

Two old folk

Luke 2.22-40

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Today is the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. That title puts the emphasis on Jesus in the story. The old name for it was the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which puts the emphasis on her. The popular name is Candlemas, because of the tradition of candlelight processions on this day, emphasising the words of Simeon that Jesus was a Light for revelation to the gentiles. But I would like for the purposes of this morning to rename it. When we hear stories, we tend to identify with someone in it with whom we have an affinity. So whilst the young parents among us and many of the rest of us can perhaps think back to when we had a new born child, and identify with Mary and Joseph in this story, rather more of us can identify with Simeon and Anna. So I want to rename this feast day as the Feast of the Two Old Codgers. Indeed the story is basically about old Simeon, whose exact age we are not told, and Anna, who was eighty-four – a very great age in those days.

What we consider old, and how we regard old age is what I would like us to think about. I am an OAP of course, but I am very aware of how many people there are in church who are much older than me. It is all relative. Tomprrow I have to go back to my old parish to fulfil a promise I made to a lady that I would take her funeral. She died last week having just failed to make her 100th birthday. But until the last week of her life, although physically in poor shape, she was as bright as a button. Many young people regard you as old if you are over about thirty-five. I recall running sessions for Relate at the Army Apprentices' College in Harrogate on Contraception. It was pretty clear that most of those 17-18 year olds thought it was a topic which would be of no personal relevance to me. I was after all in my thirties!

How older people are regarded varies considerably from society to society, and from age to age. The Greeks had a proverb 'Respect Grey Hairs' but today you are supposed not to respect them, but to be frightened of getting any. If we go back to Thomas Traherne in the c.17th he wrote in his poem 'Dies Natalis' 'How venerable and reverend did the aged seem.' But in today's world, you get the impression from politicians and others that the aged and the

baby-boomers are seen as a problem, or a potential problem, a drain or potential drain on the country's resources in health and social care.

And equally you see huge contrasts in how people look on old age for themselves. At one extreme is the exuberant anticipation of old age by Jenny Joseph, who died last year, in her poem 'The Warning'

When I am an old woman I shall wear purple
With a red hat which doesn't go, and doesn't suit me.
And I shall spend my pension on brandy and summer gloves
And satin sandals, and say we've no money for butter.
I shall sit down on the pavement when I'm tired
And gobble up samples in shops and press alarm bells
And run my stick along the public railings
And make up for the sobriety of my youth.
I shall go out in my slippers in the rain
And pick flowers in other people's gardens
And learn to spit.
You can wear terrible shirts and grow more fat
And eat three pounds of sausages at a go
Or only bread and pickle for a week
And hoard pens and pencils and beer mats and things in boxes.
But now we must have clothes that keep us dry
And pay our rent and not swear in the street
And set a good example for the children.
We must have friends to dinner and read the papers.
But maybe I ought to practice a little now?
So people who know me are not too shocked and surprised
When suddenly I am old, and start to wear purple.

At the other extreme are debates about cosmetic surgery, its popularity, and how it is advertised. You only have to watch TV for a very short time to be inundated with information about anti-wrinkle creams which will preserve you at least for a while from the inevitable. Getting older is seemingly all about loss, all negative. People keep on raising the possibility of

assisted dying – The Royal College of Physicians is taking opinions on this at the moment - another example of our negative mental framework as we think about our latter years.

We need to reflect on these contrasts of attitude as Christians. We are inevitably the victims of the zeitgeist, the spirit of our age. If we are people who live in the light of eternity, and know that however many years we have in this world, it is like the blinking of an eye in terms of our whole existence, then we ought to be resisting the negative messages that float around us all the time. We might reflect on these words from Psalm 92:

The righteous shall flourish like a palm tree,
and shall spread abroad like a cedar of Lebanon.
Such as are planted in the house of the Lord
shall flourish in the courts of our God.
They shall still bear fruit in old age;
they shall be vigorous and in full leaf;
That they may show that the Lord is true;
he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.

And maybe these two old people we hear about today can be an encouragement to do that. The very first people to recognise why Jesus had come were these two old people in the Temple. Simeon is saying ‘At least I can die happy – because all that I have hoped for and prayed for is now a reality’. He didn’t know what was going to happen thirty or so years later to this baby – but he was utterly sure that in him God was making a decisive intervention in the history of the world. But even in that euphoric moment, he realises also that it won’t be easy – especially for Mary. And then Anna bubbles over with excitement at meeting with the Holy Family. She was a profoundly prayerful woman, and in this baby she sees the answer to her prayers. This is genuinely a story of the wisdom, the insight, of the aged. That is something a world which is too fond of saying of older people that they are ‘pass their sell-by date’ might care to think about. We shouldn’t have regrets about growing old – it is a privilege not everyone has. I mentioned that next week I will be taking the funeral of a lady of 99. A fortnight ago Pippa and I attended a funeral of our son-in-law’s sister, aged just 46.

Becoming old does not necessarily mean becoming wise, although there is a kind of wisdom that is only available to those who are longer in the tooth. So we need to work at how we think

about our own ageing – and that applies whether we currently think of ourselves as young, middle-aged or older. As the c.19th Swiss philosopher Henri Amiel wrote: ‘To know how to grow old is the master work of wisdom, and one of the most difficult chapters in the great art of living.’ Some of those who have thought deeply about the stages of our spiritual growth see that it is usually only in old age that we have the potential for what they call ‘integration’ – of being able to see a more holistic picture. So maybe whatever our age, on this feast of the Two Old Codgers, we can pray for that integration. Let me end with this prayer of an anonymous c.16th nun. Maybe her words can be of help:

Lord, Thou knowest better than I know myself,
that I am growing older and will some day be old.

Keep me from the fatal habit of thinking I must say something
on every subject and on every occasion.

Release me from craving to straighten out everybody’s affairs.

Make me thoughtful but not moody; helpful but not bossy.

With my vast store of wisdom, it seems a pity not to use it all,
but Thou knowest, Lord, that I want a few friends at the end.

Keep my mind free from the recital of endless details; give me the wings to get to the point.

Seal my lips on my aches and pains.

They are increasing, and love of rehearsing them is becoming sweeter as the years go by.

I dare not ask for grace enough to enjoy the tales of others’ pains,
but help me to endure them with patience.

I dare not ask for improved memory, but for a growing humility,
and a lessening cocksureness when my memory seems to clash with the memory of others.

Teach me the glorious lesson that occasionally I may be mistaken.

Keep me reasonably sweet.

I do not want to be a saint (some of them are so hard to live with)
but a sour old person is one of the crowning works of the devil.

Give me the ability to see good things in unexpected places
and talents in unexpected people.

And give me, O Lord, the grace to tell them so.