

Faith and Theology in Later Life

Dr Ros Stuart-Buttle

In this talk I make no chronological attempt to define 'later life'. We are all persons of later life in one way or another.

I recall being a teenager on the day of my own Mum's 50th birthday and her saying she didn't want to be 50. Dad's helpful reply was, "But darling, I like older women!" Of course, as a teenager, parents aged 50 years were seen as ancient. I'd be quite happy now being 50 all over again myself.

I also like the story of the child who asks her grandma how old she is. "Oh I don't know" says Granny, "when you get to my age you forget". "But Granny" says the little one, "It's easy. You just look at the label inside your vest and knickers and it tells you how old you are!"

On that note, let me outline what I hope to do in this evening's talk. I'll begin with some observations about aging in today's culture and society before then linking this to how our faith develops as we move through life's circumstances and situations. I will then take a brief look at what the scriptures tell us about aging and the later years and make some theological connections that concern both our own spirituality as well as where the church finds itself in today's changing times. Finally I will draw on the recent Listening Exercise from around the archdiocese to share some thoughts with you, both theological and pastoral, that I hope may contribute to the discernment process as the Synod moves forward.

There are mixed messages about aging or growing older in the society we live in today. Some images can help to show this. On the one hand, you are only as old as you feel, 70 is the new 50, it's time to take up travelling, go on a senior gap year, time for leisure, volunteering, new hobbies or learning new skills, freedom to be an aging rock star or glamorous granny. Book titles in Amazon abound with books about aging positively. I particularly like the book title play on words, *This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto Against Ageism*¹. Really what many of these books are is an account to reassure us that getting old just means that we have to work harder at staying young. Apparently gerontology or the study of aging has become the new thing and there are many studies on how to age successfully – whatever that means! The experts tell us that such things as remaining active and productive, keeping healthy physically, emotionally, mentally even sexually, maintaining social contacts and relationships, having some measure of independence and autonomy, positive attitudes to life, financial security, and yes a dose of religion and spirituality and having a good death – these are all markers of successful aging. Yet on the other hand we know there is another side to all this - aging populations, medical problems and healthcare needs, financial and mental health worries, social care issues such as family breakdown, fear of violence and crime, loneliness, loss of hope in old age and worries

¹ A. Applewhite (2016) *This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto Against Ageism*, Networked Books.

about death and bereavement, both one's own and that of a loved one. This puts questions onto all of us: With declining birth rates, will there be enough active members of the workforce? What happens when the baby boomers retire? What about retirement incomes, the rising pension age? And who will pay for old people who are no longer able to contribute for themselves? The reality is that an ageing population is bringing new challenges to be the kind of society that will be a good place for all to live.

What are we to make of this? Aging is a natural process within the stages of human life. We journey into old age as we grow and mature through life. Moral psychologist Erik Erikson gave us the first real developmental theory of human life as stages that encompass the whole lifespan from birth to death or cradle to grave. Oxford professor and author Helen Small in *The Long Life*² suggests that our human lives gather meaning over time and therefore the story of our self is not complete until it experiences later years – and she characterises later years as a stage of life that helps us to grasp who we are and what our life has meant. “At first we want our life to be romantic, later to be bearable, finally it to be understandable”, to make sense. So just for a moment, think back to yourself at 21 –who were you then? What were you like? What was important to you? And who are you now? What makes sense now that didn't back then?

It comes as no surprise that our religious faith and belief also develops and indeed changes as life's experiences create new and often unexpected patterns. As we age, circumstances change. Unanticipated challenges arise. Things that were previously a priority become no longer important. Sometimes the change is sudden, sometimes it is gradual. We can be unprepared for the emergence of doubt following the various losses and crises of old age, especially chronic illness, disability and bereavement. Equally we can be surprised and moved by the sudden or unexpected joys of a beautiful sunset, the wonder of nature, the smile of a child, the beauty of a kind word or gesture.

