

## Ageing in an age of Ageism

“Inside every old person is a young person wondering what happened”

Terry Pratchett (quoted in The Times)

How do you feel about growing old? Does the very word ‘old’ seem the worst label to bear? Do you feel like Terry Pratchett, the young person inside who is shocked as you catch sight of yourself in a mirror or reflection in a shop window and suddenly think ‘who is that old person looking at me?’

Perhaps ageing more than anything else impresses upon us the frailty of our human condition, which will finally be consummated in physical death as dust returns to dust and ashes to ashes.

“Our days may come to seventy years, or eighty, if our strength endures; yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow for they quickly pass, and we fly away.

Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.” Psalm 90:10-12

In a recent article, Michael Palin, a very active and well-travelled man, wrote that he had always considered himself to be 27 years old until the experience of lockdown during the present pandemic made him realise that he is really 76 years old.

On the same theme, during a phone call with a good friend of mine in her mid-seventies, she commented that the months of lockdown and isolation seemed to her like a dress rehearsal for being house bound in old age. She felt that old age had suddenly rushed towards her unbeckoned. This rather long, but insightful quote by David Gibson captures the feeling well:-

“Growing old makes a body and an inner self part company, as one ages the other stays young. It leaves a person depressed at the disconnect between the mirror and the mind – how we look to others versus how we think about ourselves – and generates denial as our limbs begin to do with difficulty the things they used to do with ease. This process leaves a person blinking in perplexity at the speed of life, which has hurtled towards its conclusion just as it seemed to really get going. Youthfulness leaves so quickly. And entering old age itself is to arrive in a season beset by all manner of difficulties, pains and sorrows.”

(Gibson p128)

As we look at our personal, subjective response to ageing this has to be influenced by the attitudes and values of the western, secular culture around us, which tends to idolise youthfulness and regards the succumbing to the ravages of ageing as something to be avoided at all costs.

There has also been a growing sense of generational divide due to the economic prospects and freedom of the young having been seriously curtailed in order to protect the old, who are more susceptible to the complications of the Covid-19 virus. Although this is a very real issue and the young have, and will in the future, pay a high price in order to protect the older generation, this can compound the anxiety, for some, of being more of a burden than

a blessing in society. But as ageing believers we have a better story to tell and a better legacy to pass on to the next generation:-

“Since my youth you have taught me, and to this day I declare your marvellous deeds. Even when I am old and grey, do not forsake me, my God till I declare your power to the next generation, your mighty acts to all who are to come.” Psalm 71:17-18

Although we may mourn the loss of our youth and not welcome some of the changes that will come with ageing, we can learn to accept where we are now and to adapt and adjust so that we cooperate with God in being the best that we can be for Him and for His glory.

“Do not regret growing old. It is a privilege denied to many.” (Author unknown, quoted in McGuinness p28)

### **Realism in the face of ageing**

It is not unusual to hear people, when they reach a certain age, trying to deny the reality and inevitability of ageing by saying “age is just a number” or “50 is the new 40” or “you are only as old as you feel”. To some extent these sayings may be true, but they push aside the reality, keep us in denial and thus fail to engage with ageing in a positive way.

“Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, “I find no pleasure in them.” Ecclesiastes 12:1

David Gibson says that the Teacher’s realism about being an old person leads him to command the young person to allow the future failing of their body to inform how they use and treat their body in the present and the future certainty of death should invigorate how they live now. He also says that such realism need not lead us to despair but rather than live with one foot in the grave, to put both our feet on the path of life, to seek both to rejoice in all that life has to offer whilst remembering our Creator, who is also our judge.

“The Teacher is telling us that God made a good world and it is foolishness of the highest order to be blind to its goodness and shimmering glory as we live our lives. It is precisely in enjoying the world God has made that we show we have grasped the goodness of the God we say we love.....in the words of the Teacher, God says, rejoice, be happy, find joy in the days when we can be physically, mentally and relationally active.”(Gibson p130,131)

### **The inequalities of ageing**

We all know that the date on the birth certificate does not always equate with how someone looks, feels or is able to function. We all have different genes and family histories that influence both our health and rate of ageing. Some constantly struggle with weight gain while others remain ‘stick thin’ with little effort. Some are crippled with arthritis while others take a day’s walking on the hills in their stride. Some continue to be engaged in pushing the boundaries of their learning and enjoying an interest in many things into their eighties or even nineties, while others begin to experience cognitive problems in their sixties or even fifties.

