

Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I'm 84

PSALM Lecture 21st March 2018

A group of friends met to decide how they might celebrate their fiftieth birthdays together, which all fell at about the same time of year. After much discussion they decided they would go for a meal at the Ocean View Hotel – there was a wide variety of meals to suit all tastes and in one of the rooms on a Friday night there was always a tribute band from the 70s and 80s playing and you could go and sing and along and dance if you wanted to.

Ten years later the same group of friends met to decide how they might celebrate the fact that they would all be 60 later that year. After much discussion they decided that they would go for a meal at the Ocean View Hotel – it had been a great success the time before and if you avoided Friday nights when a tribute band was playing, you could sit together and have a very nice meal overlooking the harbour.

Ten years later the same group of friends met to decide how they might celebrate their seventieth birthdays in a few weeks' time. After much discussion they decided that they would go for a meal at the Ocean View Hotel. It had undergone a major facelift and was under new management and was now a quiet, civilised place to go. The food was not too spicy – and there was a lift.

Ten years later the same group of friends met together to decide how they might celebrate the fact that they would all be 80 that year. After much discussion they decided they would go for a meal at the Ocean View Hotel. They had heard it had a good reputation – and they didn't think they'd been there before.

This story alerts us to the dangers of stereotyping by age when life is so much more complex and richer than that. Yet boundaries are relevant and important. Legislation in various ways takes age and age limits seriously and non-negotiably. State pensions, winter fuel allowances, senior railcards and admission concessions all have fixed age qualifications attached to them and the psychological barriers they create are more important than we often give credit for. They also show little respect to the realities of life: stipendiary clergy must retire at 70 but I meet some who need to be allowed to stop at 58 and others who have several years of productive ministry ahead of them at 71.

The title of this lecture also reflects a rapidly changing world. Paul McCartney wrote the song in 1958 at the age of 16 – although it didn't see the light of day until 1966. In the mid-1960s life expectancy for women was 71 and for men 69 and the song made sense.

How then do we see the people in our churches – all sorts of people? Are people a problem or a gift? And how do we determine that – is it based on their usefulness in running the church? Their acquiescence in what's going on? The amount of time they require in pastoral care or attention? In some surveys of congregations in Southwark during the past decade, we found that 30% of our congregations were aged 60 and over (compared to 15% in the general population); however as age increased, they reported that they were less secure in their discipleship. Many were living with complexity in relative isolation; they were battling loneliness because they found it harder to get out; there were issues of mobility, health, lack of energy and the fear (or reality) of being 'written off'.

The novelist Nicci Gerrard put it very eloquently in a Sunday Times article:

“I met a woman at a party who had had a formidable life of achievements; she sat in her wheelchair, tiny and ancient, and people occasionally stopped to bend over her and talk to her loudly, politely, meaninglessly, as if she were a small child again. Her eyes in the mosaic of her wonderful face blazed with fury”

So how might we view the church’s ministry amidst those whom PSALM seeks to work? I wonder if we most often talk about ministry ‘to the elderly’ rather than ‘with the elderly’. It might just be that we simply need to ask people what ministry in the life and work of the church might look like for them. That never means that church is about always giving people what they want – but it is about entering into creative dialogue with others. Why shouldn’t someone share in the responsibility for their own spiritual well-being, as much as people are encouraged to share in the pathway for their physical and mental well-being? The same might be said of children and young people in our churches – between what ages do we determine or think that people don’t have that responsibility. As we reflect on ministry among the elderly (however impossible that might be to define) what is the balance between gift and opportunity, privilege and opportunity? This afternoon is about a particular stage or stages of life. I am not especially setting out a list of ideas and strategies (you will be good at sharing those already) – but rather offering three words around which to coalesce our thinking.

Wisdom

There is a long tradition in Biblical writing, in both Old and New Testaments as well as many other religious and philosophical systems down through the ages, of extolling wisdom. But wisdom in Jewish and Christian tradition at least is never wholly (or even partly) about learning or intelligence or facts or education – even if it involves something of all of these. Wisdom in Scripture is about living life well and authentically in God’s world, in God’s order – and living that life with integrity. What amazing resources we have in older people in our churches who have lived through a lifetime of seeking to do that in a life of faith, often through dark and difficult times. How do we honour and receive that? There is a vast untapped community resource of wise men and women available within and beyond the church. To receive this may be an extraordinarily fruitful way of ministry with the elderly in church and beyond.

