

## Saturday February 20 Genesis 23:1-20 - bereavement

1 Sarah lived to be a hundred and twenty-seven years old.

2 She died at Kiriath Arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan, and Abraham went to mourn for Sarah and to weep over her.

3 Then Abraham rose from beside his dead wife and spoke to the Hittites. He said,

4 "I am an alien and a stranger among you. Sell me some property for a burial site here so I can bury my dead."

From the books of Psalms and Lamentations we move on today to something different. If you know Genesis, the opening book of the bible well, you might still have forgotten about an event recorded in chapter 23. I'm struck by the brief and matter-of-fact way just two verses record a huge event in Abraham's life. His wife Sarah died. Abraham mourned. He wept for her. Then he went out to buy a burial plot. As simple as that.

Connect it to your own experience of the death of someone you loved and were close to, and you will know only too well the sorrow these verses from Genesis only hint at. The pandemic, with its enforced separations, has made times of death and bereavement even worse.

In March of last year, paramedic Jonathan Newell volunteered to work on the respiratory ward at Craigavon Area Hospital here in Northern Ireland. He contracted Covid-19, along with a number of family members including his mother Martina. The staff brought Jonathan's and Martina's beds side-by-side in the intensive care unit. Martina died. "I took her hand and told her we loved her and within about 10 minutes she passed away peacefully" Jonathan later recalled on BBC Ulster television news.

Too ill to leave hospital, he watched her funeral on a computer screen. "I couldn't grieve in the hospital" he said, "I couldn't take part with my family at home in the grieving process ... I couldn't be there to support them over the time of the wake, of the funeral, the burial ... And to me, it wasn't real".

I tell this story not because it was exceptional, but because it *wasn't*. So many have died in hospitals and care homes with family members unable to be with them; funerals took place with mere handfuls of mourners. I think of two friends of mine who both died after periods in hospital in the months before the pandemic broke. I am not alone in being glad that both died when they did. Their loved ones were with them at their bedsides. A few months later and that would have been impossible.

It is so easy to delude ourselves into thinking that "they'll soon get over it". Almost certainly they won't, whether Christians or not. These are truly life-changing experiences that take us on journeys through very dark valleys.

"Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn" urges Paul in Romans ch. 12. It might be impossible to visit people we love who have been bereaved. Which makes it all the more important to write, to get on the phone or link up on Zoom. What if you don't know what to say? Perhaps that doesn't matter very much. What is more important is that you do it.