A Theology of Ageing; Ageing Well

They still bring forth fruit in old age, They are ever full of sap and green; Ps 92:14

Grow old along with me. The best is yet to be, The last of life, for which the first was made.

Robert Browning’s Jewish Rabbi offers an alluring invitation but is it realistic today, in the northern hemisphere? It is likely that most of us will grow old but it is safe to say that society no longer reveres and respects those who are old in the same way that the Rabbi ben Ezra took for granted. Our society does not, on the whole, value old age. We are a materialistic culture, valuing people in monetary terms: for what they earn, what they produce, and what they consume. We therefore speak of the ‘burden’ of an ageing population and rarely of the benefits and the potential.

There is nothing more certain than that one day each of us will die. Yet society often feels to be death denying, indeed we tend to behave as if there were no such thing as ageing and are encouraged to believe that we will remain young, healthy and full of possibilities for ever. Therefore ageing becomes something to be feared and rejected. Many older people facing their final earthly story say they are not allowed to discuss death and dying. It seems to be the final taboo.

Such a society not only denies the older person the opportunity to talk of what may be so important to them but it also puts an enormous gap between younger and older people. It separates the generations, alienates young and old, with a consequent loss of sharing and of journeying together. This increases each group’s fear of the other, and isolates those who are older. In the church the lack of contact between generations deprives those who are older of the opportunity of passing on to younger people the meaning and value of the traditions they have loved. Paul clearly speaks of ‘God’s household’ in his letter to Ephesus (Ephesians 2:19).

Households consist of people of all ages living together. If we are to be whole people, old age cannot be separated off from who we are, it is part of who we will become. Throughout our lives we are creating the person we will become. Old age is not a ‘problem’ to be ‘put right’. We cannot and should not seek to ‘cure’ it. In his Reith Lectures some years ago, Tom Kirkwood identified a trend in society to consider ageing a ‘mistake’, or a challenge that will eventually be rectified through scientific endeavour.

The obverse of this coin of being fearful of old age is the wealth of acceptance, tolerance and indeed humour shown by older people themselves in coping with illness or failing health and suffering. Talking with older people, hearing their insights into how they have come to terms with various difficulties and how they cope certainly reveals an extraordinary degree of wisdom and courage - along with gratitude for what...
modern medicine has been able to offer. There is a contradiction or tension here. Whilst the ‘cold face of modern science’ may in itself have an affect of making us believe that ageing is a mistake, it also brings advantages in coping with the unquestionable difficulties that old age brings with it for many.

Somewhere in this jumble of positives and negatives there needs to be a balance. A balance between ben Ezra’s portrayal of the advent of wisdom and opportunity, seeing old age as a ‘golden age’ and that of a doom-laden portrayal, where old age is something to be avoided at all costs or at least something in need of ‘fixing’.

‘Good ageing’, for both the individual and society, is a negotiation between the vicissitudes associated with an ageing body and indeed mind and ageing as a golden age of wisdom and calm. Such a balance allows that ageing is inevitable with any losses and pain involved in that process. This negotiation also allows for the inevitability of death itself.

For many years now psychologists have divided life up into stages. Each stage has a particular task to be undertaken, or a focus for our attention. For those in the second half of life ‘integration’ is such a task.

Human beings are spiritual beings. They have what Victor Frankl called an ‘irreducible core’ allowing the mind to relate to what it does not yet know or understand. This spiritual core differs from the conscious mind in that the latter can relate only to what is or has been. Each one of us is on a spiritual journey. This journey involves searching for meaning in our lives; it looks to locate us in the world, in meaningful relationships including, if we believe, with God.

Ageing is part of this spiritual journey and ‘integration’ a part of that. It is a time to assimilate life, take stock and help people think through what they are going to do with their remaining time. It is a time to pull the whole mixed bag of life together and be able to make some sort of sense of it. Feeling a part of the whole and seeing where one fits into the bigger picture is important for a sense of meaning and purpose.