This does of course require something of how people themselves offer their wisdom. I vividly remember working in a church (before the Churchwardens’ Measure brought in a six year limit to consecutive office!) where two churchwardens, entering their eighties after many years of faithful service in this role were persuaded to retire. One of them thereafter sought to try and influence decision making, readily expressed their views and tried unsuccessfully to stand for church councils and committees. The other came to church week by week and sat in the pew and smiled and prayed and affirmed his successors regularly. Many without hesitation found their way to his door (literally and metaphorically) to seek his advice and counsel. Just as there is grace in receiving wisdom, so there is grace in giving it.

Identity

In 2012, in his last speech in the House of Lords as Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams introduced a debate on age and ageing and said this:

We tolerate a very eccentric view of the good life or the ideal life as one that can be lived only for a few years between say, eighteen and forty. The ‘extremes’ of human life, childhood and age, when we are not defined by our productive capacity, and so have time to

absorb the reality around us in a different way – these are hard for our society to come to terms with...The recovery of a full and rich sense of dignity at very age and in every condition is an imperative if we are serious about the respect we universally owe each other, that respect grounded for Christians in the divine image which is to be discerned in old and young alike.

There is a proper and respectful imperative to address people as the people they are. For many this may not be about certainty but part of wise living with complexity – embracing a maturity of faith which holds contradictions and paradoxes together. Ministry, especially but not only when memory begins to fail, is about lovingly taking people seriously. We often run the risk of determining the identity of others in limiting ways: we speak of ‘Jean who has arthritis...Anne who is on her own now...Bill who is getting forgetful’ as if this is their main and defining characteristic, the way that we identify them.

A verse from Elizabeth Jennings wonderful poem ‘Old Man’ reads:

And we move round him, are his own world turning,
Spinning it seems to him, leaving no shadow
To blaze our trail. We are actions only:
He is himself, abundant and assured,
All action thrown away,
And time is slowing where his shadow stands.

The contrast between ‘we are actions only’ and ‘he is himself, abundant and assured’ is poignant and salutary. Identity in Jesus Christ means that in the present we are who we are now in his love; the fullness of our lives is hidden in him and secure and we look forward to the flowering of who we will become in Him.

In ministry with the elderly, the treasure of identity is priceless and in Christian faith and community we have unique opportunity to celebrate this. Jean, Anne and Bill in my examples are simply and wonderfully Jean, Anne and Bill.

Time

Many of you will know John Swinton’s marvellous book about dementia and identity: his latest publication ‘Becoming Friends of Time’ is an equally inspiring and important read. The second half of the book is about ministry with those with significant intellectual disability, brain injury and dementia. The first half is a wonderful reflection in two types of time. He writes about ‘clock time’ – timed and organised in a world of conformity and measurement where there may be time to fit God in rather than fit in with what God is doing. It is in this sort of world of time that people who are ‘non-productive’ may come to be seen as a “waste of time”. The recent debate about people with Downs Syndrome highlighted the danger of determining whether or not some peoples’ care and life was an inefficient use of resources.

Swinton goes on to describe ‘God’s time’ – part of God’s gift in creation to his world, born out of God’s love; perhaps echoing Williams’ point that those who live within the Creator’s time have time to notice, care for, value and appreciate the other person and have time for one another. Swinton quotes the Japanese theologian and thinker Kosuke Koyama who refers to the ‘Three Mile an Hour God’. This is the average speed at which a person walks and he suggests that God moves at this speed (it is an average speed because He sometimes runs too!); a disciple, if they follow, follows at this speed – and is not too busy to notice or to care. This is the speed of those, he suggests, who understand time and is a way of being in the world which is rest-ful, time-full, relational and non-

anxious. In this time there is no place for statements like 'I'm not the person I used to be' or 'I can't do much for the church except pray these days' which are all too often sadly heard in pastoral visits.

This re-imagining of time is not something that is for the elderly alone – it is for the well-being of all God's creation. It maybe however that this re-evaluation of time will help us in that ministry – because if we can get it right there, it will make a difference for all of us. Maybe the elderly of our congregations are pioneer ministers in this respect.

So I'm not this afternoon giving you a programme of events to take away and implement. What I am suggesting is that paying attention to wisdom, to identity and to time and how those inform and shape how we are the church especially in our ministry with the elderly may have profound implications for all of us.

Let me leave the final word to John Swinton

"Taking time seriously and realizing the fullness of what it means to be in Christ and to be Jesus' body enables us to see human difference for what it is: mere difference. If the church can begin to live out such a truth, perhaps the world can at least have the opportunity to begin to learn to tell the time properly."