



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

Does anyone actually care?

Part 7: Simply getting older

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Psalm 103:5

“Who satisfies your desires with good things
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.”

They say “Life begins at Forty”. If it were a song, it would need to have two tunes—for, as well as the brightness of the comment, there is another side. The fact that everyone gets old does not really make the person struggling with the ageing process feel any better.

As we reach the final in a series of seven pastoral addresses, I turn to the question of getting older. In doing so I recognise that for many people it is a difficult challenge.

Philosophers, psychologists and saints have all seemed to say that a mid-life crisis is a possibility for many. Carl Jung warned that those who avoid the recognition of passing through mid-life will be “hypochondriacs, misers, dictators, applauders of the past or eternal adolescents”.

Let us be clear in our minds that we are not talking about one gender alone when we talk of a mid-life crisis. Men journey through mid-life and, although the physical changes in males are not spoken of as readily as the female menopause, we know enough to realise a mid-life crisis can happen for both men and women.

A recognition that we are at a point of crisis can be important and the truth is that others may be aware of it anyway. It can involve a personal struggle which has to be faced ... and can be defeated, actually resulting in real personal growth.

Let us then meet head on the question of getting older, and ask some fundamental Christian questions about it.

Text: Psalm 103:5

“Who satisfied your desires with good things
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.”

The Psalms have an amazing capacity to focus upon the intimacy of life. Psalm 103 is one of the high points of the Psalter, telling of the mercy of God. The form is that of a hymn or meditation, since it contains no direct address to God. The psalm moves from a call to worship to a recollection of the triumph of God’s mercy, the greatness of God’s mercy, the eternity of God’s mercy and concludes with a call to worship the Eternal King.

For the psalmist, getting older can be a place where we meet God and renew our life in some deep and profound way. I want us to think about this and how we can emerge from these experiences new and better people. In so many ways it can be a positive period of life

Earlier full-time retirement, together with the phenomenon of redundancy and greater longevity, has caused increased conversation around this theme. But it is a matter for all of us to consider!

As we grow older, we embark on a journey toward personal integration; a journey that leads to an unknown destination; a journey that can be unpredictable. Let us resist too carefully locating middle age ... because once we do, we will discover that others want to fix it at a different place! Let me suggest that it is possible to confront the issue and come through it a new and different person.

An important part of mid-life is to face what one professor has called “the young and old within oneself”. To blind oneself to either part can damage our general wellbeing. To deny age can make us the ‘oldest teenager in town’. To deny the other can make us old before our time!

How many of us feel a different age than our external body would suggest? Some of us may feel older!—but for most people youthfulness does not leave us because the body begins to age. I am particularly concerned this evening with meeting mid-life—where changes within the body take place and our agility may struggle, or at least the ability to respond is not as swift as once it was.

My text could be linked with Isaiah 40:31, where the prophet writes about “mounting up with wings like eagles”. Scripture is not saying that spiritual reality will make you necessarily physically young once again, but perhaps it will help to put together those things within us that are too often in conflict, so that we might face up to our age as it is—and of course facing up to it is part of the secret of emerging from mid-life renewed. There are so many television ads focusing on products aimed at denying the onset of the ageing process ... it can become obsessional.

One unifying thread that has linked these Pastoral Addresses is facing up to where we are and what we are. This is not easy in terms of ageing—but a willingness to do it will actually make us more bearable people to live with and healthier people for our own sake!

Again I offer some helpful guidelines for dealing with this pastoral issue:

Make peace with the past

One of the things that people find fascinating as they age is keeping a diary—or perhaps even better, the writing of a journal. One of the downsides of our electronic communication and the twitter generation is that fewer people keep extensive journals. I still have my hard copy diaries from the outset of my ministry. They will be invaluable when I write a reflection on my ministry, warts and all, in just a few years’ time!

As you look back on your life, you may need to forgive your family for any of the false starts that you experienced. Perhaps you need to forgive yourself for the failures and for dreaming larger than you have lived. It certainly means we shall need to let go of some of our youth and our shortcomings. For parents, it will mean letting go of children, which can be one of the most difficult things of all.

Recollections of the past can create emotional havoc. I have often referred to The Velveteen Rabbit, who desperately wanted to be real. The well-worn rabbit learned that ‘real’ “doesn’t often happen to people who break easily, or who have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept.” It hurts, yet the rabbit’s very remembering and shedding of tears over those memories meant he became real.

We need to ask ourselves whether there are things in the past which need to be dealt with in some way. If they are not dealt with, they may cause difficulties later. For the person who faced pressure from a sibling in early life and grew up feeling inadequate, there could be burdens carried that need to be dealt with. People who feel second-best can make very harsh colleagues and even worse bosses.

The secret of the Psalm is bound up in the mercy of God, vital in dealing with the past the mercy of God that forgives—v.3; the mercy that provides—v.5; the mercy that is gracious—v.8; and the mercy that is everlasting—v.17. To people who realise that they are recipients of mercy comes a new understanding of the past.

Getting older can bring anxiety and, as mentioned earlier in this series, it is a critical area to explore. Christians are in error when they suggest that the gift of peace protects the heart and mind against anxiety.

Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish Christian philosopher of the nineteenth century, whose bicentenary is this year, wrote about anxiety and dread. He saw anxiety as a necessary part of life—if not the essence of every valuable religious crisis. He and many others would contend that a man or woman must pass through anxious, constricting experiences if they are to discover their true self before God. Kierkegaard only lived 42 years, like so many of his contemporaries.