We often use the language of the faith journey. What was your faith as a child? As a young adult? Are your ideas about God from your childhood still the same as today? Renowned theorists on faith development, James Fowler and John Westerhoff, remind us that we should expect our faith to change and develop as we go through life. They set down the idea that various stages of faith occur as we move through maturity and life's patterns and experiences. We shouldn't really expect our faith to remain static as we go through life. Fr Gerry Hughes SJ in his book, *God Where are You?* writes of the God who speaks to us down the arches of the years.³ I find that a beautiful image - God somehow present in the arches of our years – past, present and what is still to come. Fr Gerry also uses the metaphor of life, with all its thoughts, feelings, emotions and memories being like a large symphony orchestra with new instruments and new themes being introduced with every event we experience. Some events become a dominant theme, they enhance the music or they cause dissonance to the harmony of life. And our faith and theology, he says, is not there to answer questions or stop life's music

² H. Small (2007) *The Long Life*, Oxford University Press.

³ G. Hughes (1997) *God Where Are You?* Darton, Longman & Todd.

from playing but to keep the questions open for further exploration. Theology, as St Anselm taught, is faith seeking understanding – not faith going down cul-de-sacs or a blind alley to a dead end. So perhaps as our life years move on and responsibilities lessen and we are forced to slow down, our later life can bring a sense of acceptance and serenity, a sense that we cannot answer all questions or solve all life's problems and that at the end of the day all we really can do is place our hope and trust in God.

Our society and culture gives us views about aging, but what do our Christian scriptures say about people of later years? Well perhaps baby boomers would do well to follow the example of Job, who in his elderly years, openly accepted his 'autumn days' (Job 29: 1-6). Perhaps there are those of us who will take comfort in Proverbs 16: 31 'Grey hair is a crown of splendour; it is attained by a righteous life'. But there are several biblical concepts about life and aging that tells us quite significant things. Firstly we are reminded that all human life is sacred and precious to God. Chronological age does not lessen the value of human life. The commandment in Exodus 20:12 tells us to honour our father and mother i.e. those who have gone before us, so that we may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you. The call to care for the 'old and vulnerable' is constant throughout the Bible. We are reminded too that our physical life is bounded by loss as the psalmist tells us. It is temporal, it will come to an end like 'passing grass or flowers in the field' (Psalm 103).

We see in the scriptures, too, that aging provides an opportunity for God to teach deeper spiritual maturity and wisdom. It is repeatedly the aged who testify to God's incredible power to redeem and to bring newness into the world – Sarah wife of Abraham, Eli "whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see" (1 Samuel 3), teaching the young Samuel to recognize God's voice, and the elderly prophets Anna and Simeon in Luke's gospel being among the first to recognize the Christ-child. So while, in the contemporary world, the elderly are often treated as having perspectives that are obsolete or in the past, in the Bible they are presented as figures that see a new future that others cannot.

Moreover the Bible shows us that the journey of the faith life enables the believer to face difficulties and even death with confidence and hope. Dying is a natural part of the process of living. Our great hope is not anchored in this world. Physical death opens the doorway to new life in Jesus. As Catholics we are called to embrace a conviction that a far better existence is to come, as we hear in the first letter of Paul to the Corinthian church. So in our scriptures we see that aging is a time of loss and testing, even suffering, but it is also a time of great hope for the future and of God's blessing.

Turning now to the Report from the Listening Exercise conducted around the archdiocese we see the very real, challenging and significant hopes and fears, joys and sorrows (to use the opening phrase from 1965 Vatican II Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*) in relation to how people in later years' experience God, their Catholic faith, the life and liturgy of the church, their family and relationships, and indeed the very world we live in today. One thing that is clear is that people in later years have lived through momentous changes in both society and church. Of course, every generation thinks that no other generation has seen change like they have but we need only stop and think of the aftermath of the second world war, the turbulent politics of

the 1960s, the social revolution of the 1970s, the dramas of the 1980s – fall of the Berlin Wall, financial crises of the 1990s, the worry over what the millennium would bring, the arrival of technology with the Internet and social media etc. let alone the confusion over the current political status of our country, to agree that not only the pace of change but the very culture shocks and the way that life in our western world has been affected cannot be underestimated. It is a cliché but the world in 2019 is a very different place from where many of us grew up.

