

RETIRED CLERGY and WIDOWS SERVICE

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Senior Citizens' Week - October 2009

St John's Launceston

When you go back to a former parish, or perhaps meet someone you knew years ago, do you say to yourself, 'Oh the poor things, haven't they aged', forgetting that they are saying the same thing about you? Of course, we aren't saying that about each other today, are we?

My sister in law Ruby, who had been a missionary in India for well over twenty years, used to call Psalm 71, which we have just read, the 'Senior Citizens' Psalm'. She found it was a great blessing to her, especially in her later years.

She had to leave India because the government of the day wouldn't renew her visa; they wanted to get rid of foreign workers, especially Christian missionaries, so Ruby reluctantly returned to England. She felt that this Psalm spoke of her relationship with God throughout the years of her life ever since she became a Christian.

Ruby didn't grow up in a Christian home, they were known as the 'Four Wheelers'; you know, they went to church in a pram to be baptised; they went again in a car to be married, and eventually in a hearse to their funeral; but nothing in between.

Soon after Ruby trained to be a nurse she watched a patient die. What had happened? There was a change, something had gone. But what was it, and where had it gone? Her inquiries eventually led her to Christ and a lifetime of Christian service in England, then in India, and later as a lay reader in her Parish Church in Herne Bay, Kent.

Getting older doesn't mean we have to become obsolete. It can mean continuing to grow, maturing, still ministering but perhaps in new ways, venturing into new paths and enjoying ourselves in fresh ways to the end of our days, learning from the past in order to live effectively in the present.

Early in our married life we had an elderly minister who had had a very vital ministry to young people but, now in his late fifties, he really didn't relate to young folk. They thought he was a bit odd. He

didn't speak their language. It was suggested that perhaps he should change track and specially minister to older people. At first he was deeply offended and hurt; but then he took the advice and had a wonderful relationship with older folk, and ended his days as a much loved and valued pastor and friend.

T.S. Elliott said, 'Old men (and women) ought to be explorers; and someone else said in a modern idiom, 'Have a blast while you last.' I heard a sad story a couple of weeks ago about Prasad Pal, perhaps you know about him. He has the world's longest ear hair, a whopping five inches long. Pal's boast would be amusing if it weren't so tragic. He said, "I'm proud of my ear hair. Other than this I have not achieved much in my life.'

Today, Bishop John has kindly invited us, as retired clergy, to meet together over a meal, to catch up and reminisce, but also to look to the future. Some of us, perhaps most of us, can say, with the Psalmist, 'You Lord are my hope, you are my confidence, O God, from my youth. On you have I leaned since my birth. You are He that brought me out of my mother's womb, and my praise is of you continually.' For others, like Ruby, your relationship with the Lord may have come later.

We have all spent years serving God in various ways, and in different places, sometimes with success and joy, and at other times, no doubt, struggling to be faithful. Now we are retired, probably glad to be free of all the day to day responsibilities of parish life. To idle our last years is to rob ourselves of what could be the best years of our lives and to deprive the Church of the gifts God has given to enrich it. There is still service to be offered and victories to be won.

Some of us may not have the energy or inclination for leadership any more, even in small ways, but we can be a valuable asset to the coming generation by mentoring. Of course, we must be careful not to be a problem or a nuisance, and to do it with the Bishop's and the Rector's permission.

John Wesley was asked what he would do if he knew he only had a short time to live. He answered, 'I should meet with my young men until the moment came that I was called to yield my spirit back to Him who gave it.' We could pray with the Psalmist, 'O God, in my old age, when I am grey headed, do not forsake me until I have shown the strength of your arm to future generations and your might to those who come after.'

I like the story of the father who asked his ten year old, ‘Son, why do you want to go to heaven’, expecting him to say ‘so I won’t have to go to school.’ The father was surprised when the boy said, ‘because I want to see Grandad.’ I had been several years since his Grandad had died, but the years had not diminished the love the boy had for his Grandfather, and the assurance that he was in heaven. The old man had, by his living and talking, given something very precious to his Grandson, a good relationship with himself and with God. I read this week, tips for Grandmothers. Pray for your Grandchildren, play with your Grandchildren, and pass on your faith to your Grandchildren.

The Psalmist wanted to pass on his understanding of the Lord to others, and we have spent years trying to do that. But we should still be open for God to use us to enrich other people’s lives in different ways now. Perhaps our greatest usefulness will be in these quieter gentler years, as we have, without the pressure of parish life, the time to help people in a one to one situation, to find or regain their faith. We can tell them of God’s great goodness and faithfulness in our own lives. ‘You have taught me ever since I was young and I shall tell of your wonderful acts. Now that I am old and my hair grey do not abandon me. Be with me while I proclaim your power and might.’

The Gospel reading reminds us that we are to ask, seek, find, and be persistent. God hasn’t changed; we continually need to be apply this teaching to ourselves as well as to others; maybe for patience to cope with life, perhaps with strength for each day, maybe to renew our confidence that God still loves us, although we feel as though we aren’t as able as we once were. Yes, God is still answering prayer. In Malachi, we read: ‘Then those who feared the Lord talked with each other and the Lord listened and heard. Those who feared the Lord and honoured Him they will be mine, says the Lord, in the day when I make up my treasured possession.’

Leslie Brant has paraphrased Psalm 71 and I shall use part of it as a closing prayer.

“I will dedicate my remaining days to praising you, espousing your faithfulness, and proclaiming your love and concern for all who will turn to you. May every fibre of my being and every activity of my life resound with praise to my God.”

May that be our desire and our experience as we remember; the best is yet to be. Amen