Sermon for Candlemas on 31st January 2021

Zoom Service

Luke 2:22-40, Hebrews 2: ? - 18

I love preaching on Candlemas, because it gives me the opportunity to celebrate older people! And that’s an important thing to do in our society, where getting older is generally seen as a disaster. In fact, if you believe all the adverts for anti-aging creams, it is a disaster that can be avoided – by women at least! I think older men are supposed to be interestingly attractive…

Given that generally our society seems to feel that older people need to be tidied away out of sight, unless they can buck the trend and appear ageless, it seems surprising that there are still a handful of older people in positions of great power and influence. The United States has just elected a 78-year-old president in Joe Biden, an age at which most men are shuffled safely into retirement. Nancy Pelosi, speaker of the US House of Representatives is 80 – most people would expect to be quietly at home by her age, not right there in the firing line. Pope Francis is even older at 84. None of these people are treated as out of touch, or irrelevant. So why is there a general assumption that getting older takes away your role in society, automatically rendering you useless?

I completely recognise that there are many things about getting older that are absolutely rubbish. A steady increase in the number of things that are wrong with your body is hard to bear – and when things go wrong with your mind as well, the loss of dignity and self-respect is extremely painful. There may be one or more bereavements, which can bring a whole load of new challenges just when you feel least equipped to deal with them. On top of all that comes an increasing need for support, eating into your sense of competence and self-worth. Getting old is not for the faint hearted – but of course it happens to all of us!

Candlemas, the Feast of the Presentation of the baby Jesus in the temple, is an affirmation of the importance of older people, and an encouragement to all of us to receive the gifts that aging brings. In Luke’s narrative, we don’t actually find out how old Simeon was, though it is always assumed that he was elderly as his response to recognising the baby Jesus as Messiah is to say that he can now die in peace. Anna, we are told, was 84, an extraordinary age in those days, pretty impressive now! In that society older people were respected as they are generally not today, but even so I don’t suppose that anyone at the time realised we would be still celebrating Simeon and Anna’s words more than 2000 years later!

Mary and Joseph brought their seven-week-old son to the temple in Jerusalem to comply with the law of Moses, a way of giving thanks to God for the safe arrival of their first born. You can imagine them, new parents, anxiously arriving at the temple gates and buying their turtle doves for the sacrifice. They are still learning how to care for their new son, and probably bursting with pride. They venture into the second court, the court of women, which was as far as Mary was allowed to go, and here after the rite, they are approached by Simeon, who has been guided specifically to meet them by the Holy Spirit. I wonder what Mary felt when this strange old man reached out for her baby? Luke tells us that they were amazed by his words: Jesus is ‘a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel’. They didn’t get a private moment to assimilate this – no soon had Simeon spoken than Anna approached and began telling everyone around that this baby was the one who would redeem Israel.

Simeon and Anna speak prophetically, not only foretelling the future but speaking God’s truth into the present, revealing to anyone who would listen that Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. They brought hope at a difficult time, encouragement that God was still at work, faithful witnesses fulfilled after many years lived in faith.

Now you might not think that the examples of Simeon and Anna are very relevant to you! Our culture doesn’t really expect older people to speak prophetically! However, I can think of two notable exceptions. This last year, the Queen’s Christmas Broadcast was listened to by 8.14 million people, who would have been encouraged by her clearly prophetic message as she spoke of being guided by ‘the spirit of selflessness, love and above all hope’ at a time of unprecedented restriction in our celebrations. And many of you will have been listening to the familiar tones of Sir David Attenborough’s voice as he narrates ‘A Perfect Planet’ – like the Queen at the age of 94. He may not be a Christian, but his prophetic call to celebrate and take care of our planet is very much in tune with God’s purposes.

Sadly, our respect for the Queen and David Attenborough are not typical of our attitudes to the voices of older people. Society much more often deems them irrelevant and out of date – life has just moved on too fast. But if Anna and Simeon’s place in the Bible demonstrates that God can raise up prophets to speak at the very ends of their lives, then maybe we should be more expectant? Captain Tom has recently demonstrated dramatically that society can listen to older people – donations topped £30 million on his 100th birthday. Can we take stock now and listen to the voices of our own older friends and family? Have we heard their prophetic messages – born of many years following Jesus, or simply a lifetime of growing in love? Many of you will remember Beryl Birch, from the congregation at Longden, a very lovely lady who died the year before last, aged 95. Something simple she said has really stuck with me: “I wake up every morning and thank God for bringing me to a new day”. It seems deeply prophetic that even as a very elderly person with severe health restrictions Beryl could rejoice daily in the life that God had given her.

If you think of yourself as an older person, do you believe that God can use you to speak prophetically? It’s not just for ordained people to speak of God’s love and purposes! Though we are of course honoured that Colin is still willing to preach for us at the grand age of 88! If we think of Simeon and Anna’s moments of glory, they were quite local and probably didn’t cause too many ripples at the time, except in Mary and Joseph’s hearts. Any communication might be prophetic, speaking God’s transformative words into the heart and mind of someone we meet. You may be able to remember something highly significant an older person said to you – a phrase from your grandparents that has stuck with you, maybe, or their presence at a difficult time in your life. Just so are we called to be there for the next generation. I had a very special relationship with both sets of grandparents, mainly driven by the fact that I was the oldest of four, and my grandparents had me to stay on my own. You might not think that was particularly prophetic, but it certainly helped me to know that I was a precious child of God in my own right, not just one of many!

Now a word of caution - knowing that God can use you to speak his truths to a younger generation does not entitle you to say whatever you think without considering how it will be received! The poem ‘When I am an old woman I shall wear purple’ makes us smile about the glorious freedom from needing to be approved of that old age brings – ‘I shall go out in my slippers in the rain, and pick flowers in other people’s gardens and learn to spit’. That still doesn’t mean that we can say the first thing that comes to mind when we talk to others! To prophesy effectively we need to wait for the right moment and be sensitive in our words. But be reassured, no matter what society thinks, old age does bring wisdom, maybe not in how to use Twitter or play video games, but in our experiences of living. Relationships never go out of date, and neither do our basic drives and desires, the need to be loved and to achieve, to contribute and to make a difference. What you have learnt in a life time of living out love is still wholly relevant to those who are younger with a shorter perspective.

The other caveat on speaking prophetically in later life is that it is not the same as living backwards, insisting that things were better in the old days! We have to distil the wisdom of the past, and listen to see how to apply it to the lives of our younger friends and family. I am sure that many of you have lived through prolonged stress just like the current pandemic, and will remember what helped you and others survive those times. We behave today as though history was irrelevant, but at our peril. Older people can help us to avoid making the same mistakes over and over again.

Old age may bring many seriously unpleasant things, but it does not mean that older people become irrelevant, their experiences swept under the carpet. We all have opportunities to pass on all that we have learnt in our walk with God, in words or in deeds. Just listening in love and hope is an incredibly precious gift. And for those of us who do not consider ourselves old just yet, Simeon and Anna challenge us to pay attention to in our relationships with older people. Yes, they may need our support – but that doesn’t mean that the relationship is one way! God will speak through them, providing that we are listening!

May you know God’s grace in all your relationships, young and old, and hear his voice in every person. Amen