Many aspects of birth and life are traumatic and some experiences are capable of causing lasting damage. What in your past do you need to make peace with? Jesus Christ will journey back with you and look at the old hurts. He can bring healing to areas that hardly seem a problem—when we choose not to see! ... and yet we discover deep-down they are a hindrance and a hurt. Getting older gives us the opportunity to make peace with the past.

We have time to become who we're meant to be

Mid-life can bring with it a panic about time. We may feel that time is running out and, moving slowly and deliberately, it is drawing towards some conclusion. At this level we need to attend to our feelings and inspirations.

In seclusion, the Trappist monk and spiritual teacher Thomas Merton wrote: “My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going, I do not see the road ahead of me, I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so, but I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing and I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear if you are ever with me and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.”

You may feel sometimes that the things you were meant to do in life you have not actually done. It is as if there is some purpose within you and that when your life is over you will not have achieved it. It is a terrible agony to live with and it can make you quite hurtful towards others ... and toward yourself. The fear of not living long enough is a difficult concern and may flow over into challenging behaviour.

Mid-life is not the time to become despondent about all the things that we ought to have achieved but did not—rather it is the time to become the person that we were meant to be. This is not true just in terms of achievements—it is much more to do with our inner-life ... as we grow older we can see God nourishing our heart and life in new ways of spiritual growth. Some would say that in mid-life the one thing you don't have is time. However, a proper assessment of what matters in life may mean we do have the time!

I recall sitting down to have a difficult conversation with a man who—much to the dismay of his family—started behaving like a teenager at 50. He would flirt with girls 25 years younger and would behave out of all proportion to a man of his maturity. We discussed the reasons for his behaviour, because it was going to be important for his own growth that we did, and the words he used were: “I want to show that I still can.” Still can what? ... is an interesting question.

Perhaps meeting mid-life means not being concerned to prove whether we can or we cannot—for in life that is not the real issue ... it is much more to do with what we are.

There is an appropriate grace for every age—and the mid-life experience is no exception. We set our direction into old age in mid-life. If you want to be critical and negative all your life, start in mid-life and set yourself at the crease and carry on. The alternative is to be the person God wants you to be!

Learn to be at home with yourself

How have you been blessed? What are your achievements? Resources? Weaknesses? Your ultimate task is to be at home with yourself, to rest secure within yourself. Surely this is one of the things that can happen to us in mid-life.

One of the most difficult people to live with is ourselves, until we become comfortable with the gracious hand of God. The message of mercy in Psalm 103 is a message of the triumph of God, over those things that would restrain us ... and in turn this allows us to be ourselves.

God is seen as a King who has established his throne in heaven and his kingdom rules over all. This calls for the worship of our lives. The secret of worship, as a way of life, helps us not only to come to terms with ourselves, but to accept ourselves.

I need to be on my own sometimes—and I know some of you will identify with that. But life is more than just solitude. We often know ourselves best through loving friends and certainly the companionship of Christ.

Christian self-identity is summed up in the meaningful eighth Psalm:

I am a person created in the image of God.
I am a person created for fellowship with God.
I am a person created to be God's trustee over creation.
I am a person created to glorify God with my every fibre.
I am a person whom God knows and loves.
I am, therefore, of infinite worth.

Does what I have achieved—or failed to achieve—change these things? Certainly not! What I can say is that we reach a point of self-understanding which is revealed in salvation and then at that point we feel a wholeness that is ours—despite the externals. If we worried less about the externals we would find a new way of assessing life—which more closely accords with the will and way of God.

Be open to the direction of God

Mid-life is an important stage. It may mean a career change—bringing a totally new understanding. Many people find this is exactly what life brings ... it has certainly been so for me.

Significant changes in the ageing process are activated by physical changes, large and small. Faith changes may be necessary also—equally important, yet invisible. Such movement may express itself in startling changes of outlook, of activity, of direction. Many older travellers have re-committed themselves to the Christian faith with new vitality.

Some people are characterised by “I’ve always said that” or “I won’t change my view about this or that”. This is not something to be proud of, but a tragic inability to submit ourselves to God’s change program for all of us.

E M Blaiklock, the New Zealand biblical scholar, observed: “John wrote his gospel in his nineties. The Venerable Bede translated it into English as he lay dying. It is true that the arteries harden and the mind stiffens in mortal man, but it is also true that the Spirit of God is not constricted and that the willing heart can be enlightened at any age, illumined anew and delighted with fresh revelation.”

I remember being in Spain on holiday and driving into the Pyrenees on the border with France. I came to Figueres and passed the home town of Salvador Dali, who was in his garden and recognisable by his moustache. The surrealist artist had painted a picture which in my early years I didn’t appreciate. It is a breathtaking view of the crucifixion from above ... “The Christ of St John of the Cross”. You look down from the perspective of God.

It can tear at the heart. However, is there any other way to understand the cross than from God’s perspective? Are you involved there? You are challenged to decide, to respond. Here God is making the ultimate move to bring us to our senses, and to himself. On the cross, he is hammering out in sacrifice the basis of our eternal wellbeing.

The various stages of ageing are places to come into an experience of the power and reality of the cross in a new way. I am certain that in our unreserved giving to him, and the dedicated vision of Christ we take up, we not only receive a new life—but we emerge from the ageing process the better for it—indeed hardly recognisable as the previous person.

As one French writer suggested, “Youth is made rich by its dreams of the future; age is made poor by its regrets for the past.”

Getting older need not be a pastoral problem, unless we chose to make it one! A newly hired consultant breezed into the personnel manager’s office and interrupted his conversation with another employee to ask how many of the company’s staff were approaching retirement age. The personnel manager said, “All of them. Not one of them is going the other way!”

Simply getting older is part of life and God can be with us on that journey if we choose to make him our companion ... and the steps will not only be easier ... but fulfilling.