

## ***'As a Dying Man to Dying Men:' Eulogy for Joe Bell***

*'And I heard a voice from heaven saying, "Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. 'Blessed indeed," says the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours, for their deeds follow them' (Rev 14:13).*

Eulogies are generally relatively short, so I trust I will be forgiven by sharing somewhat broadly regarding the departure of our beloved brother and Bishop, Joe Bell.

Like all of you I was greatly saddened to hear that Joe Bell had gone to the Lord after a life dedicated in its entirety to the Lord Jesus Christ and the preaching of the Gospel. As his curate (1991) and then subsequently enjoying him as my mentor for more than two decades I felt that I should try my hand in writing what in some senses, is an impossible task, an obituary for Joe. Joe is not necessarily easily to write about as he was often such a multi-dimensional and occasionally taciturn individual. Indeed, if I am utterly honest - for those of us as his young curates, he was mostly intimidating man, with eyes like gimlets! The latter point, I suspect applied mostly to his various curates such as myself, Tom Robson, Peter Wessels and a host of others. And yet all of this often hid a marvelous sense of humour!

I have wonderful and occasionally challenging memories of my time with Joe in Pinetown in the early 90s:

**1). *'What humility really looks like.'*** Joe was without question one of the most humble men I have ever met, but despite this as such a strong leader he always made it very clear at any particular time precisely what he wanted and when - indeed right up until the last few services he ran, literally days before he was welcomed into heaven - at his retirement village in Simons Town - he was still arranging the order of service for the Easter Weekend: who should preach, who would lead the service and so on (this incredible story was told to me by Bishop Frank Retief Himself). But despite this, Joe's humility always became pretty obvious once you got to know him!

**2). *'Mark just shut up and listen...say nothing.'*** Joe had his own unique way of training curates. Because I was a bit arrogant and a somewhat of a hot-head as a third year student at the George Whitefield College – my lecturer, another great leader and treasure we recently lost to the Lord, Dr John Newby (who knew me well) – offered me some good advice just before I joined the Pinetown Church staff: *'Mark, just shut up and say nothing, just listen and learn...'* Of course, I did not follow the good advice John offered me and very soon I was offering Joe my own opinions on the salient points of running a church after no experience! Even the normally, relatively loquacious John Child (a wiser man than myself) had the patience to listen and to keep his insights to himself at such meetings. I should have taken this as a sign! I remember Joe very graciously and quickly putting me in my place! And yet within a day or two the incident was completely forgotten.

As curate you also learned a great deal about manual labour at Pinetown: Joe would often say to me: *'Pack out the chairs for the men's meeting to be held in the hall on Saturday morning.'* No problem. But then it turned out to be 500 chairs. When it came to training up curates, Joe was definitely *'Old School.'*

**3) 'I would have thought...'** As part and parcel of Joe's unique means of motivating his curates, was the unforgettable phrase: '*I would have thought.*' Yet once you actually got to know what '*I would have thought,*' actually meant in Joe-Bell parlance, it took on a whole new dimension to you and could, potentially, impact your career as a curate. Staff meetings were on Monday mornings. Here Joe would occasionally present his own form of an 'stipulation' or an 'directive' by simply stating '*I would have thought...*' Fool as I was, for the first month or two of my tenure at Pinetown, I took this as an invitation for us all to enjoy a long, dawn-out theological discussion on whatever topic was at hand (such as William Ockham on the Lord's Supper). Thus, earlier on during such occasions, when Joe proffered: '*I would have thought...*' I would, indeed, happily offer him '*what I thought...*' (perhaps the problematic view of Barth's doctrine of election after 1932). But after one or two such 'counter' suggestions, I soon learned that this was not precisely what Joe meant; when he stated, '*I would have thought.*' It rather meant something like: '*Get on with it!*' Having learned my lesson, again I soon joined the silence of Reg and John Child.

**4). 'Motivating people.'** There are thousands of books out there on how to motivate people in the ministry and I have read a couple myself. It certainly appears to be an exceptionally valuable and much needed gift for ministry work. After all, when you are dealing mostly with volunteers, motivating people is not always easy, it can become a challenge. But not for Joe.

