

A Biblical Perspective on Ageing and Old People

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The phenomenon of 'ageism' is common in modern Western societies. 'Ageism' refers to negative attitudes - both overt and covert - within society, to ageing and older people. In practice these attitudes surface in a wide variety of ways. Some are subtle such as a resistance to employing older workers, poor service in commercial transactions and discrimination in health care; others overt, such as physical and mental elder abuse. In a recent article in the NZ Herald, the ageing years were described as the "long goodnight" and the author wondered why it was not possible to artificially terminate them. For the majority of ageing people such sentiments are at the least uncomfortable, at the worst to be taken as evidence that their position in society is neither appreciated nor guaranteed.

Underlying these attitudes is a perspective on ageing that encompasses fear, economic pessimism, and a view of human life that sees it as purely mechanistic and without intrinsic worth. The philosophical ethicists of the utilitarian school such as Joseph Fletcher, John Harris and Peter Singer who are big names in bioethics, argue that human life *per se* has no value over any other form of life. Only a *sentient* being, that is, one who can value his / her own existence, is to be regarded as a person. In such a purely secular view, non-sentient beings such as the fetus, new born infants and the confused and demented elderly do not qualify as persons and therefore need not be supported by society. Indeed these philosophers can and do make a case for doing away with the confused elderly on the grounds that they are an economic burden on the State. Taking this line to its practical conclusion, in Holland and Belgium where euthanasia is legal, some physicians and philosophers are publicly pushing the idea that it is *unethical* to allow people who are demented, depressed or mentally defective to live and that their lives should be terminated even though they themselves may be unable or unwilling to consent to such a termination. Indeed, a significant proportion of euthanased people in those countries are either not capable of consenting to the termination of their lives or are not consulted about it. Thus, a strictly secular philosophy of life manages to turn long-standing notions of what is and what is not ethical on their heads.

The influence of secular philosophy is not limited to the terminal weeks or months of life. It increasingly dictates the debate about how health and social services should be allocated, and notions of Quality of Life. Where will it end? A writer in the Listener magazine a few years ago favoured compulsory euthanasia at 55. Just as well the idea was not adopted or many of us would not be here!

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The Biblical view of ageing and old people is in total contrast to the utilitarian view. The Bible views the presence of old people in a community as a sign of God's favour.

This is what the Lord says: "I will return to Zion and dwell in Jerusalem...once again men and women of ripe old age will sit in the streets of Jerusalem each with cane in hand because of his age",(Zech. 8: 4)

and conversely, the absence of old people is a sign of God's disfavour.

The Lord, the God of Israel declares:...."The time is coming when I will cut short the strength of your father's house so that there will not be an old man in your family line". (1 Sam. 2: 31)

As is the case in many Eastern countries to this day, many of the political and religious leaders we encounter in the Bible were mature and even elderly males. Abraham lived to be 175. The great leader Moses was 120 years old when he died, yet as we read:

His eyes were not weak nor his strength gone. (Deut. 34:7)

Joshua was 110 when he died, Joseph 110 also. King David was said to be "old and full of years" when he died. However, it must be also said that there was a balance of young leaders and some outstanding women were also in leadership. And we must remember that the majority of those called into leadership were called as young men, who then lived out their lives as leaders. The point I am making is that Biblical attitudes to ageing that I will be discussing are not due to biases introduced because the writings are all those of old men.

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The Biblical concept of human life and dignity is based around the notion of creation and particularly, creation in the "image of God," however one might understand that concept. It clearly does not mean that we look like God, but surely expresses the idea that we share in at least some of the Divine attributes. The greatest of them is love:

"God is love". (1 John 4:16)

The Biblical concept of the love of God is that it is a sacrificial love, shown most fully in the death of Jesus, one person of the Trinity, on the cross for the sin of all humanity. That God would take it upon Himself to do that is arguably the strongest evidence supporting the idea that people, that is, all people, without discrimination, have intrinsic worth and dignity. Moreover, Jesus took care during his short life to associate with the outcasts of society, including those with the most severe psychiatric disorders, many of whom He healed. The Biblical concept that emerges is that there is a nobler way to address the issue of old and disabled folk in society than getting rid of them. It is that we should:

Bear one another's burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ. (Gal. 6;2)

According to the Biblical view then, those who seek to follow a Christian spirituality will be seeking to love and nurture those whom society would neglect: not throw them on the scrap heap or euthanase them. That was

certainly the driving force behind the establishment of hospitals and hostels by religious orders and from which our present hospital and public health systems derive. And most of those who benefited from their ministrations were the old and the destitute.

