

Sunday 19 October 2008: St Luke

Healing in Old Age

Readings: Isaiah 35.3-6; Luke 10.1-9

It's good to be back in this beautifully refurbished church, which is, along with all the new developments, a salutary reminder to everyone that change is the opposite of decay, and for those of us who are now a bit long in the tooth, a reminder too, that the past is only ever a preparation for the future.

Some words from the prophet Isaiah read earlier in this service:

Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart "Be strong, fear not". Isaiah 35.1-3.

Today we commemorate St Luke the beloved physician, the patron saint of doctors and healers, the follower of the Christ who himself healed the infirm of body and mind and set the captive free. Yet the paradox is that even those whom Christ healed still came at last to death. Some, without doubt, through the gateway of old age

It has been said that life *is* a terminal illness, and in the sense that we all do die it is perfectly true.

When people die, as we say "before their time", either when young, in their prime, or in those optimistic early years of retirement – death is seen as an unjust enemy, a robber on the road of life who snatches away any hopes of new opportunities, new explorations, new achievements. For those in old age who face the certain imminence of death, the grim reaper is not so much a robber, as a mysterious official who awaits them as they gradually approach the end of the line, there to see them over the border from known to unknown territory, and to tell them that much of the baggage they've accumulated, will not be needed on the next stage of their journey.

For the elderly in particular "time's winged chariot" draws near at an alarming pace. The months slip away rapidly, and like the owner of a log pile towards the end of winter, there's the knowledge that the years are no longer stacked high, and the fire no longer assured of fuel. Some, of course, blessed with good health and a full life, ignore the log pile and enjoy the fire. A spry ninety-four year old church member in the village where we now live, told me earlier this week that she loved old age because it gave her the space and time simply to enjoy the mystery of being, but there are many others who face their declining years coping with failing bodies, pain, regret, fear, and often a sense of worthlessness.

It is hard to accept old age, because however much you may be loved and valued, however many activities fill your days, you are no longer a major contributor to the world around you, no longer centre stage, no longer in the swim of things, and increasingly alienated from the culture that surrounds you, uncertain about i-pods, blogs and all the other mysteries of new technologies, uncomfortable with changes in language that annoy you – "I was sat on the bus" instead of "I was sitting on the bus", ... "bored of" instead of "bored with"....."it's down to you" rather than "up to you"....."I'm good thank you" rather than "I'm well thank you", "I've had an invite to a party" instead of "an invitation to a party"; baffled by trends in humour which seem to be without wit or sophistication – and knowing quite well that as

grumpy old men and women, you are feeling and saying exactly the same things as your parents and grandparents said to you about your own generation and time.

I remember standing on the portico of this church being told by an aging member of the congregation, who was increasingly disabled by the onset of Parkinson's Disease, that she no longer felt capable of administering the chalice, and, of course, we'd been aware for some time that she was struggling. She was in deep distress. She knew in theory, as we all know in theory, that life is a matter of receiving gifts gratefully in our early years and yielding them up gracefully in our later years. But theory doesn't deal with feelings, especially the feelings of someone who had once been so capable.

She had founded the sound archives of the BBC, been a major figure in recording for posterity much of the folk song heritage of England, had played a leading role in the life of this church, serving on the PCC, reading both Scripture and poetry beautifully in services, and taking an active part in every aspect of congregational life.

"I feel so useless now" she said.

What I said in reply was, I see now, unhelpful - not because it was untrue, but because I in my strength was unable to enter into her frailty and sense of loss. I said: "Marie, you aren't of value for what you do, but for who you are".

And, *of course*, the value of each one of us lies in who we are rather than what we do; but if our idea of who we are is distorted by our memories of what we once did, then we are left with no security about our identity, about who we really are, once our best days are gone.

Those who are aging enter territory unknown to the young. The old look back knowing what it is to be a child, a student, a wage earner, a parent, someone strong and active. But just as the child can know, but not enter into the experience, of what it is to be a parent, neither can the adult in his or her prime, know what it is to be in old age.

I now know, in a lesser way, what Marie meant.

I walk past a shop window, with a spring in my step and feeling inside a fine figure of a man, in no way different from what I have always been, but a glance in that self-same window shows me a slightly stooped elderly gentleman, dressed in the traditional retirement colours of beige and olive green!

I have had my first experience of being offered a seat on a crowded bus.

I have endured being called "dear" in shop and waiting room, in that patronising tone reserved for the obvious pensioner.

Old age is above all things a crisis of identity.

Who am I now that so many things are being stripped away? Who am I now that the world has moved on, has become different, and left me stranded on the island of my time and generation? Who am I now that my body is less able to do the things it once did? Who am I as my memory fails, and my mind becomes as inefficient as my body? We may not all face dementia, but few escape the ridiculous inability to recall names, places, or even where you've just put your glasses.

Jane and I have just returned from a holiday with two of our contemporaries, during which we spent a whole protracted breakfast-time trying to remember the title of a film, and when that failed, trying to remember those who acted in it, all with singular lack of success.

You may know those words of John Sparrow, one time Warden of All Souls, Oxford:

*To my deafness I'm accustomed, to my dentures I'm resigned,
I can manage my bi-focals, but oh how I miss my mind.*

So here are the things that the elderly in their twilight years might wish to bring before God for healing? Before Jesus the Lord of Life, for transforming? To the Holy Spirit for renewing?

They are, I think, covered by the "FOUR I'S" - Identity, Infirmary, Insecurity and Isolation.

IDENTITY The need for the healing of the feelings of loss brought about by a sense of diminished usefulness, of being on the edge, rather than in the centre. Of being seen as an old person rather than just *a* person, in a culture where, unlike other places and other times, being an elder no longer automatically commands respect and a listening ear.

INFIRMITY The need for the healing of those fears and frustrations caused by an increasingly failing body and a less than reliable mind.

INSECURITY The need for the healing of the sense of no longer belonging, and the fear of ending up in a care home, or being a burden to others, especially those you love the most.

ISOLATION The loneliness of losing contemporaries – friends, relatives, husbands, wives and the knowledge that in the end you *are*, in human terms, on your own.

And it's here that the words of Isaiah, addressed to a nation, but no less true for individuals, stir our hearts and lift our spirits.

Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart "Be strong, fear not".

We who share the Christian faith, follow the Christ who makes all things new; who is the same yesterday, today and for ever; the Christ who has gone before, and who has tasted death, but has been raised from the dead, and tells us that he has gone to prepare a place for us.

The Christ who himself sacrificed *his* full identity, accepted infirmity and pain, knew the insecurity of apparent abandonment as he asks for the cup to pass from him in the garden of Gethsemane, and cries from the Cross: "My God. My God, why have you forsaken me?" The isolated Christ who admits to being alone, but is able to say to his Heavenly Father "Yet I am not alone, for you are always with me."

Old age feels like the end, but in the light of the resurrection faith we hold in common, it is but the prelude to a whole new beginning, a new adventure, a new identity in *that* life which we believe is yet to come, and where all that we have been and done in this life comes into an unknown and abundant fruition.

The healing of the ills of old age lies in the hope of what lies ahead, and the knowledge that, what we can so easily think of as loss, is, in the end, harvest.

The hairs of our head are indeed numbered, and we are, each one of us of infinite and eternal value to the God who created us and promises us that fullness of life, unlimited by time, which is beyond our imagining.

Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart "Be strong, fear not". Amen.