

A theological perspective on the spirituality of ageing.

Prepared by The Rev John Fairbrother, Director of Vaughan Park Anglican Retreat Centre, for the Selwyn Foundation 2009 International Conference on Ageing and Spirituality. 30 August to 2 September.

Being a Baby Boomer, I am steeped in my parents' legacy of Christian faith, hard work, economic depression, war and hopes for prosperity. I have experienced golden years of plenty and discovery, personal liberation, licence and responsibility. Throughout, the personal sense of ageing while not always welcomed has been impossible to avoid. To think about the significance of ageing is to plumb the meaning of life and is a primary task of theology.

Ageing is an inescapable reality common to all of life. Putting aside the intensely frustrating question of what might have been before the probable singularity science positions as the Big Bang, everything, be it an inanimate physical thing, flora, fauna, being, narrative or story, everything ages.

Inviting, as the opportunity is to have a go at including thoughts about atrophy, entropy and the second law of thermodynamics may be, this conference, fortunately, is focussed on the spirituality of ageing of people. I hope the scientists who work with such things may have an opportunity to contribute another perspective another time.

For we humans ageing might be seen as the individual's most visible evidence of personal narrative. You might see me before you here, for example, as a somewhat worn white middle class male cleric of later middle age. In fact, by one contemporary definition being elderly kicks in after fifty-five years. A sobering assessment!

There is, of course, much more to ageing than mere physical evidence. The reality of ageing affects the inner being and expression of each person. It is of the essence of individual spirituality. There are, then, quite naturally, very many spiritualities of ageing.

For the purpose of this presentation I am thinking from two premises. First, the perspective taken on ageing is the time of life when one has fewer years in prospect than experienced to date. Second, spirituality is conceived of as the individual's intuitive, imaginative and intellectual framework for interpreting meaning from context and relationships.

We humans are not exempt from a genetic predisposition to the fear of death. What sets us apart on this planet is the capacity to appreciate that and contemplate its meaning. How this peculiarly human capacity is understood and applied is the province of theology. This conference explores the connection with human spirituality. My contention is that any spirituality of ageing is determined by the resolution or non-resolution of living with this natural predisposition to the fear of death.

The intuitions about life and relationships, the imaginations of memory and hopes, the perceptions of self and appreciations of context, the results of systematic and experiential learning, all interact to form the inner framework of the individual's life on which understanding and meaning may be located and brought into relationships

with each other. Moreover, such inner frameworks enable the reality of relationships to find depth when the intuitions, imaginations, hopes and the like are allowed to connect and be shared.

A theological perspective on the spirituality of ageing can only be one among many theologies. Christian theology is an imaginative and interpretive discipline rooted in both experience of life and the world, and Scripture. It is (to draw on the writings of Paul Tillichⁱ) the language that addresses questions of ultimate concern. Theology is an open-ended exercise, unlimited by final definition. Theology confronts and stands opposed to any belief or stance that closes thinking down. Theology is the language that plumbs the uncertainties of life in order to derive meaning where chaos or disorder might otherwise prevail. The discipline, however, can never claim unconditional certainty as the project always seeks after meaning revealing of God. One can hardly be certain about that which, while in the manner and spirit of Jesus is approachable, is never completely knowable, in this world at least. Theology is the language of freedom, the language that explores the potential of hope for life.

Continuing my two premises for a theology of spirituality of ageing as outlined above, namely: the human predisposition to a fear of death and spirituality as being a personal inner framework on which meaning may be located; I want to spend a few moments addressing a theological approach to the spirituality of ageing.

Switch on the television, pick up a popular magazine, visit your local chemist or health shop and it won't be very long before you are confronted with attractively packaged messages conveying a negative approach to ageing. The profit driven framework of the market place creates and encourages sharp focus on the reality of ageing, presenting it as a physical condition that can, and perhaps should be, at best alleviated or virtually cured. The fundamental message seems to be that ageing is unattractive, a problem, even a social ill. On mission is the capitalist framework of artfully generating need, to create a market demand, to breed consumer desire to buy product with dubious promises of efficacy.

Such a presentation of meaning is revealing of a negative spirituality that invites consumers to limit their personal perceptions of self to the governing frameworks of others. The predisposition to a fear of death is easy fodder for the principalities and powersⁱⁱ that St Paul in another context warned against. A Christian theology of the spirituality of ageing proceeds in quite another direction.