Although ageing may be a gradual process it can also be affected suddenly and profoundly by marker events such as divorce, redundancy, moving house or location, serious illness, bereavement, chronic limiting disease or some kind of trauma or injury. Even planned and expected retirement can be significant both in how someone feels about themselves and how others view them. For some of us the process of ageing can result in loss of capacity as we allow life to just become limited over time, which may well be the reason why many people have commented on feeling older during 'lockdown' with the imposed restrictions it has brought into all of our lives. As Tony Horsfall says, these events make us realise that we have come to a phase in life where things will not be the same again and that we are not the same any more.

### **What do we see as we look in the mirror?**

The signs of ageing may arrive gradually but there comes a day when we look in the mirror and realise that we are not what we were:-

- Skin becomes wrinkled and dry and lacks firmness
- Hair becomes grey, thinner and for men the hairline may recede
- Teeth yellow and gums recede
- Weight gain and expanding waistline
- Loss of muscle and muscle tone with corresponding loss of strength
- Loss of upright posture and possibly height over time.

At a more subjective level we look at our reflection and feel that we are less attractive to others. Women particularly become aware that they are invisible as they age. In some work places this can lead to a loss of confidence around younger colleagues or at worse feeling side lined and over looked.

You may also look into the mirror and be shocked to see one of your parents looking back at you. How you have aged, the mannerisms and characteristics that you have adopted remind you of one of your parents when they were older; and that can be a shock!

### **Physical changes that affect our functioning**

- Menopause may vary enormously in terms of the severity and length of time that symptoms persist but in the end it is life changing in that it results in loss of fertility. For some women it is welcomed as the end of monthly periods but for others there is a sense of loss as a woman. Single women can find this time especially difficult since it closes down the possibility of having children of their own, and with that, of having grandchildren.
- Around fifty years old, all of us develop presbyopia, which means that we need reading glasses or a reading addition to existing spectacles. Those who have never worn specs often find this a frustration and a nuisance to get used to.
- Hearing loss may creep in as we find ourselves putting up the volume on the television or find we can't hear as well as we used to on the phone.
- Short term memory loss can be an issue, everything has to be written down if we are to remember it. A calendar and a notepad are a great investment.

- There is a loss of physical strength, stamina and capacity. Jobs that we would have done without a second thought become daunting if not impossible with time. This can be very difficult for those whose daily work is physically demanding or who work in highly pressured and stressful professions. I spoke to an older single lady in our church who found even changing the lightbulb of a ceiling light was impossible for her these days.
- Aches, pains and stiffness of joints becomes the norm. It is as if our bodies are reminding us daily as Paul said “Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.” 2 Corinthians 4:16
- We can no longer take our bodies for granted but need to pace ourselves and build in recovery times. Even so the possibility of developing more serious illness increases with age; it is just a fact of life.

Recognition of these signs of fading youthfulness and encouraged by the cultural and societal value placed on outer beauty and physical fitness, there can be enormous pressure to attempt to reverse the inevitable signs of ageing and to hang on to the appearance of youth.

There is nothing wrong with looking after our appearance, exercising to keep fit, watching weight and diet to stay healthy, it is part of our responsibility to be the best that we can be for God and a recognition that our body belongs to Him and is the dwelling of the Holy Spirit. The problem arises when the lengths we go to in order to stay young are excessive or obsessive because our identity is invested in our appearance or performance.

