

Abbeyfield Homes ~ 50 years

A sermon on aging preached in Chelmsford Cathedral at the 50th Anniversary for Abbeyfield Homes

Here's a biblical quotation many of us here will be pleased to hear:

Proverbs 16:31

"Grey hair is a crown of glory, and it is won by a virtuous life."

Feeling better?

On the other hand - there's Psalm 90:10

"The years of our life are threescore and ten, or even by reason of strength, fourscore, yet their span is but toil and trouble."

A crown of glory, or toil and trouble?

The Bible is a wise book – it acknowledges both sides of the experience and process of ageing. It can be a golden time – blessings. Wisdom, maturity - free prescriptions! But it can be a time of decline, loss of self-worth; even depression.

Most of us have a little positive and a little negative to cope with.

There is a great deal of sentimental nonsense talked about the elderly as if, when we become old, we're all sweetness and light, an asset to any Saga holiday - or frail, forgetful, grumpy and out of touch.

But age does present problems. Problems for the elderly, and for society. As the proportion of older people grows so grows the worry that they become an 'insupportable burden'. Will there be a sufficient number of young workers to support the NHS, pensions, housing and act as carers.

And when those sorts of headlines are read then comes the fear.

Psalm 71

"do not cast me off in old age – forsake me not when my strength is spent."

There's a wonderful insight into age in the early pages of St Luke's Gospel. The child Jesus is taken to the Temple. and there he is acclaimed by an elderly couple. Simeon and Anna are ancient – decrepit! and therefore, seemingly, of no account? Yet they, as dull as their eyes might be, can see. It is the profound insight and wisdom of old age which is acclaimed in text – these old people can see the truth about this child.

Another lovely passage is in one of St Paul's letters (2 Corinthians 4:16)

"our outward nature is wasting away, but our inner nature is being renewed every day."

Simeon and Anna show how old age can be a time of contemplation - Time to appreciate God's creation, with deeper spiritual awareness.

But for some, aging is not pleasant. Time to think of deeper questions can bring uncertainty and worry. Religion gains meaning for some, others lose faith in the future.

Jesus once met a man who had been waiting by a pool for 38 years. Waiting for someone to place him in the healing, bubbling waters. Jesus has to challenge him hard - 'Let's face it, you don't want to be healed do you?' He had become used to being the victim. Waiting can damage the spirit.

So what is the difference between an Anna or Simeon and the Man by the Pool? What is the key?

All were accustomed to waiting - But while Anna and Simeon were waiting in hope and expectation, the man waiting by the pool - was expecting nothing.

For so many, growing old is a stripping away of all that seems good in life - with nothing to replace it.

Jesus said to Peter:

"I tell you most truly, when you were young you put on your own belt and walked where you liked; but when you grow old you will stretch out your hands and somebody else will put a belt round you and take you where you would rather not go."

Peter was being told about his future but those words resonate with us all, because for many, perhaps most, people, this stripping away of autonomy in old age is the hardest thing to bear.

Whether it is caused by loss of work, loss of income, the growing away of the children or old friends, the death of a partner, or the loss of physical strength and health. It can be experienced as a slow crucifixion of identity, extended nowadays over many years by advances in medical science. And where this loss of autonomy becomes too much to bear, then depression can set in. And you don't need me to tell you how destructive that can be for relationships, for families, and for the wider community.

But this stripping away of autonomy can become a source of great insight. An elderly, house-bound woman was telling me recently that as she lost her independence so she was becoming more and more aware that although when she was younger, she was convinced of her independence, she can now see that was just a myth. Put us on a desert island, and most of us would not last a week. Human beings are not self-sustaining, even though we pretend we are.

Individualism is society's biggest lie. We belong together and we need one another.

As that elderly lady grew even more dependent she told me that she was learning something else too. As she lost each of her props, so she realised that none of them had ever been worthy of her whole confidence. In the end - there is only God.

There is a wonderful Danny de Vito film in which he plays a tycoon. At one poignant moment in the film he exclaims: "What is the point of life? It's to grab as much money as you can and when you die the person with the most wins."

"Oh no," said my elderly friend. "The nearer you get to death, the wiser you can become about what we can really rely upon. - And it's certainly not your money!"

Human beings need to be constantly reminded that we are inter-dependent. We need one another. We need the love of one another. We must learn the true interplay of give and take, in which the giver is the gainer and the taker is the true benefactor.

If Abbeyfield stands for anything it is this: the last phase of our earthly journey can be appreciated and celebrated. It can be, and can be seen to be, worth while and of rich, deeper meaning. Old age does not mean 'Past our sell-by date', It means 'a rich resource for Britain!'

I thank God today for those who established the Abbeyfield Society fifty years ago – and it's wonderful that we have Richard Carr-Gomm and his early supporters in our midst.

And I thank God for all those who have served the Abbeyfield Society so well through these rich fifty years.

And I thank God too for all those who have benefited from it, both old and young!

Thanks be to God for these rich fifty years! AMEN.