Joe enjoyed so much love and respect from his people and possessed so much innate leadership ability to motivate others, it was incredible to view this trait in action in his ministry. On one occasion, I remember Christ Church Pinetown purchasing a derelict nearby house in order to turn it into a functioning building with offices and a bookshop. It seemed like an impossible task. The house was a wreck. Obviously it would require an enormous, almost impossible amount of work to refurbish it! This would include carpenters, electrical work, plumbing, plasterers, painters - the list goes on forever. All church members skilled in these skills were contacted by Joe's secretary quite late in the preceding week and were invited to report to the grounds of the 'new-old' house on Saturday morning. By the time Saturday morning arrived, to my amazement there they appeared, more than 80 folk, all reporting for duty at 09:00am!

**5). 'Keeping your bathroom clean.'** I have all kinds of special memories of Joe, and, as I said to Bishop Frank the other day, in many ways its only now, after almost 40 years of being in ministry myself that I feel that I am truly qualified to become Joe's curate as only after my own extended experience would I really learn from Joe and miss much less of what had to offer.

One of the most endearing experiences that I have of Joe stems back to around 07:30am one Sunday in 1991 when as curate I arrived at Christ Church Pinetown to open the Church (the church key ring had a diameter of around 30 cm with at least 60 keys – all had to be used each time the church was opened and closed – this took around an hour; it taught me a great deal about patience). Everything was dead quiet as no one had arrived – or so I thought. But to my amazement the bathroom door was open and there, at my feet on his knees on the floor was Joe Bell kneeling in full bishop's 'regalia' complete with collar and

purple shirt, cleaning the floor! In response to my look of amazement he insisted that part of our service to God was not merely preaching but also assuring that all things we pursue we should do so with excellence. Everything worth doing was worth doing well. He then gathered up his jacket and left.

**6). Preaching, focus, will and drive.** Speaking of my own ministry as an individual over a fairly lengthy career, over time I began to realise that although ministry gifts will always remain of paramount importance, nevertheless never wandering from personal focus on Jesus or the Gospel drive itself is of equal if not of greater importance. This is very much illustrated when we reflect on the ministry drop-out rate from our ranks over the years. Joe never lost that drive!

Joe's preaching was similar to that of Frank Retief and this is understandable, bearing in mind the fact that they both attended the Bible Institute and have been close friends ever since. In fact, whilst it is hard to believe that they were allegedly the most mischievous students at the Institute, nevertheless for the last 50 years they have both subsequently been gripped by the Gospel of Jesus Christ like none other preacher of my experience. Certainly, we have all heard outstanding preachers ourselves and obviously I cannot claim to have heard them all. I'm also sure we are all gripped by the Gospel but in my own experience every moment of Joe's existence, day or night, was occupied by the conviction of the *fields being white for harvest* (John 4:35) and the need to tell people about Jesus. It's not as if Joe's life was one in which followed the Gospel, rather it was *driven* by the Gospel, even consumed by it. In this sense it might be said that his life was quite *'black-and-white'*; the world was composed of those who know Jesus and those we have to reach who do not. This was certainly reflected in his incredibly powerful preaching. I remember the first time I heard Joe preach, 40 years ago and its power and conviction and urgency remain with me today.

As his curate on one occasion at Pinetown after I had preached a rather inadequate Gospel message, Joe offered feedback. Instead of referring me to my *'structural inadequacies'* or a *'lack of projection'* Joe's feedback was: *'Never lose your passion for the Gospel and the lost.'* I have never forgotten that mandate.

Moreover, to this day all those who preach at Christ Church Pinetown, look down and see etched into the wooden pulpit itself the saying: *'As a dying man to dying men.'* I'm sure that adage stands there today as it should. In a nutshell it also perfectly sums up Joe's true life and ministry. *'Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain'* (1 Cor 15: 58).

Indeed, over the decades, it was this incredible Gospel drive that was partly responsible for the growth of many of our REACH SA churches in the KZN Province. I remember it also being reflected in the ministry of Hamilton Buthelezi who was running our nearby Claremont Church in Pinetown (we shared the same office).

