? Because if it is just **wishful thinking** and not based on a definite reality, we’re going to face problems when death comes knocking at our own door, or perhaps someone else close to us. Worse still, if our assurance is based on wrong thinking we could be in serious trouble when we wake up on the far side and find we had not made the right preparations for that journey.

Of course, some people do not believe there is **life after death**. The best comfort they can offer is that “Betty is now at peace and out of pain”. And that is clearly true. But what a loss for them if heaven is real and they don’t know how to get there!

Some people may have said “Betty is in heaven now” because they believe that **God is loving and kind** and in the end He will find some excuse for squeezing everybody in. It’s a lovely comforting thought when facing the reality of either one’s own death or that of a loved one. The problem is there is absolutely nothing to prove that this is true, and quite a lot of reasons for believing it to be untrue. The greatest evidence of the love and kindness of God is the teaching and the life and death of our Lord Jesus Christ. But He has told us that God His Father has entrusted all judgement to Him and He specifically warned that some will rise (from the dead) to live and some will rise to be condemned¹. And if there is no hell, why did Jesus suffer crucifixion to save us from going there?

Jesus constantly challenged people to believe in Him, and if we refuse to believe what He says about life and death, we’re going to be in trouble!

Some people seemed to put two sentences together – “**Betty was such a wonderful woman (and so she was)**.... She is in heaven now.” If you did a survey in Ireland asking people who do believe in heaven and hell why some will go to heaven and some will go to hell, I expect a great majority would in one way or another say it depends on how good a life we have lived here.

But the people who gave most trouble to Jesus, refused most stubbornly to accept His teaching, and finally conspired to crucify Him were those who believed they were good enough to get to heaven and were deeply offended when He pointed out there were sinful issues in their lives that needed addressing! His most ardent followers were those that the “wonderful” people of His day saw as totally unworthy of spiritual blessing: like unlearned fishermen, prostitutes and other “sinners”!²

And what about the criminal on the cross who admitted that he was being justly punished, getting what his deeds deserved, and to whom Jesus promised “today you will be with me in paradise”?³ Jesus did **not** operate under the principle of “the better the life, the more hope of getting to heaven”! It seems almost exactly the opposite

But you may ask: doesn’t the story of the sheep and the goats teach that⁴? No I don’t think so. Read it more closely – certainly it teaches that there are two categories of people and there are two outcomes depending on which

¹ John chapter 5 verses 22 and 29

² Matthew chapter 9 verses 9-13

³ Luke chapter 23 verses 39-43

category a person is put into, but it does **not** (as many assume) teach the basis on which Jesus decides whether a person is a sheep or a goat. The world cannot be divided into people who never do anything good for anyone else and people who never fail to take an opportunity to bless others. For myself, I would have to admit that, although by the grace of God I do at times reach out to the needy, there have been many times when I have failed to do so. And Betty would have admitted the same. IF that is how the diagnosis is made we both fall into both camps – part sheep and part goat! No – Jesus is simply saying that those who are sheep will be rewarded for every act of kindness to another for the sake of Jesus, but for those who are goats and not sheep even the failure to act in love justifies their punishment.

So **why did Jesus accept the criminal**, the prostitutes, the sinners, the people who deserved nothing from Him? The simplest answer can be found in the appeal of that criminal to Jesus: he recognised Jesus as God, as one who beyond death would establish a kingdom, that he himself was totally unworthy of belonging to that kingdom, but he threw himself on the mercy of Jesus. And he received what he asked for!

True, Betty was a wonderful person, but that is not why she is assured a place in heaven! As a young woman she did the same as the criminal on the cross, recognised her unworthiness and her need of forgiveness, asked God for it and received it. From then on she has been guaranteed a home in heaven by the One who will be her judge and He will find her guiltless because He is her Saviour, the One who took the punishment on her behalf because of His love for her⁵.

And she grew into a wonderful woman because she allowed God to work in her life, making her like her Saviour! Not in order to qualify for heaven, but because she was already one of heaven's children.

And He will do that for you too if you ask Him.

If you would like to discuss this further, please contact me at phil@grace.ie

⁴ Matthew chapter 25 from verse 31 on

⁵ John chapter 5 verses 21-24 and chapter 17 verses 20-24