### **Relational readjustments of ageing**

*Caught in the 'sandwich'* – there can be the ‘perfect storm’ when while still dealing with the issues of menopause, the children leave home and we are faced with the adjustments to an ‘empty nest’. At the same time as trying to get used to how to relate to these newly independent, although sometimes not so independent young adults, the needs of ageing parents begin to increase. This is also compounded by the fact that we are all located at opposite ends of the country involving frequent long drives up and down the motorways. All this often happens when there is pressure at work and possibly increased financial pressure to support children. This can be hugely time consuming and exhausting.

*Traded in for a new model* – when talking to the deputy head of a large high school recently she said that 52% of their pupils had parents who were divorced. So now if you have parents who are still married to each other, you are in the minority. When we can't change one area of our life that we are struggling to come to terms with, it can seem very attractive to look for the answer in changing something else and for some people that may be their marriage partner. It might seem like a new adventure, a way to prove that I am still attractive as an attempt to hold on to the diminishing asset of youth, but it brings in its wake a high cost to all involved.

*Who is mum around here?* – Elyse Fitzpatrick in her book “The afternoon of life” describes her own experience of the changing relationship with her mother. She explains that as her mother aged serious life events intervened, causing her mother to become dependent on

her, eventually needing to move into her family home and requiring constant care. She experienced the change in their roles as her mother became the 'child' and she had to assume the role of the 'parent'. This role reversal may be carried out very lovingly but it can be strange to look after the one who cared for your every need growing up.

*Left holding the baton* – it is not strictly speaking a relational change of ageing, but it is a significant bump on the road when our own parents die and we become the oldest generation in the family. Of course this happens at different times for different people, but it is a marker in the ageing process and brings home the realisation that life does not stand still and that we too will die. This may prompt a renewal of a neglected relationship with siblings as a form of solidarity in facing the future.

*Will you still love me when I'm 64?* – To be married to the same person for over forty years is both a feat and a great privilege. For those used to demanding jobs outside of the home it can come as something of a shock when the day comes to spend most of your waking hours with the person that you married many years ago, but now feel that you don't really know. One of the sad results of lockdown has been the rise in marital problems. On the other hand there is great love and comfort to be found in the companionship of the one person who knows you well and still loves you.

### **Reflecting on the past**

Have you ever found some old photographs of grandparents or great grandparents and thought that they were in their seventies, then having checked the dates to discover that they were only in their fifties. There was a time when age was put on like a garment at a certain time of life, and a lot younger than we would be happy with today.

Many people feel a need to look into their family background as they get older, not as a form of unhealthy nostalgia, but to discover where they fit and the influences that came to bear on who they are today. It can be very sobering to see those who lived just last century, who were worn down by long hours of heavy labour, poverty, poor standards of health care and hygiene and of course living through two world wars. Their lack of education and opportunity helps us to be very grateful for all the privileges that have made our lives so much easier.

Sometimes as part of reviewing the past we are faced with reviewing our own past with its ups and downs, the good things and the achievements as well as the mistakes and failures. The events and the actions of others that have deeply affected our lives as well as the times that we have hurt others.

"The reason that many of us do not like to think about the past is because it is painful, yet if we have not come to terms with it, we simply carry our hurt with us like excess baggage into the future. But not all the past has been bad, so if we allow the negative to dominate our thinking, we will rob ourselves of a source of joy and comfort. We may find there is much for which we can give thanks to God." (Horsfall p41)

Horsfall suggests that in evaluating the past we need to remember that God's hand was on all that has taken place, that under God's grace even the worst situations can be redeemed

and have meaning within the sovereign plan of God for our lives. Think of the life of Joseph and how God used the evil intent and mistakes of others to bring good for Joseph himself and to accomplish His plans for the people of Israel. With hindsight there are many actions, decisions or words that we would long to change, but cannot, and for these we need the forgiveness of God, our loving Heavenly Father.

“All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.”  
Psalm 139:16

### **Who am I?**

“This is an issue that all people have been plagued by, and wrestled with down the centuries. We have constantly asked ‘who am I?’ But it has become a modern obsession. Our culture is so preoccupied with feeling good about themselves.” (Beynon p15)

Beynon would say that this is about our identity, how we define ourselves, how we know who we are and ultimately about our significance. Horsfall describes this question of identity as one of the most fundamental questions of human life and spiritual growth. That we grapple with it first as adolescents, seeking independence from our parents, but it then re-emerges in later life especially post-retirement. This is probably because we have invested our identity primarily in what we do, so when we cannot do that which gives us our identity, who are we?