**7). Light-hearted moments at Pinetown.** As mentioned, unless you got to know Joe you could easily miss his sense of humour, as much of the time he would joke but with a very straight face and this tendency occasionally would overflow into his services at Pinetown.

Joe loved clowning around. For example, those involved in leading the service would enter the vestry door right at the front of the church onto the stage and be seated behind the service leader who stood in front of those seated, behind the pulpit. On one occasion the assistant rector, Reg Courtney (who had no idea of what was going on behind him) was in the middle of leading the service, when Joe silently suddenly entered through the door fully dressed in a 'Bobby's uniform (British policeman's uniform with the large, 'high hat' and the obligatory handcuffs and 'night -stick'). He gestured the congregation to remain silent. Well, needless to say, once Joe finally decided to 'arrest Reg' the extent of the congregational hysterical laughter which followed was such, that it took half of the rest of the service to get things back under control.

And yet Joe could also manifest almost endless patience. Almost every Sunday morning after the later, second service, like clockwork, an elderly lady in her late 80's or early 90's would with a small victorious flourish present to Joe a multi-page document - immaculately written in ancient blue writing paper with a fountainpen in careful point-by-point form, upon which all the 'problems' of the church and those of the morning's sermon were carefully written. Joe always accepted this anticipated missive with a smile.

**8). Legacy.** A few pages of course, will hardly succeed in exhaustively mapping out the life of a multi-faceted man like Joe Bell. For example, I have not mentioned anything about his love for sport, his love for his children, the sea and for boating and so on. I fondly recall him walking on the beach at Scarborough with his faithful dog of many years and preaching at his Scarborough church which he planted, and which continues to meet to this day. It was simply impossible for him to retire!

Just as important is the need to make an important mention of his wonderful, God-given faithful wives, Christine (who sadly also passed away some years ago) and Lynette. Shortly before he went to be with the Lord, Joe himself stipulated to Bishop Retief that Lynette's indispensable and indescribable contribution to his care and well-being (whilst he was both well and ailing) should be remembered. A similar description can be made of Christine, whom I had the opportunity to get to know whilst serving at Pinetown.

However, as I prepared to write this legacy note for Joe's memory, the thought also occurred to me that *institutional memory* within itself is a priceless commodity, contributing to the longevity of any organization, one which we should always cherish and never neglect, certainly if there is to remain unity in our churches and our theological identity. As Scripture teaches: '*So teach us to number our days what we may get a heart of wisdom*' (Ps 90:12).

Scripture reminds us: '*Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity! It is like precious oil on the head, running down on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes*' (Ps 135:2).

Thus, as REACH SA we should always remember the contributions of those faithful men and women, from all races and nations, whether those who remain with us today as well as those who have gone to be with the Lord. These are the Gospel soldiers on whose shoulders we stand, without whom we would not exist in the expanded state that we enjoy today, compared to, say, 1989 or even 1938.

Moreover, as we remember our colleagues over the years, colleagues to whom we remain indebted today, we should also acknowledge that each were products of their own time and this fact is inevitably reflected in their own ministry models (I remember the heated debates at Synods in the 1980's!). Yet it also occurred to me that as much as our individual perspectives occasionally differ as individuals, we have so much more in common: *The Gospel itself!*

Some of the names of these 'soldiers' for Christ (in no particular order of merit) appear below. Of course, these names also reflect my own ignorance I therefore apologise in advance for those whose names who should have appeared below but do not. Here, an apology is in order. One obvious example of this are the countless women, as we all know, who have stood alongside their husbands (or working alone) in any successful ministry team running our churches. The same point can be made regarding our 'laymen;' although this is often an unhelpful, unnecessary term, many names of our committed 'laity' should also appear on this list:

I recall Tony Ive and his immaculate English (and his passion for Anglicanism and his EFAC reports at Synod).

I also thank God for my own friendships and acquaintances over the years with folk such as Elias Majozi, Goodenough Mtembu.