Many express spirituality through religion - seeing themselves in relationship with God. Spirituality, though, is not necessarily about religion although it can be defined as the human need for a sense of something Holy. Spirituality is about the search for meaningful relationships, being connected and also having a sense of belonging. It encompasses the search for meaning and purpose and very much a need for love. Spirituality is closely concerned with maintaining dignity and self-esteem.

The call to care for the ‘old and vulnerable’ is constant throughout the Bible. Society’s earliest forms of organised care came out of religious institutions where spiritual care was paramount. Today, much research reveals that an openness to spiritual experiences is conducive to health and well-being. Spirituality is a basic human need and a necessary component of both physical and mental health. Studies show that for people with a physical disability or chronic illness spiritual transformation, hope, personal control, positive social support and a meaningful energetic life enable a person’s sense of well-being to improve. In order for them to be able to come to terms with their condition, help in finding a sense of wholeness and meaning in life is crucial. This link between spirituality and well-being has implications for ageing. It will help people move from a having and doing based life to a more spiritual one of integrity and wholeness; of being or becoming. After all we are human ‘beings’ not human ‘doings’. Our value is in ‘being’ unique in God’s love.

Spiritual well-being allows for interconnectedness. Interconnected because human-beings are relational, are
interdependent. We are all spiritual beings with a responsibility to support each other in our journey of life including our spiritual journey through life. Una Kroll speaks of well-being in older age as ‘allowing the sun in at the sunset of our lives’. Una is well into her eighties, living a very busy life, much more slowly than before, but living it abundantly. Jesus came that we may have life and have it abundantly. (John 10:10) What then do older people need to ensure that, even when they can no longer be up and about or as busy as they once were, they can have life in abundance; have feelings of well-being right up to the close of their earthly story?

There have been enormous societal changes taking place over the past 100 years with many norms and values being changed or rejected. These are often experienced as losses for those in the third or fourth age of their life. There are also personal losses including jobs or roles, the loss of loved ones, diminishments of vigour and strength, for some the loss of a life time’s worth of acquisitions or declining income. The very old may have lost children. There are also less obvious losses of freedom, choice and, for some, even loss of competency. Perhaps the most difficult of all is the loss of hope. Although every person is different, for most, many of these increasing changes and losses are inevitable. What all authorities agree upon is that it is not the positives or the negatives of change or losses themselves but how an individual copes with the various aspects that really matters. A person’s feeling of satisfaction of life is dependent on how they dealt with their aspirations and balanced them with the reality of their life. Giving encouragement to take care of such matters is a crucial task of spiritual care giving.

Every person’s story is significant, a fascinating memoir of historic value. Today we hear a great deal about reminiscence or a person’s life review. Reminiscence allows a person to refocus, offering an opportunity to consider any unfinished business, conflicts or fears and to reconcile broken relationships. Life stories help us to understand who we are and where we have been. They help us reintegrate, enhancing integrity and facilitate the next stage which, for older people, includes death.

There can be difficulties in searching deep. One person may be encouraged by thinking through their achievements whilst others may be discouraged particularly if they have unrealistic ideas about the successes of others. Some people may use feelings of worthlessness or brooding on past negatives or feelings of guilt as a defence mechanism to avoid making changes. Isolation or loneliness may lead to an unbalanced pessimism. Some aspirations and hopes never come to fruition and these need to be held even when they are no longer possible. Cicely Saunders, founder of the hospice movement, said ‘Some spiritual pain has to be lived through’. To live life in all its fullness means that we must live through it all, both the good and the bad bits.

Chaplain Jill Ison writes: ‘Telling the story of one’s life is like weaving a tapestry with symbolic ribbons of family, faith, health, hope, joy, death, love, adversity, and much more that creates a weaving of great beauty, significance and holiness’.