Paul Tripp would say that although God wants us to know who we are in Him and to live that identity out in our lives, many of us have developed what he calls *identity amnesia* by which he means that we have forgotten who we are in Christ.

“The problem with identity amnesia is that it gives way to something even more dangerous: *identity replacement*. If I have forgotten who I truly am, that identity will fail to shape my response to the people and situations I encounter and I will fill the identity void with something else.” (Tripp p268)

Tripp divides identity replacements into four main categories:-

1. *I am my success: identity in achievement* – this may be experienced both in the positive or the negative form. That is, my identity is in my achievement because I am successful (be that in academic, career, sport, music etc.) which may lead to being under constant pressure to be busy and doing what it takes to keep on finding my meaning and purpose in the successful achievement. Or if my identity is in my achievement and I have failed, or at least under-performed, then I will end up depressed and discouraged. Think of the cricketers who have developed mental health issues due to the pressure to perform successfully time after time.
2. *I am my relationships: Identity in acceptance* – we are created by God to be social beings and to live in community with relationships as a high priority. The problem arises when we look to people to give us our identity. For example, if as a parent I try to live my life vicariously through my children, it will affect how I react towards them by being controlling, domineering and too invested in their success. Then when they fly the nest I will feel as though I have lost my reason for living. Similarly,

if I place my identity in my marriage partner, and look to them, not to God, for acceptance, appreciation, to act as my rock and fortress and to give me hope, then I am expecting a sinner to do what only God can do in my life.

3. *I am my righteousness: Identity in performance* – there can be a slide from the place where we depended on God and His grace with our identity based on Christ's righteousness to the place where we have substituted our own performance. It may be evidenced in pride, or in being critical and judgemental of others. We will constantly be comparing ourselves with others and while we thought we were serving God, we will actually be serving ourselves. This need to feel that I am acceptable by my own efforts can be a real barrier to seekers coming to Christ and depending on the grace of God alone for salvation.
4. *I am my possessions: identity in physical things* – It is tempting to define ourselves by the 'stuff' we own. There are huge cultural pressures not to be content with what we have. If not 'things', it may be the physical world with the pleasures that it gives – the holidays, the travel, the experiences, the food – how many T.V. programmes are obsessed with food! The big one is physical appearance, we live in a culture that has institutionalised being defined by how we look and what we wear. We can be tempted to spend more time caring for and adorning our bodies than nurturing our souls.

The bottom line is that if our identity is based on the opinions of others, be it positive or negative, then we will live with the fear of man. We will look to others for their evaluation of our acceptability, worth, and significance. "When our lives are on show we will be constantly worried about what the audience thinks of our performance." (Beynon p20). This can result in others determining how we live and playing out different roles for different audiences, since we long to be accepted and to receive their applause.

If we don't really know who we are then every relationship becomes either a source of comfort and reassurance or a potential threat. It turns every relationship into a cause for comparison that leaves us difficult to relate to and very insecure.

Paul Tripp would say that if we have *identity amnesia*, having forgotten who we are in Christ, and replace that identity with our achievements, career success, status, role, performance or appearance, then as we age we will experience disillusionment, disappointment, emptiness and discontent, since we have invested our identity in that which will not last, will fail over time and lacks the power to meet our deepest spiritual needs. He suggests that in order to get our identity right we need to change from defining our identity horizontally, looking to the opinions of others, to defining our identity vertically and rooting it in knowing and worshipping God, our Creator, Sovereign Lord and Saviour.

Graham Beynon uses another analogy. He explains that forming our identity is like looking in a mirror and that to get our identity right we need to avoid using the mirror of the world around us to guide how we think about who we are, but to use the mirror of God's word, (James 1:23-24) the bible, to see what we really are like so that we gain our identity, not from our culture and the world around us, but from God.