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The writers of the Book of Psalms, give some wonderful expressions of the trust that older people may have in God. Just one example of many is in Psalm 71: 18,19 where we read this testimonial:

Since my youth, O God, you have taught me, and to this day I declare your marvellous deeds. Even when I am old and grey, do not forsake me O God, as I declare your power to the next generation... (Psalm 71: 17-18).

And even in the face of death, one may experience God's sustaining power:

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death , I will fear no evil, for you are with me....(Psalm 23: 4)

However, it is encouraging that as long as life lasts, those who are righteous, will:

flourish in the courts of our God, They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green....(Psalm 92:13, 14).

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The Bible has some interesting practical observations to make about the role of society and the family with respect to their elders. There is a well-known Old Testament instruction dating from the time of Moses:

Children, honour your father and your mother...(Exodus 20:12)

And:

Listen to your father who gave you life and do not despise your mother when she is old. (Prov.23: 22)

In addition, according to the Apostle Paul,

"Children ...should learn to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repay their parents and grandparents for this is pleasing to God" (1 Tim. 5: 3-8)

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But if there is no family, what then? As we are all well aware, in our times smaller family sizes and the greater mobility of families often lead to situations even in developing countries where there is in fact no-one of the family to care for older relatives. This is where the Christian community can step in. There is an interesting Old Testament concept that comes into play. It is that:

"God sets the desolate in families" (Ps.68: 5,6)

On my last sabbatical before retirement I visited Israel to explore services to the elderly in that country. There I discovered their foster home for older adults programme. It was in many respects similar to our system of fostering of children whose homes have become dysfunctional or who are orphaned, except that it was people in their 70s and older who had no family support of their own who were being fostered out to families. The social workers reported that it worked well. In Houston, Texas, I discovered some time later a similar project at The Church of the Redeemer. These are examples of ways in which a spiritual principle may be given life.

In a recent research project carried out in collaboration with the Nielsen Company, The HOPE Foundation for Research on Ageing found that the majority of older New Zealanders were struggling along on low incomes and had only small amounts invested. Many of them had little to spare once the needs of daily living were met. So, in New Zealand as in many other countries, many older people have difficulty making financial ends meet. Forecasts are that this situation could worsen in future, especially in respect of the children of the 'Baby Boomer' generation who may not have the opportunity to save for old age or purchase a debt free house. You may not be surprised to discover that there are Biblical principles that address this situation. One is financial:

If one of your countrymen becomes poor...help him so that he can continue to live among you...do not take interest from him...(Lev. 25: 25)

In the book of Deuteronomy there are even more specific God - given instructions to the Israelite nation regarding the care of the destitute and elderly. For example in Deut. 24: 19 – 22 we read that He commanded them to leave some of the grain, olive and grape harvest for

The alien, the fatherless and the widow.
(Also see Lev. 19: 9-10, 23:22, etc.)

The early Church took the sharing of resources very seriously. We read in Acts 2: 42 – 47 that:

All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods they gave to anyone as he had need.....

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The thing that becomes clear is that according to the Biblical view, spirituality is not just grounded in feelings and being focussed on one's own need although there will be times when that is appropriate. Spiritual principles should govern life. They can open our eyes to the need around us and to practical ways in which we can meet those needs. For this reason an understanding of the Biblical perspective on ageing can help to mitigate negative aspects of ageing.

A couple of final points. The first is that despite the fact that Moses lived to be 120, in Psalm 90, which is attributed to him, he wrote:

The length of our days is seventy years – or eighty, if we have the strength; yet their span is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass and we fly away. (Psalm 90: 10).

Maybe he penned those lines in his younger days, but as an estimate of longevity, his figures are not badly out of line with modern averages for longevity from birth despite having been written some 3500 years ago. He does seem somewhat disillusioned by life, but maybe that reflects the many difficulties he encountered during his long life as leader of the nation of Israel.

Finally, I wonder if many of you know that the Bible even has a view about setting the appropriate age for receiving the Old Age Pension? It is 60! Writing about the context in which the Church has responsibilities to assist various types of indigent persons, St Paul advises Bishop Timothy (in 1. Timothy 5:9) that bereaved women should be placed on the list of widows (who would be eligible for assistance) after that age. That beats Krupps' Armament works of Germany which is generally credited with introducing the concept of a retirement pension (at age 70), in the late 19C by close to 2000 years!

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Thank you.