Waiting for God

Not only is ‘waiting for God’ a thoroughly Biblical expression, and a phrase often used in connection with Advent, it was also the title of a sitcom popular in the late 1990s.

‘Waiting for God’ starred Stephanie Cole and Graham Crowden and was set in a retirement home near Bournemouth. They played two feisty residents (Anna and Tom) who were anything but quietly passing time until they met their Maker. Even back then the issue of an ageing population was a topical one, but is more so nowadays as Britain’s 17 million ‘baby boomers’ begin to reach retirement age, and for the first time in our history the over 65s outnumber the under 16s.

This demographic trend has major consequences for society, but also for the church. It is common to speak of the ‘greying’ of the church as many congregations are now composed mostly of elderly people. Many are still fit and active, and the backbone of the church’s witness and service, but they are inevitably feeling their age. Sadly, there can still be a stigma attached to growing old, and as people age and become less productive they may well feel their best years are behind them and that they have little to offer. Getting old can radically undermine one’s self-esteem and sense of worth.

What does the church have to say to this important group, and how do we address their concerns?

The Bible actually has some very pertinent insights, especially in the book of Psalms. One of the writers, for example, expresses the common fear of being overlooked as he grows older: ‘Do not cast me away when I am old; do not forsake me when my strength is gone (71:9).’ At the same time he is mindful of God’s presence with him since his youth, and this awareness seems to steady him, reassuring him that God has a purpose for him even in his sunset years: ‘Even when I am old and grey, do not forsake me, O God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your power to all who are to come (71:18).’

We are introduced here to the concept of ‘generativity’, the idea that our task in later life is to help establish and guide the next generation, to pass on to them something out of our wisdom and experience - and from a Christian perspective to create a legacy of faith. As we grow older and our energy decreases it is not so much about doing things ‘on the front line’ as it is about being there alongside younger people to support, encourage and inspire them as they carry the baton forward.

Perhaps this is the ‘flourishing’ spoken of in Psalm 92: ‘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 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 (v12-15).”’ Even though we may be outwardly less energetic, inwardly we can still be very much with it, and can significantly influence a new generation. We can discover a God-given purpose for this phase in life, in mentoring others, praying for them, and being there to listen and advise as necessary. We can continue to bear fruit, but maybe of a different kind and in a different way to earlier seasons in our lives.

Dr Billy Graham has shared recently his thoughts on ageing (he is 93 now) in his book *Nearing Home: life, faith and finishing well* (Nelson). He does not hide the fact that he is a grieving and ailing widower who has difficulty getting up from a chair or putting on his shoes, but he remains positive about the fact that God can still use us even when we are severely limited. He says that while growing old is natural (and difficult), growing old with grace is a choice. This we can do when we learn to see the years from God’s standpoint and discover his strength for every day. He believes that God has a specific reason for keeping us alive, and that even in old age we can align ourselves with his will for us. Pertinently he asks his readers, ‘Are you willing to be used by God regardless of being bound by physical ailments, financial constraint, or the loneliness of growing old?’

In the season of Advent my mind often turns to two favourite Biblical characters highlighted in the Birth Stories – Simeon and Anna (Luke 2:25-38), both of whom were ‘waiting for God’. I always feel they must have been good friends, for they have much in common, although I have no evidence for such an assertion!

They were ‘waiting for God’ because they were both deeply spiritual people, Jewish believers with real faith in the promise of a coming Messiah. Simeon was righteous (morally upright) and devout (deeply in love with God) and ‘waiting for the consolation of Israel (2:25)’. Anna, described as a prophetess because she lived in the presence of God, spent her time in rigorous spiritual disciplines (worship, fasting and prayer) and was ‘looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem (2:38).’