“The person with a clear biblical view of themselves is someone who truly knows who they are. They know what God says about them and how God says they should think of themselves. And so they can sit loose to other people’s opinion of them.....they can have a sort of self-forgetfulness rather than self-preoccupation. They can consider how to love and serve others rather than impress them. They are at peace with themselves – because they are at peace with God.” (Beynon p24)

Horsfall sees our true identity as “God’s beloved child” since this is the only identity built on solid rock that can keep us firm through difficult days. This identity is given to us, we haven’t achieved it for ourselves, it is the identity bestowed on us by the God who made us and has redeemed us in Christ.

“Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, and what is unseen is eternal”  
2 Corinthians 4:16.

How can we prevent ourselves from losing heart, cooperate with God in being renewed day by day and fix our eyes on what is unseen but eternal?

### **Look upward**

Remember our Creator, the giver of all good gifts, live gladly, joyfully with gratitude in our hearts for all His goodness to us day by day. Make a list, and thank God in prayer for all the good things He has brought into your life or provided for you today.

Deal with anxiety and fear by remembering all the ways that God has been faithful in the past, helped you and carried you. Bring to Him your present worries and your future fears, ask for His grace and peace as you leave them in His hands, since He is sovereign and Lord of all.

Remember Him as your Saviour, the One who is rich in mercy and because of His great love, made us alive in Christ. Take time to feed your soul on passages of scripture that are full of the truth of God’s love and forgiveness to us as undeserving sinners. That speak to who we are now in Christ as His adopted children, redeemed, pardoned, accepted, filled with God’s Holy Spirit and created in Christ to do good works. What can ever give us a more significant identity than that!

Immerse yourself in the Psalms and learn to praise and worship God, just for who He is. What better preparation is there for heaven?

Increase your faith by dwelling on God’s character and attributes until you recognise that He is faithful, reliable and you can trust His promises. It always helps me to remember that God is loving and good so His plans are always for my best. He is wise so He always knows what is best and He is sovereign and all powerful so He is always able to bring about what is the best.



“Our life is a journey towards Christlikeness and Christ himself, ultimately unimpeded by bodily limitation. Christians are those who are coming into fullness of life despite, or even through, physical decline. Besides which declining physical vigour can be offset by greater spiritual and emotional stamina. And of course we are loved throughout every stage of the life span given us.” (McGuinness p32)

### **Look outward**

People often say that the bible never mentions retirement, but it does. In the book of Numbers 8:25-26 it refers to the work of the Levites “But at the age of fifty, they must retire from their regular service and work no longer. They may assist their brothers in performing their duties at the Tent of Meeting, but they themselves must not do the work.” It may not have been that they were too old, but that they needed to think about training up the next generation to do the work.

The older we get the more we need to seek how God would have us use our time and gifts to serve Him and others. As our capacity reduces it is vital to focus on our priorities and what fits well at this stage of life. It can be frustrating to find that we can no longer work the hours that we used to, that energy and stamina are limited so that we need to pace ourselves and be realistic about what is possible.

“Even to your old age and grey hairs I am He, I am He who will sustain you; I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you.” Isaiah 46:4

Job asks the question “Is not wisdom found among the aged? Does not long life bring understanding?” He then provides the answer “To God belong wisdom and power; counsel and understanding are His.” Job 12:12-13. In other words age alone does not bring wisdom automatically, but staying close to God and learning from Him in the cauldron of faith will. “The bible’s view is that ageing, under God and by grace, will bring wisdom, that is, an enlarged capacity for discerning, choosing and encouraging.” (Packer p19) We need wisdom as we seek to help and encourage younger believers to follow the Lord. To pass on a legacy of truth and faith to our children and grandchildren.

Age need not be a barrier to growing, flourishing and being fruitful in our Christian life as we continue to be a witness for Christ by our life and words.