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Reminiscence is very much a part of spiritual care giving; very much a part of nurturing the inner being. But it is not the whole story and not all of us will be involved with others at this deep level of sharing. But from time to time most will have the opportunity to share something of another’s story, to help ‘let the sunshine into the sunset of life’.

Letting the sunshine in, though, requires more, particularly towards the very end of life. Whilst doing my own research, some years ago, people were clear about what they required in order to feel they were living ‘full and good lives’; about the things which made their lives ‘worth living’. Amongst the cohort was a group attending a Day Centre. Spanning an age range from seventy to mid-nineties, all needed support with daily living. Over a number of weeks they wrote a wish list. Most of the things on their list were also mentioned by many of the other people I interviewed.

Sex was at the top of this list. Human beings are sexual beings. This was Tom’s wish and everyone except Lilly laughed. When the banter ceased all agreed that satisfying relationships was a prime need: loving relationships where deepest feelings can be shared; which engendered trust, allows for hurt, anger and disagreement as well as joy and happiness, and which do not shy from touch.

God, both as a loving and a judgemental God, was mentioned, so was being allowed to have doubts. Rick was sure there was no God, although he had hope – he saw his future as a positive thing through his children and grandchildren. Even he was animated around feelings of awe and wonder, speaking of nature, of crashing waves and indeed quiet places – there was something inexplicable, something beyond human understanding.

The group wished to make their own choices, be they good or bad in the eyes of others. They wanted enough money, in retirement, to live those choices and to pay the bills without feeling a burden. They wanted to feel respected, listened to and understood. They wanted to share what they knew and to help others with similar difficulties or experiences as their own. Despite embarrassing incontinence or not being able to keep up with the conversation they wanted to be involved in society, to feel they still belonged, that they were really known, valued, and (despite their various foibles) accepted. Being known, valued, accepted and involved are all stages that lead to a sense of belonging.

The group all spoke of wishing to sort out past hurts, those they had ‘doled out’ and those they had received. They wanted to be grateful - they spoke of ‘counting their blessings’. Some spoke of wishing to be flexible and prepare for any changes.

In considering death, nearly all talked of wishing to ‘die at peace’ and wanting to prepare for dying and indeed death. Their concerns were not just around practical things such as pain relief, or property and wills. Just as important were issues of what life was all about and what would come next (if indeed anything). They certainly did not want ‘quick fire’ reassurance but honest discussion and the chance to voice difficult questions; acknowledging that often there would be no answers, certainly not easy ones. They wanted to share their doubts, hopes and fears and to be respected as adults with the ability to learn and live with uncertainty. Older people are not an homogenous group so when I speak of ‘they wanted or wished’ it is only for ease in showing a consensus. And in the main ‘wanted’ is my word.
Amongst this particular group of interviewees only Lilly found difficulty in putting forward her thoughts. On the few occasions she managed to lift her chin from being slumped on her chest one had the feeling she had God very close. Indeed it was Lilly who recited the Lords Prayer when someone used the words, ‘our father’. I so often hear similar stories of those who rarely speak lighting up when familiar words from their faith history are used.

The honesty I encountered was overwhelming. I was amazed then, and still am, at the extraordinary ‘thank yous’ offered for just sitting and listening, when I consider the generosity all theirs – in sharing their personal stories and insights. So often, just being together feels like a holy place, a sacred place and very different from that preacher in Ecclesiastes (12:5) ‘when people are afraid of a steep place and the street is full of terrors’. But this is the place and the case for some lonely, isolated people for whom the search for hope does seem futile; where there is no sense of wholeness or well-being.

This ‘Factsheet’ comes out of a talk given by Janet Parker at the Continuing Ministry Education Day: “Yesterday’s Today and Tomorrow Too” based around verse 14 of Psalm 92. When we look carefully at the context of this verse it is describing the life that we enjoy when we are ‘right’ with Him – planted in the house of the Lord…in the courts of our God. To bear fruits is to bear the marks of the Spirit’s harvest; love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control as given in Galatians 5: 22-23. The person writing Psalm 92 is grateful – he gives thanks, sings praises but he also speaks of the stupidity of evil-doers who flourish but then die.