Then we recall Laura Haas and her outstanding work amongst the poor. We should also consider Leon and Maggie Odendaal, together with Alan Willemburg, Peter Flagg, and Jan Van Beverdonker (who collectively built up many of our Western Cape Churches churches).

We also thank God for church planters like Rev, Dave Rhategan, who was tireless in his enthusiasm for growing the gospel.

Our faithful Bishops who have now gone to glory, Peter Chamane, Jeremiah Ngubane, Desmond Douglas, Peter Kalangula (Namibia), Edwin Ngubane. I could also mention dozens but will highlight just a few names of faithful pastors who ministered in difficult circumstances in our sadly segregated society. Rev Shadrack Papane, Xmas Hadebe and Jeremiah Zondi.

Looking northwards, we are grateful for the ongoing ministries of Peter Moore, and Matthew Stubbs who, together with Cynthia and Chippie Brand, spent years assisting Martin building up the Midrand church and other works further afield. Martin also helped found Love Trust and the Gospel Coalition Africa as well as the planting of more than one Christian school.

Together with Joe and Christine in KZN, Bishop Frank Retief and his wife Beulah (in Cape Town) in God's providence built, up their work in a virtually unprecedented manner with almost countless conversions. At this point we should also recall all our presiding bishops, leaders who, over the years have also invested unparalleled energy in growing our denomination: Bishops Morris, Bradley, Foord, Bell, Retief, Inglesby, and Lyons.

Brian Cameron and Alan Beckman perhaps remain to this day the most knowledgeable individuals regarding the details of our denomination's history. Noel and Pat Wright were also, for many years, repositories of enormous amounts of information.

Mervyn Eloff, who like none other, continues with the Simeon Trust to perpetually motivate REACH SA to remain grounded in the exposition of the Word and the Word of the Gospel alone.

We remember past brothers such as Neil Hurworth and Herbert Hammond who guided and defended the denomination's interests through turbulent times.

Then we have the many other brothers and sisters such as Alan Hodson and Billy Nield who have worked tirelessly, investing an enormous number of resources in sustaining our church's needs (the list is almost endless). We can also look back many years to Roger Palmer and the establishment of his campus ministry.

Moreover we also owe a great debt to our friends overseas such as those of the Langham Partnership, Dick Lucas, Melvin Tinker, Richard Coekin, Dick Lucas, Dudley Foord, John Chapman, David Jackman, David Streeter, our brothers and sisters of the Proclamation Trust, the Gospel Partner's Trust, William Taylor, our colleagues at Crosslinks, the Church Mission Society, and the 'Friends of the GWC,' other friends from both the United Kingdom and Australia - here we think of the friendship of Moore College, Mark Thompson, the Jensen brothers, Stuart Brooking and 'Local leaders International' and many others. Again, the list goes on.

At GWC we have our own very own entrepreneur, Neville Carrington who, with his Explore colleagues, has also spent much of the last three years flying around Africa supporting and developing the Explore Correspondence Course throughout the continent. I suspect that, Neville has spent more time this year alone visiting various countries in Africa than actually living in South Africa itself. There are approximately 1500 Explore graduates currently labouring in Africa alone.

And can we forget our many other colleagues and supporters (past and present) who worked faithfully for over 30 years to turn the George Whitefield College from a small training institution (1989) serving our own denomination (in those days 'The Church of England in South Africa') to an international educational powerhouse, educating hundreds of students from all over Africa and the world? Today 40% of our student body is comprised of individuals from Africa and other countries. Despite the terrible political unrest in the country – and what must have appeared at that time to be the worst possible moment to plant a theological college - Dr. Broughton Knox arrived to establish the GWC. He was soon joined by Dr. John Newby as the first faculty. Dr. Knox was then replaced by the unique and irrepressible Dr. Seccombe. The all-important work of the College currently continues under the guidance of Rev. Dr. Mark Dickson, its current Principal.

For those who have gone ahead of us, we give grateful thanks to our God for these servants who fought the good fight and finished the race.

*'They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:  
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.  
At the going down of the sun and in the morning  
We will remember them' – Robert Laurence Binyon 1869-1943).*