“The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon; planted in the house of the Lord, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green, proclaiming, “The Lord is upright; He is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in Him.” Psalm 92:12-15

### **Look inwards**

“The designer Ben Sherman said, ‘Looking good isn’t important; looking good is everything.’ that’s certainly what our culture believes. Whether it is body image, beauty or fashion, we all know instinctively what’s wanted and valued. Here perhaps more than anywhere else, our culture subtly shapes us and seeps into us.” (Beynon p146)

But God does not look on the outer appearance, He is more concerned with our heart, with our godliness and character. He is not concerned with outer beauty but with inner beauty. He wants us to invest our time and energy in that which will last and has value for eternity.

“What matters is not your outer appearance – the styling of your hair, the jewellery you wear, the cut of your clothes – but your inner disposition. Cultivate inner beauty, the gentle gracious kind that God delights in.” 1 Peter 3:3-4 The Message.

As well as our heart the other way that God wants to transform us from the inside out is by renewing our mind. Changing our minds from absorbing the thinking of the world around us to thinking His way, understanding His will and what pleases Him. This will ultimately inform our decisions, our character and our behaviour.

“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – His good and pleasing, perfect will.” Romans 12:2

This means taking the time to read, study, meditate and pray over the scriptures allowing the Holy Spirit to reveal to our hearts and minds spiritual truth, motivating us both to love God and to want to obey Him. “And we who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into His likeness with ever increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” 2 Corinthians 3:18

The other element of our inner life that God is concerned about is our soul. In Isaiah 55:1-3 the writer calls all who know that they are hungry and thirsty not to buy that which will not satisfy their need, but to delight their soul in the richest fare and listen that their soul may live. We are aware very quickly when our physical body is hungry or thirsty, but can ignore when our souls are running on empty. It’s as the verse says “what is unseen is eternal.” What is unseen can be overlooked until the well runs dry and we find ourselves struggling. So let’s feed our soul, not just for the benefit of this life, but to develop and maintain an eternal perspective.

You may already be feeling old or you may still be feeling young, yet how we live now will contribute to how we live out our lives in old age. David Gibson explains using an essay written by James Russel Miller, a Presbyterian pastor:-

“Old age is the harvest of all the years that have gone before. It is the barn into which all the sheaves are gathered. It is the sea into which all the rills and rivers of life flow from their springs in the hills and valleys of youth and manhood. We are each in all our earlier years, building the house in which we shall have to live when we grow old. And we may make it a prison or a palace.” (p142)

He asks the question. How can we so live that our old age, when it comes, shall be beautiful and happy? And, after much explanation sums up the answer:-

“Only Christ can make any life, young, or old, truly beautiful or truly happy. Only he can cure the heart’s restless fever and give quietness and calmness. Only he can purify that sinful fountain within us, our corrupt nature, and make us holy. To have a peaceful and

blessed ending to life, we must live it with Christ. Such a life grows brighter even to its close. Its last days are the sunniest and the sweetest. The more earth's joys fail, the nearer and more satisfying do its comforts become. The nest over which the wing of God droops, which in the bright summer days of prosperous strength lay hidden among the leaves, and stand out uncovered in the days of decay and feebleness when the winter has stripped the branches bare. And for such a life death has not terrors. The tokens of its approach are but the land birds lighting on the shrouds, telling the weary mariner that he is nearing the haven. The end is but the weather beaten keel on the shore of glory."

(James Russel Miller quoted by Gibson p145)

"Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith," Hebrews 12:2

### Points to Ponder

1. How do you feel about growing old?
2. Are you aware that the past year of lockdowns has hastened your sense of ageing?
3. What did you once enjoy doing that is now difficult and what are you still able to do that you enjoy that you can thank God for?
4. Has there been a marker event in your life that has made you feel older or that life will never be the same again?
5. Which of the signs of ageing do you most dislike?
6. Have you, intentionally, made efforts to slow the signs of ageing or to promote health and fitness?
7. Has ageing caused you to spend time reviewing your past? What issues has that raised for you?
8. Where are you most tempted to look for your identity and significance outside of God? How does that manifest itself?
9. How can you co-operate with God in being inwardly renewed day by day and focussing on that which is eternal?
10. How can you continue to be fruitful at this stage of your life?

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