How closely aligned is the list of those fruits of the Spirit to the wish list of older people? But so many older people talk of no longer feeling they really belong to their church. Those stages of being known, valued, accepted and involved which were once strong are now diminished. Being sick, disabled or even housebound should not mean that older people cannot play a full, and indeed necessary, part in the missionary life of the local church. Perhaps we should be asking what difference does it make to our faith and witness if we cannot do as much as we used to, or indeed would like to. And also ask who is going to affirm and help sustain our expression of faith in the face of increasing limitations.

Within Jesus’ ministry care and mission went together, ‘Your sins are forgiven . . . rise and walk’ (Mt 9:5). An holistic care of body and spirit. As his disciples we follow him ‘caring about’ not just ‘caring for’ others. Being alongside someone helps them to know that God’s love is for them, that it is real – here and now.

In Jesus’ love age does not diminish the value of human life, each stage of life is as important as another. As can be seen above the ageing process offers an opportunity of growth towards spiritual maturity and preparation for death in the hope of eternal life. Revd. Carl Howie suggests: ‘Each should live with the limitations and towards the possibilities of life as we have it’.

If we encourage and enable each older person to live fully with their limitations then our theology of ageing will affirm that each of us is unique and of value and precious in the sight of God. It accepts that our earthly lifetime is limited and that life is a process of losses and of gains. That we must both embrace this life and live it fully, travelling hopefully to the very end, with faith, in God’s love.

There are three things which last forever: faith, hope and love. (1 Cor. 13:13).
The Spiritual Dimension

SCOP interprets ‘the spiritual’ as that dimension of human beings which is beyond the physical, mental and social, but integrally related to them. It is sometimes expressed through a form of organised religion, but often is not. ‘Spirituality’ is about ultimate meaning and value, perceived purpose to life (or lack of it), connectedness with others, with self, and (sometimes) with ‘the transcendent’, or ‘a higher power’, often referred to as God or the divine.

Spirituality and Spiritual Needs

As Christians we are made ‘whole’ through their communion with God. However this is not the case for everyone within our multicultural society, with its diversity of life styles and values, although for all people life is affirmed through their relationships.

We each have an inner being that requires nurturing and taking care of spiritual matters is very much a part of pastoral care. All human being share the same spiritual needs but each person’s precise needs vary, being dependent on individual circumstances. And it is important not to impose assumed needs.

We all need:

Love – to receive it and also to give it
Hope – something to look forward to, in this life and perhaps beyond. The human spirit flourishes on hope.
Faith – something to believe in
Peace – a sense of security and tranquillity
Worship – something or someone of highest value in our lives

Spiritual needs can be focused in these six ways:

Isolation – humans are social beings and need companionship and friendship
Affirmation – we all need to feel that we are of value and use in life, that we are wanted, loved and needed
Celebration – this is a natural instinct. Without room for celebration life becomes a burden
Confirmation – we all need someone who will simply listen and allow us to share our deepest feelings
Reconciliation – older people often say they ‘want to die at peace’ - with others, with their own heart and (if they are believers) with God
Integration – feeling that you have pulled the whole mixed bag of life together and made some sort of sense of it

Lord, you have placed us in a world full of mystery and beauty, a world in which conflict and violence, carelessness and pain so often hide your presence.
Help us to be sensitive to our inner being, to recognise something of the awe of being human.
We give thanks for the religious traditions which seek to communicate something of you and of your presence.
Help us to walk the way of faithfulness whether we are in the light or in the shadows, with alert minds or experiencing the depths of confusion.
May there always be those around us who can recognise and cherish our innermost being.
Open our eyes and hearts that we may offer this to others, and in that sacred space, see something of you.

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