In our Catholic communities as well, many people of later years grew up in the pre Vatican II church – there will be those here tonight who remember the Latin mass, kneeling at the altar rails to receive communion on the tongue, fasting beforehand for 1, 3 hours or even overnight, the celebrant with his back to the congregation, the rather closed off attitude to other churches and religious faiths etc. And then came the Second Vatican Council 1962-65 with all its energy and vision and it seemed as though the church would change beyond recognition. The Jesuit historian John O'Malley asserts that never before in the history of Catholicism had so many and such sudden changes been legislated and implemented which immediately touched the lives of the faithful, and never before had such a radical adjustment of viewpoint been required of them.⁴ Perhaps some might say that we are still living through this radical adjustment of Vatican II, even though the Council happened more than 50 years ago. But the point surely is that for people of later years, Vatican II is something significant that belongs to their experience of church. For younger Catholics, it doesn't form part of their picture; it is not their history.

A number of concerns and challenges about the Church emerge from the Listening Exercise. One area where this is seen is in the tension between remaining in faithfulness to the church's scripture and tradition (i.e. teachings and doctrines passed down through the magisterium) and the pastoral challenges this presents for today. For some people there is a sense of loss (perhaps nostalgia) to go back or to retrieve what went before. This is spoken by 'traditional voices' that seek a return to past liturgy or devotions, a particular view of priesthood, the Latin rite etc. It is expressed by others as a loss of cultural Catholic life and memory. We hear people say, this is no longer the church or the faith I was brought up in. One comment in the Listening Exercise Report said 'I don't know if what I once thought was true is still true anymore.'

I suggest that this is important to recognise. French sociologist of religion Daniele Harvey-Legieux speaks of religion as a chain of memory⁵ that we pass down from generation to generation. A religion, she says, is built on some particular tradition (person, scripture, set of teachings) and on this the community or institution rests. A chain of beliefs is shared as collective memory and this keeps both individuals and the community committed to that memory or story. When that chain is weakened or broken then a sense of loss occurs. Many people in later years feel that the chain of Catholic memory has gone. There are all sorts of reasons for this, not least the advancing secularisation of society that impacts on us all. Today it is well recognised that there is a crisis in the transmission or handing on of faith. In our own families, among our siblings or our own children, there are those who no longer practice the

⁴ J. O'Malley (2002) *Tradition and Transition: Historical Perspectives on Vatican II*, Academic Renewal Press.

⁵ D. Harvey-Legieux (2000) *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, Rutgers University Press.

faith. Indeed many grandparents, rather than parents, now take on the task to become the first educators of their grandchildren in faith. I can't be the only granny in the room who has seriously considered baptising a grandchild while giving them a bath!

But on a more serious note, if the family or the parish is no longer a stable vehicle of transmission for faith, then the question of how to hand on the faith to children and grandchildren, to next generations, to those who have left the church, to our parishes facing shifting or declining attendance at Mass, this demands very real pastoral attention. My own parish is fortunate in that we have a primary school so from time to time we have baptisms and see young families at church. But I know that there are parishes where nearly everyone who attends Mass is a person of later or advanced years. One of the comments from a school child who responded to the Listening Exercise wrote that the church is for nans! Being a Nan myself I loved this comment. But out of the mouths of babes come certain truths. An old school friend from Seafield in Crosby, at school together since the age of 4, said recently that she continues to go to mass each week even though her children no longer do. But she looks around in church to see that she is the youngest person in the congregation – she is my age - and she worries about what will happen to the parish and to the Catholic chain of memory in the future.