They were ‘waiting for God’ also because they were both near the end of their lives. Anna we know was aged 84 (some commentators surmise she may even have been 105!), and had been a widow most of her adult life (probably over 60 years). The assumption is that Simeon was also near the end of his life. He had been promised by God that he would not die until he had seen the promised Messiah, and after the Temple encounter seems more than ready to be ‘dismissed’ (literally, to be released or loosed from a burden). Not only do these two seniors carry in their hearts a deep sense of longing and hope in God, but they are both sufficiently detached from the present world to have set their sights on a better and more abiding one. They share a common longing for homecoming.

What we should notice though is how significantly they are used by God at this very late stage in their earthly pilgrimage. Simeon is still being prompted by the Holy Spirit, and feeling the divine constraint enters the temple at just the same moment as Mary and Joseph arrive with the child Jesus. It is a divine encounter, and Simeon, alive as always to the activity of God, recognises that this child is the long-awaited Messiah. Age has not lessened his sensitivity to the Spirit or his excitement in the purposes of God.

Rejoicing inwardly Simeon embraces the infant Christ, affirming him as the source of salvation for Jew and Gentile alike. Then he blesses the novice parents before speaking prophetically to Mary about the child’s future and her own associated suffering.

Anna for her part is in the temple as usual and is likewise divinely directed to share this God-given moment with them. We are not given the detail of her thanksgiving, but we can imagine what an enormous encouragement this was to Mary and Joseph as they come to terms with the true identity of their son and what God is doing in their lives. Clearly they benefited from the spiritual input given to them by both Simeon and Anna.

These senior citizens of the kingdom provide a model for all who are feeling the passing of time, reminding us that God still has significant things for us to do, especially in stimulating the faith of younger generations. They also serve as a provocative reminder to the church not to patronise the elderly or underestimate the spiritual potential of their contribution, but to seek ways in which their wisdom, experience and gifting can be harnessed for the benefit of all.

Not all elderly people remain sprightly and in good health however. For many issues of increasing frailty, lack of mobility, sight loss, hearing impairment and mental confusion are daily realities for them and their carers. Ageing may not feel to some like an exciting adventure. Before he died in 2011, Dr John Stott, a world famous preacher and church leader, shared his own experience of the increasing weakness and dependency common to many in old age, and gives us another perspective of what it means to be ‘waiting for God’.

Aged 85 he tripped and fell and broke his hip. Fortunately help came and he was transferred to hospital where he received a new hip, but it marked the end for him of independent living. It also brought him to a place of emotional weakness expressed, uncharacteristically for Stott, in bouts of weeping. Gradually he began to see his dependency not as an indignity, but as something that could be used by God to bring about a greater maturity in him. If Christ became a helpless babe, and on the cross was again seen in utter weakness, then he reasoned, it follows that dependency cannot deprive a person of their innate dignity and worth.

In *The Radical Disciple* (IVP 2010), Stott points out that when we enter this world we are totally dependent on the love, care and protection of others. We then go through a phase of life where others depend on us. Finally most of us will leave this world totally dependent on the love and care of others. This is not an evil to be avoided, but simply part of what it means to be human, and we should have no fear about ‘becoming a burden’.

‘We are all designed to be a burden to others,’ he writes (p112). ‘You are designed to be a burden to me and I am designed to be a burden to you. And the life of the family, including the life of the local church family, should be one of ‘mutual burdensomeness’. ‘Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2).’

That God is aware of the sense of weakness, limitation and dependency that comes with ageing is confirmed for us by the words of Jesus to Peter about his later life: ‘I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.’ Such weakness is not to be avoided at all costs, but humbly embraced as part of our God-given humanity. Surprisingly, John continues: ‘Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God (John 21:18-19).’

Clearly an increasingly ageing population presents the church with both an opportunity and a challenge. The opportunity is to recognise that amongst the elderly there is an enormous harvest field for outreach, as well as a significant pool of resource for the ministry of the church. The challenge is to continue to care for people when they are at their most vulnerable, and not to forget them when they can no longer attend services or make a visible contribution. Out sight should not mean out of mind.