Ageing is always about the present. It is at the ground of the human condition. Yet the Church teaches "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever"ⁱⁱⁱ. The continuity of the truth of life is found in God as made known in Christ. God simply is. "The Word was with God and the Word was God"^{iv}. However, we people are never quite the same day by day. Each day we each age. Physically we alter, and our inner lives are affected by the relationships and experiences we engage. Theologically, ageing may be thought of in a sacramental way. Day by day our bodies become as the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace,^v that is, the grace of God's unconditional gift of life. As the sacraments enable us to clear space in order to make a tangible sign of God, ageing might be seen as a narrative of life in process, where individual presence becomes a profound witness to the potential liberation and peace of God within each person and among all who greet and commune in God's name.

What, then, might a contemporary theology of spirituality of ageing look like?

The Scriptures reveal life is good and created for humanity to enjoy and draw meaning from^{vi}. That while each person, from before they are born, is known and precious in the sight of God and may hope for meaning that transcends death, each person is also part of a greater community of faith that points to a Divine intention for the continuity of life beyond the individuality of each person.^{vii}

The popular tradition of faith presents ageing as something of a journey, where worldly experience grows in Godly wisdom with the promised reward of personal resurrection either at death, a consummate final judgement, or as immortality of ones soul. Whatever the mix one adopts from this tradition, it seems to me at least, ageing is being presented as the approach toward a tangible heavenly prospect, reminiscent of an antiquarian worldview shaped as a three-tier universe. The specifics are the substance of Scriptural interpretation informed by particular need and context.

Another theological approach to the spirituality of ageing remains more involved with the present moment of life. It may be found through an approach that reflects primary concern for listening with others for what might be shared through the stories, meanings and appreciations of experience.^{viii} It is an approach where life is understood as God's most special gift and, of itself, is revealing of God. The challenging part is putting aside any fear of ones mortality, in order to offer all one has become to life itself, living in the faith that life is the continuity of God. Ageing is the process by which we are our record of the gift of God, which is life itself. We are on a journey of return. The experience of ageing, then, is our personal narrative of coming from and returning to God.

The descriptions of journey's outcome are the theological realm of the mystic, poet, visual artist, community of faith, personal and shared insights, imaginations and intuitions. A theology of spirituality of ageing is about life and living well^{ix}. It is about living with understanding and appreciation for life that is free of fear^x, particularly the fear of physical or mental decline or death.^{xi}

In the Church Times^{xii} edition of 14 August I read the following from an article about "church and mission for the over 55's".

"Bishop Wood, 89, who was Bishop of Matabeleland and then of Ludlow... still has a gospel to proclaim: 'What we know about cosmology and the sheer size of the universe means you must not try and particularise God, or picture him; it is a waste of time, and it is frustrating, because God is God, and I find theological minutiae irritating. I believe in our Lord Jesus Christ.

I believe he came to reveal God's purpose for all men. I believe that with my whole heart. I fervently believe in the Kingdom; the Church's role is peripheral in that sense. It is a good place here. It is very congenial to me.'"

The Bishop is clearly present to his shared home at The College of St Barnabas.^{xiii} He has a clear interpretation of Scripture and theology that he is willing to share with those he encounters. Sexist language notwithstanding, this is a wonderful witness to a theology of spirituality for ageing. A clear expression of Christian spirituality

proclaiming “yes” to life in all circumstances and every day. The words reveal a deep theology of faith, hope and love for the God given gift that life is.

I recall seeing on television the American comedian Bill Cosby on his 70th birthday saying: “This is the longest I have waited for anything.”

May our waiting in God always be blessed.

ⁱ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology Voll*, James Nisbet Co Ltd 1960, p.14

ⁱⁱ Ephesians 6:12-13

ⁱⁱⁱ Hebrews 13:8

^{iv} John 1:1

^v *A New Zealand Prayer Book He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa*, Collins 1989, p.932

^{vi} See for example, Genesis Chapters 1 & 2.

^{vii} See for example: Jeremiah 1:5, Matthew 10:30-31, 1John 4:7-12,16-19.

^{viii} See for example: Luke 24:13-35

^{ix} John 10:10

^x John 14:1-7

^{xi} 1Corinthians 15:50-58

^{xii} www.churchtimes.org.uk

^{xiii} www.st-barnabas.org.uk