We can add into this changing picture of our parish populations, the falling numbers of priests in the archdiocese (alluded to at the previous talk by Fr Gerry O'Hanlon) and the fact that there are fewer younger priests coming forward as well as the problems of the clergy abuse scandals and the contested models of priesthood. There are also the concerns about the future or continued celebration of the Mass and the sacraments in our parishes and schools and such things as pastoral visits to the elderly, housebound, the sick and dying – these are very real concerns for many people. What future model of church will be needed to live out both the blessings yet also the challenges of our aging parish populations?

For me this opens up a pertinent question. What do we do when the faith in which we were brought up no longer provides an adequate explanation for the meaning and purpose of our lives? Irish writer and academic John Feehan⁶ suggests that we have three choices. I find his words challenging. He says, a) we can refuse to accept the evidence all around us and blindly try and continue as before; b) we can abandon the faith that we grew up with because it has proved inadequate; or c) we can accept the new knowledge or situation and use it to develop a more mature understanding of what lies at the core of our beliefs and how we are called to respond. The first, he says, is a sort of dishonesty. The second is a form of laziness. The third is a position of critical acceptance, leading to a reinterpretation of what we hold dearly and what we are about. This, he says, requires courage and exercise of the virtues that have been gathering dust in our spirit.

We can reflect on John Feehan's words both for ourselves as individuals on a personal level but perhaps as well for our church and the situation of today. Reading the Report from the Listening Exercise, what also spoke to me was a sense of living tradition, that the Church is a

⁶ J. Feehan (2012) *The Singing Heart of the World*, Orbis Books.

pilgrim church, always on the move, on the road. For some people, the Church is more oriented to the past; for others it must look to present realities, for others it must look to the future, whether this might be married priests or a genuine role for women in ordained ministry or for more open and inclusive theology or whatever areas the future church needs. But how can this sit within a sense of the apostolic church, the church handed down by Jesus through his successors, in scripture and the teachings of the magisterium, in what we call the church's tradition?

Archbishop Diarmud Martin of Ireland earlier in 2019 said that to look towards the future means we need to extricate ourselves from the contingencies of the past. This is particularly difficult when the past has been dominant for generations and when continuity and tradition are prized as they are in Catholic understanding. But we must look towards the future. So how do we keep or interpret tradition so that it is faithful to the past yet alive and active for today? One of my favourite sayings, reputedly by the artist Picasso, hints at not repeating what has always been done but being open to new ways and new life while still remaining true to who we are and where we have come from. Tradition is not wearing your father's hat, it is begetting a child.

Drawing to a conclusion, we might ask how can the Synod thoughtfully respond to what people of mature or later years are saying? This is a real pastoral issue as the Synod moves forward into the discernment phase. We certainly need to challenge any negative myths or prejudice about older people and face up hopefully and realistically to the challenge of an ageing society and our aging parishes. We must also respond to the shifting cultural patterns of people today to make sure that older people are not isolated from our church communities but encouraged for their wisdom and life experience as a resource for others. Perhaps we need to re-look at what we mean by vocation and how ministry is done by and for adults of more mature years. Many people in the Listening Exercise called for greater opportunities for adult learning, evangelisation and catechesis, to include those who are in mature years of life as well as for young people too. So what about resources for parishes to offer to those coping with the losses, changing situations and sufferings that often accompany later life, addressing concerns about sickness, death and dying, but at the same time building opportunities for prayer and spirituality and sharing a gospel of hope and resurrection for continued faith and trust in God through all stages of life's journey.

Perhaps this takes us back to where I started this evening. No matter what age we are, our faith and our theology are constantly challenged by life. When people speak of growing old, too often the emphasis is on the 'old' rather than still growing or becoming. But we can only be the people and the church now, in this moment, in this culture, in this time. This invites our faith and our church not just to be understood differently but to be lived differently. May the Holy Spirit give each of us the grace to respond.

I'd like to finish with a short quotation. Fr Gerry Hughes died in 2014 when he was 90 years of age but he wrote the following words when he was in his 70's:

‘God’ I said at the age of three to see what would happen; ‘God’ I am still saying seventy years later , and still waiting to see what will happen.⁷

⁷ G. Hughes (1997) *God Where Are You?* Darton, Longman & Todd, page 269.